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FROM THE EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

Axel M. Oaks Takacs

Interreligious Studies Media (ISM) and its many partners continue to lay down foundations for the important responsibility it is assuming in sustaining and growing not only this journal, but its other sibling media, such as Interreligious Studies Press, the Inter/Sections podcast, and more. ISM's new website is live; we encourage you to explore it at www.interreligiousstudies.org. The reboot of the Inter/Sections podcast is also forthcoming. We recorded our first episode of the relaunch last November and have two episodes in the works.

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

The five articles collectively and variously advance comparative theology, interfaith praxis, and the reimagining of religious engagement across traditions.

In "An Ecumenical Approach to Interreligious Dialogue in Asia: Volf's Theology of Embrace in Conversation with *Ecclesia in Asia*," Baltazar Acebedo Jr. critically engages Pope John Paul II's apostolic exhortation *Ecclesia in Asia* through the lens of Miroslav Volf's "Theology of Embrace." Attending carefully to Asia's colonial history, religious demography, and socio-political realities, Acebedo argues that Volf's fourfold pattern of embrace offers a more dialogical and less triumphalist framework for Catholic interreligious engagement in the region. By retrieving an ecumenical theology centered on reciprocal communion rather than fulfillment paradigms, the article proposes a constructive path forward for Christian participation in Asia's plural religious landscape.

Ana Petrache's "Observing the Sabbath While the Body of Christ is Quarantined" turns to the lived religious experience of the COVID-19 lockdown in Rome and Bucharest. Drawing on interviews with Christians, Jews, and Muslims, Petrache analyzes how ritual structure shaped each community's response to state-imposed restrictions. Particularly striking is her exploration of the Christian language of the "Body of Christ" and its

Eucharistic implications, set alongside Jewish and Muslim frameworks of ritual purity. By foregrounding embodiment, domestic ritual adaptation, and digital mediation, the article offers a rich interfaith reflection on ritual life under conditions of biopolitical constraint.

The Aqedah—the binding of Isaac—stands at the heart of Samantha Lin's "Wood of Sacrifice and Wood of the Cross: The Aqedah in Judaism and Christianity." Through a comparative study of Augustine and Rashi, and with attention to broader late antique developments, Lin traces how both traditions interpreted Genesis 22 in ways responsive to their evolving identities. Engaging the scholarship on the "parting of the ways," she argues that Jewish and Christian readings developed in parallel and in porous interaction, even amid polemic. By highlighting shared motifs and creative hermeneutics, the article contributes to renewed Jewish–Christian scriptural dialogue.

In "Monotheism and its Religious Alternatives: Some Neo-Perennialist Perspectives on the Divine Reality," Christopher C. Knight advances a contemplative, apophatic framework for religious pluralism. Building on Vladimir Lossky and extending arguments from his recent work on pluralism, Knight critiques what he terms "theistic personalism" and "monopolytheism" in modern monotheistic thought. He proposes instead a "neo-perennialist" vision in which diverse traditions function as contemplative signposts toward the Divine Reality. By retrieving classical metaphysics and apophatic sensibilities across traditions, the article reconfigures the relationship between monotheistic, polytheistic, and non-theistic faiths.

"Reimagining Interfaith Engagement: A Postfoundationalist Comparative Theology Paradigm," by David Muthukumar Sivasubramanian, offers a constructive epistemological proposal for comparative theology. Surveying exclusivist, inclusivist, pluralist, and postliberal approaches, Sivasubramanian argues that each is limited by its underlying epistemic commitments. Drawing on critical realism and postfoundationalist philosophy, he articulates a mediating framework that affirms both contextuality and the meaningful pursuit of truth. The result is a model of comparative theology that honors religious particularity while sustaining universal truth-seeking.

The issue closes with five book reviews:

- *Beyond Piety and Politics: Religion, Social Relations, and Public Preferences in the Middle East and North Africa*, by Sabri Ciftci, F. Michael Wuthrich, and Ammar Shamaileh; reviewed by Salwa Alinat-Abed
- *Dust on the Throne: The Search for Buddhism in Modern India*, by Douglas Ober; reviewed by Carlos Piccone-Camere
- *Shari'a and Life: Authority, Compromise, and Mission in European Mosques*, by Uriya Shavit and Fabian Spengler; reviewed by Okan Dogan
- *Gratitude, Injury, and Repair in a Pandemic Age: An Interreligious Dialogue*, by Michael Reid Trice and Patricia O'Connell Killen; reviewed by Fung Kei Cheng
- *Sacred Snaps: Photovoice for Interfaith Engagement*, by Roman R. Williams, Catherine Holtmann, and William L. Sachs; reviewed by Chad Meister

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 Russell (Graduate Intern). My sincere gratitude is extended to all of them.

Axel M. Oaks Takacs, Th.D.
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ARTICLE

An Ecumenical Approach to Interreligious Dialogue in Asia: Volf's Theology of Embrace in Conversation with Ecclesia in Asia

Baltazar Acebedo Jr.

Abstract
This article examines the merits of Protestant theologian Miroslav Volf's Theology of Embrace as a Catholic framework for interreligious dialogue in Asia. The paper claims that the present Catholic orientation on the issue of interreligious dialogue in Asia, presented In the 1999 papal document *Ecclesia in Asia*, exhibits worrying implications: that non-Christians are at best lesser Christians, that adaptation of non-Christian cultural elements is pretentious and disingenuous, that Christianization is the primary motive for dialogue and not peaceful coexistence, and that the recognition of the role of the Holy Spirit in dialogue can even be a hurdle for the Christian mission. The researcher explores the lessons of Volf's ecumenical theology, the Theology of Embrace, and suggests that these may shed light on the shortcomings of *Ecclesia in Asia* on the issue of interreligious dialogue in the region. The author articulates the four gestures of embrace (opening of arms, waiting, closing of arms, and opening of arms again) within the bounds of Volf's ecumenical theology, while at the same time generally considering Asia's colonial history, socio-economic realities, rich religious demography, and widespread religious violence.

Keywords
Miroslav Volf, Theology of Embrace, Interreligious dialogue in Asia, *Ecclesia in Asia*

Introduction

Post-Vatican II discourse features the council's attempt of promoting unity among people of different religions.[1] In *Nostra Aetate*, or the Vatican II's declaration on the relation of the Church with non-Christian religions, one of the key Catholic pronouncements was "[t]he Catholic Church rejects nothing that is true and holy in these [non-Christian] religions."[2] This recognition has been a subject of many discussions after the council, especially on the implications this has for Catholic theology on interreligious dialogue and evangelization. The directive of this particular document for Catholics can be summed up in its statement: "[i]t is, therefore, the burden of the Church's preaching to proclaim the cross of Christ as the sign of God's *all-embracing* love"[3] to them.

Yet, Christianity's offer of embrace appears hypocritical to Asia. It reminds most of Asia of its colonial past that portrayed the love of the Christian God as ironically oppressive and exclusive, which tried to drain the culture and riches of Asia. This did not stop Asians from thinking that Christian mission is one of the reasons why Asia is poor today. Not only is the phenomenology of embrace generally foreign to Asian experience, it is also a gesture that for them an oppressor does not deserve to initiate offering. Besides, in Croatian Protestant Miroslav Volf's use of the Parable of the Prodigal Son (cf. Luke 15:11–32[4]), it illustrates too that the invitation of embrace is not the act of the repenting son but a privilege offered by the forgiving father.[5]

While this council's inspiration to go forward and embrace Asian religions raises the question of how to reconcile the Christian God's loving embrace with the atrocities of the colonial past, it also raises the question whether this framework is going forward too fast. Although Vatican II

1 Second Vatican Council, *Nostra Aetate,* Declaration on the Relation of the Church with Non-Christian Religions (Holy See, 1965), sec. 1, para. 1, https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decl_19651028_nostra-aetate_en.html (hereafter cited as *NA*): "In [the Catholic Church's] task of promoting unity and love among men, indeed among nations, she considers above all in this declaration what men have in common and what draws them to fellowship."

2 *NA*, sec. 2, para. 2.

3 *NA*, sec. 4., para. 8 (*emphasis mine*).

4 The version of the Bible translation used for this article is the *New Revised Standard Version* (NRSV) *Bible* (Society of St. Paul Philippine-Macau Province, 2000).

5 Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Abingdon Press, 1996), 72.

maintains that Christian beliefs cannot be compromised, there may still be doubts from some Christians themselves, viz., that embracing Asian religions waters down the Christian confidence and belief in proclaiming Christ as Savior. Volf says that "the elevation of deeds above beliefs is the [necessary] consequence of the claim that God is love."[6] Evidently, there might need to be a clarification on what elevation of deeds over beliefs implies here.

It so appears, that there is hesitation from both angles of embrace, from the Christian's invitation of embrace and from Asia's response to it. The utter need to confront the tendency of religious communities to weaponize religion and the discernible priority of deeds over beliefs, may even elicit the momentum New Atheism[7] has in the West to manifest in Asia. The countries that exhibited religiosity progressively a century ago have now spiraled down to countries with the lowest belief rates. The world cannot simply deny the possibility that this is the harbinger that faces Asia's future. Not only then that there are doubts on this interreligious embrace arising from the participants of the exchange, there is also an undeniable doubt from those observing on the sidelines. And all these doubts are substantial enough to be considered in developing a viable framework of Christian engagement in Asia.

Pope John Paul II, in his apostolic exhortation *Ecclesia in Asia*, presents a framework of Christian engagement in Asia. The document does recognize in a way the threefold doubt challenging the intended engagement: that "[pre-Second Vatican Council Christian missions] proved in no way sufficient [as] the Church was often associated in people's minds with the colonial powers;"[8] that "Jesus as the only Saviour is fraught with philosophical, cultural, and theological difficulties, especially in light of the beliefs of Asia's great religions, deeply intertwined with cultural values and specific worldviews;"[9] and that "atheistic ideologies are still very much present [in Asia]."[10]

6 Miroslav Volf, *Captive to the Word of God: Engaging the Scriptures for Contemporary Theological Reflection* (Eerdmans, 2010), 147.

7 The concept of New Atheism projects that religion should not only be tolerated in society but to be confronted and criticized—basically, to strip off its undue influence to the society.

8 John Paul II, *Ecclesia in Asia,* Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation (Holy See, 1999), sec. 9, https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_06111999_ecclesia-in-asia.html (hereafter cited as *EA*).

9 *EA*, sec. 20.

10 *EA*, sec. 8.

The very problem I see is the document's possible misdiagnosis of this threefold doubt. One, it assumes that the terror of colonial past was already in the past, that "this *was* the situation on the eve of the Second Vatican Council."[11] Two, instead of understanding the complexity of philosophical, cultural, and theological contradictions Asian religions have with Christianity, it sees it as an "even greater incentive in striving to transmit the faith that the Church has inherited from the Apostles and holds with the Church of all generations and places."[12] And three, it deduces the influence of secularization and atheistic tendencies to mere "modernization" and "materialism" amidst the growing religious violence in Asia.[13] It answers the Asian fear of the colonial past by simply forgetting it, resolving philosophical and theological conundrums by sheer imposition and superiority, and confrontation with secularism by reducing it to mere capitalistic tendencies. We get knotted up with questions and doubts, and these are for sure the easiest ways to respond. The convenience and perhaps mediocrity to resolve these complex issues come with a price—another series of controversies.

One of these controversies is the document's "fulfilment theology"—that while the good in Asian religions is acclaimed as the universal work of the Holy Spirit, "whatever the Spirit brings about in human hearts and in the history of people, in cultures and religions [only] serves as a preparation for the Gospel and can only be understood in reference to Christ."[14] The document explicitly says that "the religious values they [Asian religions] teach await their fulfilment in Jesus Christ."[15] Singaporean theologian Ambrose Mong saw it as condescending to Asian religions, making them pre-Christians or lesser Christians.[16] Indian theologian Jacob Kavunkal pointed out that *Ecclesia in Asia* is very much couched in Western language of uniqueness and suffers from the preoccupation of saving Jesus Christ from the other saviors of Asian religions.[17] The glaring critique of the Japanese bishops on the Asian synod of 1998, to which *Ecclesia in Asia* was a synodal document, was "if we stress too much that Jesus Christ is the One and only

11 *EA*, sec. 9 (*emphasis mine*).

12 *EA*, sec. 10.

13 *EA*, sec. 6–7.

14 *EA*, sec. 16.

15 *EA*, sec. 6.

16 See Ambrose Mong, "Is There Room for Christ in Asia," *Toronto Journal of Theology* 31, no. 2, (2015): 223–237, 230.

17 See Jacob Kavunkal, SVD, "Church and Mission in Asia in the Light of Ecclesia in Asia," *SEDOS Bulletin* 32, no. 11 (2000): 315–319.

Savior, we can have no dialogue, common living, or solidarity with other religions."[18]

This Christian posturing gives the impression that dialogue is not the focus of Christian engagement in Asia entailed in the document. It appears that the primary motivation is rather Christianization. The document hopes that, "just as in the first millennium the Cross was planted on the soil of Europe, and in the second on that of the Americas and Africa, […] in the Third Christian Millenium a great harvest of faith will be reaped in [Asia's] vast and vital continent."[19] It also regards the philosophical, religious, and theological difficulties of this attempt as a moral imperative and "greater incentive in striving to transmit the [Christian] faith."[20] Asian religions may get the impression that this is a sign of arrogance and blind superiority.

This evident priority explains how Christian inculturation may fail in Asia in the larger picture. With Christianization as the goal, inculturation has become simply a means rather than a mission in itself. Part of *Ecclesia in Asia* is mistakenly convinced with its focus of inculturation—"to borrow elements from human cultures…so that faith can become part of people's cultural heritage, and different cultures will become expressions of the one Christian faith."[21] Perhaps one of the reasons why Matteo Ricci failed in his attempt of Christianizing China is his cultural adaptation that is inspired neither by a certain love to the real beauty of the particular culture nor by its consistency with the Christian gospel, but rather by his intention to simply sell Christianity to a particular class of society. Catholic theologian Ambrose Mong writes, "The European model is simply not appropriate in Asia, as we import a failed 'Christianity' in the West, as well as a wrong notion of conversion."[22]

As an Asian Catholic, I find interest in how Christianity as a religious minority in Asia should engage with the other religions in Asia, and in particular Miroslav Volf's thoughts about this. His book, *A Public Faith*, seems to grasp two contextual sentiments in Asia: one, that religion has and should have a place in the public arena, and two, that religion can terribly malfunction in two directions, either to be idle to the issues of the world or to be violently aggressive at the opposite extreme.[23] His book then seems to be

18 Peter Phan, *The Asian Synod: Texts and Commentaries* (Orbis Books, 2002), 30.

19 *EA*, sec. 1.

20 *EA*, sec. 10.

21 *EA*, sec. 21.

22 See Mong, "Is There Room for Christ in Asia," 229.

23 See Miroslav Volf, *A Public Faith: How Followers of Christ Should Serve the Common Good* (Brazos Press, 2011), 12.

devoted to Christian engagement in the public arena, which in this paper's context, exhibits an interreligious picture.

Volf confronts the potential problematic tendencies of religions in society, such as indifference and violence, two problems which in wide consensus of scholarship are also concerns of religiously plural Asia. And his theological response is framed under two principles: that communion with God necessarily obligates communion with neighbor, and that communion with neighbor does not mean mere tolerance, but meaningful, equal, and reciprocal engagement. Both fundamental appraisals fit perfectly the concerns of Asian religiosity and diversity.

Volf's first principle harnesses the relationship between faith and social praxis, "ascent" and "return" in his terms, respectively.[24] An ascent without return is nonsensical and hypocritical, while a return without ascent is meaningless and confusing. Needless to say, both are fleeting without the other. This principle re-echoes the New Law of Christ of loving God and loving neighbor, which was Christ's answer to the question "what is the greatest commandment?" (See Mattew 22:34–40). Apparently, even the singularity of Christ's greatest commandment is twofold. Goodness, as Aquinas would say, is diffusive anyway.[25] The love that invites us towards God, if genuine and true, invites us towards our neighbor, too.

Volf's second principle values and nourishes the particular identities participating in the engagement. Not only does it protect these individualities from possible coercive absorption of the other, but it also develops them to give space for the other.[26] It then envisions a conducive communal belonging that gives authentic value to each identity and transforms it in such a way that will make the relation more meaningful and pleasing. Volf understands the self as a being with and for the other.

From these two principles arise his theological response that may shed light to the tyrannies that face Asia today. Indifference and violence are regarded as forms of exclusion and are counterproductive to what it means to be a human being. He proposes the constant mission of the self to approach the other in a loving embrace.[27] His theology of embrace captures the idea that each one is always worthy of embrace and should always adjust

24 Volf, *A Public Faith,* 12–13.

25 See Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologica,* Ia q. 5, art. 4. For English translation, see *St. Thomas Aquinas Summa Theologica,* trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (Benziger Bros., 1948), 25–26.

26 Miroslav Volf, "The Trinity is Our Social Program: The Doctrine of the Trinity and the Shape of Social Engagement," *Modern Theology* 14, no. 3 (1998): 410.

27 See Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace.*

and make space to embrace—as God, our Lover and Beloved, has embraced everybody first.

Volf's Theology of Embrace for Asia

The exponential advancement of globalization has been a pressure today more than ever for human beings to rethink what "living together" should really mean. We are in a position where small mistakes may lead us to disastrous repercussions, which are in some cases irremediable. The whole irony between making us "closer" together by modernity and generating more chaos or misunderstanding is like the depiction of "deep waters" as a primordial element in the book of Genesis.[28] Chaos may be understood as the unregulated mixture of ideals in the "deep waters,"[29] so much so that the act of creation is rather more an act of separation between these ideals.[30] And so we find ourselves today more compelled to distinguish the line between what is proper and what is not when it comes to "living together."

Usually, the proper way is associated with "sheer neutrality" as sort of a virtue, only for people to end up demasking their façade of impartiality and transform their resentment into violence. We can no longer live in hotel-like scenarios, doing our own thing in our own rooms, letting the others do the same (while not really knowing who is the one next door), and call it peaceful "living together." Societies which pride themselves with this pseudo-virtue of tolerance and freedom contribute to greater discriminations in history.[31] This

28 In the literal sense, the first chapter of the book of Genesis mentions that there are three primordial elements in the story of creation—there was darkness, earth without form, and waters. Yet this is not to contradict the assertion of the IV Lateran Council of 1215 that God created out of nothing.

29 The "deep waters" may allude to Tiamat in Babylonian mythologies, the goddess of sea and chaos.

30 The first account of creation is said to have been written in the priestly tradition. And the task of priests according to Leviticus 10:10 is to separate or to "distinguish between the holy and the common, between the unclean and the clean."

31 Freedom of worship is so much different than freedom of religion. The difference is crucial, as society's neutral stance for religion may turn towards a progressive relegation of religion to the private sphere. The final statement produced from a European interreligious conference titled, "Being a Citizen of Europe and a Person of Faith: Christians and Muslims as Active Partners in European Societies," states that such process contributes to the further "marginalization [of religion] from the public domain, and consequently to the eradication of any sort of public manifestation of one's faith" ("Being a Citizen of Europe and a Person of Faith Final Statement," Committee for the Relations to Muslims in Europe [CRME]

erroneous understanding of "peaceful tolerance" becomes neither peaceful nor tolerant and demands re-envisioning the "proper way."

What makes this re-envisioning difficult is that people do not like to assume responsibilities. This may explain Volf's observation that in the "growing awareness of cultural heterogeneity brought about by globalization, [there is] 'tribal identity' asserting itself as a powerful force."[32] In seeking compromises in a cacophony of ideals, we find it easier to dress up as an oppressed minority, emphasizing the sheer possibility of the majority as oppressive, and leave the responsibility of adjusting, to either them as the majority or the system in general. The narrative of victimization is very convenient to enjoy the comfort of familiar ideologies without the arduous task of maturity and openness for critiques.

While it is true that the system can truly be oppressive and calling it out can be "righteous indignation," the "self" however should still share responsibilities. Stripping off the self with all its agency is much more a depressing sight, as it would also mean that the "self" has no capabilities to shape a peaceful society. Between an evaluation on the system of social arrangements and the proper attitude of social agents, Volf is more interested to speak on the latter than the former.[33] Hence, the "proper way" to be discussed in this text can be considered as the "proper posturing of the self" towards the other.

The maneuvering of the self in the proper way of "living together" may be understood in a step-by-step process. Besides, although human personhood and human loving relations are complex realities, the human being as a composite being portrays that human activities and development

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Conference, October 20–23, 2008, Mechelen, Belgium; statement is available at Den Norske Kirken website as part of a report by Gerd Marie Ådna, "Rapport fra konferanse I Committee for Relations to Muslims in Europe [CRME] og CRME-møter I Mechelen, Belgia, 20.–23.10.2008 og I Pullach, München, 19.–21.01.2009 [vedlagt]," Den Norske Kirke website, uploaded and last updated February 2009, https://www.kirken.no/globalassets/kirken.no/om-kirken/slik-styres-kirken/mellomkirkelig-rad/2009/sakspapirer%20februar/mkr%2002%20porvoo.pdf [see page 9 of pdf]).

32 Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 20.

33 Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 20–1. He writes: "In contrast [to focusing on social arrangements], I want to concentrate on social agents. Instead of reflecting on the kind of society we ought to create in order to accommodate individual or communal heterogeneity, I will explore *what kind of selves we need to be* in order to live in harmony with others" (20–1, italics original).

undergo procedural change.[34] And every process is fashioned primarily by our fundamental principles, which reveals our goals, which in turn dictate our methods.

The seeming preconception, the goal, and the method of *Ecclesia in Asia* may not appeal to Volf. As argued in the introduction, the document gives the impression that Asian religions are pre-Christian or inferior to Christianity. This then propels Christians to go on a mission of Christianizing Asia as a form of generosity towards them. Accordingly, with this goal in mind, the document sees the method of inculturation as a proper fit. The process is of course reasonable, but the issue is whether it is the "proper way" or not. I argue, rather, that Volf regards the "proper" not on centering on ourselves and bringing the peripheries to our center but on de-centering ourselves and moving out of our center.[35] Volf believes that what makes this decentering possible is that God is neither just in "our" center nor just in "our" peripheries, but in both through His universal embrace. Consequently, God also calls us to de-center ourselves into Him through embracing the "other" as well.[36] This revolutionary concept of de-centering is what makes, in my view, Volf's theology different and better than *Ecclesia in Asia*'s framework.

God's generous and charitable initiative of universal embrace may be the springboard of Volf's metaphoric drama of embrace. To sketch one's supposed relation with the other under the tension of differences, he utilizes and elaborates on four gestures of embrace, viz., I. opening of arms, II. waiting, III. closing of arms, and IV. opening of arms again. This text then deciphers Volf's theology of embrace towards Asian appreciation through each gesture of embrace, highlighting at the end of each discussion its profound difference from *Ecclesia in Asia*, with Asian religions as the profound "other."[37]

34 See Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1098a18: "One swallow does not make a summer." Aristotle argues that a life of virtue evokes consistency and espousal.

35 Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace,* 70. He writes, "Whichever way the 'centering' takes place and whatever its result, the self should be de-centered."

36 See Galatians 2:19–20: "I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God who loved me and gave himself for me."

37 See Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace,* 141–145.

I. Opening of Arms

Desire and Need for the "Other"

Volf's embrace basically revolves on the idea that the "other" perfects us. Indeed, if you live alone, you are either a beast or a god—somebody who is ignorant or arrogant of realizing one's imperfections, or somebody who does not have those imperfections.[38] In order to flourish, human society then works through individuals performing their specific duties tantamount to the virtues they have.[39] As much as our historicity is limited to the culture we live in time and space, we will only have a better understanding of the world through our relation with the "other." After all, knowledge of the "other" perfects rational animals; it is in the nature of human beings to know.[40]

Knowledge and truth accompany our mission to conceptualize justice. We are unified not only by our shared experience of imperfections, but also by our common interest towards justice. The aspiration towards justice may be the transcendent third that holds humanity together.[41] But in the plurality of human cultures, Volf believes that it is impossible to have one name for human justice,[42] as every tradition is equally prejudicial. Seeking justice however is not a lost cause, since for Volf, the "Crucified Messiah" transcends skewed human justice, and subscribes to a divinized concept of justice.[43] Hence our path to justice is the path towards Christ.

38 See Aristotle, *Politics* 1253a27.

39 This is very similar to what we can see in Plato's *Republic*. He divided society into three types of classes: the rulers for those whose prominent virtue is wisdom, the soldier whose prominent virtue is fortitude, and the laborers whose prominent virtue is temperance. The appropriate participation of every individual in this picture accounts to what we can say the virtue of justice.

40 See Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 980a21–27: "All men [and women] desire to know."

41 In Book VIII of *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle understands friendship as the result not so much of two people being attracted to each other, but of two or more people being similarly attracted towards a "third" thing that is beyond them. It is argued that as long as this transcendent third remains, then friendship lasts. For Thomas Aquinas then, long-lasting friendship lies on the Supreme Good as the Transcendent Third. See Aquinas, *Commentary to Nicomachean Ethics*, Bk. VIII, Lect. III, Chap. 4, Par. 1577. He writes, for example, "Friendship remains as long as they are good in virtue" (Bk. VIII, Lect. III, Chap. 4, Par. 1577).

42 Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace,* 202.

43 See Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace,* 277.

However, the claim of the "Crucified Messiah" towards universal justice seems unjust towards Asian religions who accommodate different soteriologies.[44] Regardless, whether we appeal to tradition, reason, or consensus, the singular justice of the "Crucified Messiah" puts into question the position of the saviors in Asian religions. Asia may be more inclined towards a concept of "one among the many," but Christianity seems to impose a decision between "one and the many." Yet Volf attests that if there is one thing that universal justice attends to, it is to be accommodating and all-embracing.[45] For him, the "Crucified Messiah" is neither one among other saviors, nor one against pseudo-saviors, but one that is present in each tradition—"one in the many."

Therefore the question is no longer which Judge is which, but is there really a Judge that transcends human justice and saves humanity from religious legitimization of violence?[46] Humanity may no longer need to risk doing injustice in playing justice, to wield the sword in the name of justice and let God problematize the seeming inescapable ironies of seeking justice.[47] This is why the "Crucified Messiah" is also the "Rider on the White Horse."[48] To have a powerful Judge comes with demands, but nevertheless with direction. We do not want the chaos of being violent waves with the unknown under the "deep waters," but rather of choosing the judgment of "being above the heavens or below the heavens" (Genesis 1:6). Our relation with the "other" and the whole creation only makes sense to us when we have the "Crucified Messiah" setting for us an example, the Transcendent

44 *EA*, sec. 2 states: "[T]he issue of the encounter of Christianity with ancient local cultures and religions is a pressing one. This is a great challenge for evangelization, since religious systems such as Buddhism and Hinduism have a clearly soteriological character."

45 Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace,* 197. Volf writes: "If God is the God of all peoples, the justice of God must be the justice for all peoples. Universal peace will be the fruit of universal divine justice."

46 Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 303. He writes: "The only means of prohibiting all recourse to violence by *ourselves* is to insist that violence is only legitimate only when it comes from God. The 'theologization' of violence is a pre-condition for the politics of nonviolence."

47 Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 277. Volf writes: "We are caught in a vicious cycle,: competing truthsand justices call forth violence, and violence enthrones the truths and justices of its perpetrators."

48 See Revelation 19:11–15: "Then I saw heaven opened, and there was a white horse! Its rider is called Fruitful and True, and in righteousness he judges and makes war […] From his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations, and he will rule them with a rod of iron; he will tread the wine press of the fury of the wrath of God the Almighty" (Rev 19:11–15).

Third that demands embrace as the proper direction, the Transcendent Other that makes all these acts of embrace possible—such is our desire and need for this "Other."

Emptying Oneself

Siding with the powerful Judge, with the strong, with the exemplar, is a natural human proclivity. Volf sees this as the reason why people are more inclined to side with the "Rider on the White Horse" that may inflict violence than the "Crucified Messiah" inflicted with violence.[49] Violence assumes control and control assures immediate gratification. It was never a question why people are violent, as the real mystery is derived from how people control themselves from being violent, to being calm and peaceful amidst chaos. Violence is easy, it is the default. Human nature has the capacity of evil, and good people are not those who are incapable of being violent, but those who are capable and yet chose not to be violent. To accept then our capacity and tendency for violence is human, but to renounce violence is divine.

Hence, positioning ourselves beside the powerful Judge makes us surrender and realize our frailties. As beauty shames the ugly, the strong shames the weak. This demands us to realize that even before making space for the "other," there is already a vacuum of imperfection in us, our shallow ideologies that need to grow. The temptation to simply capsulate this emptiness for comfort and pride just prevents our potentialities to bloom towards perfection. And so, the powerful Judge invites us to see our natural emptiness "not as limitations of what we seem to be, but by His intentions of what we can be."[50]

The powerful judge is the "Crucified Messiah" who intends for us to share the honor and pleasure in His loving embrace. He guides us by example and credibility to distinguish what is truly essential and empty ourselves of those non-essential things we gather to desperately compensate our insufficiencies. Christ on the cross is empty of worldly riches, fame, and glory, and is only justified by His obedience to the will of the Father, the law of love. Self-emptiness for the "other" is difficult, but for love it is worth it.

49 Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace,* 277. He writes: "There are many reasons why we would rather be the army of the Rider than the disciples of the Crucified. We all recoil from suffering and many of us secretly enjoy doing violence. Yet we would be both less desirous of inflicting violence and more willing to suffer it if we lived in a world in which justice were done and truth respected. We do not, however."

50 See William Young, *The Shack* (Windblown Media, 2007), 202: "Humans are not defined by their limitations, but by the intentions I [God] have for them; not what they seem to be, but by everything it means to be created in my [God's] image."

Besides, each one of us has been equally honored and embraced by the self-emptying love of the "Crucified Messiah."

Seeing the "Other" as Equals

When God embraced humanity through Christ's salvation on the cross, not only does He divinize the human person, but in the same way He also proclaims His disinterested love to all equal in dignity. The varying degree of our faults is immaterial to His forgiving embrace. He places us on "top of all creation" not of our own merit, but on the merit of His love.[51] His act of embrace is an invitation for us to see the "other" the way He sees everyone.

Volf's Theology of embrace fundamentally focuses more on "who has been embraced" by God than "who embraced God." Very often we confuse these two phrases, and just as the lawyer in the Gospel of Luke, we ask Christ, "Who is my neighbor?"[52] Commanded to love our neighbor, we usually ask ourselves, even subconsciously, "What does she do or have that would have me consider her as my neighbor?" Yet, the Parable of the Good Samaritan as Christ's example of loving proclaimed the neighbor as the giver of love (the Samaritan) rather than the recipient of it. Christ did not answer the question, because the question is wrong. The question we should ask in order to live together peacefully and justly is, rather, "What can we do in order for the other to consider me as her neighbor?" The adjustment is always on the lover, and not on the beloved. For just as Volf believes, God's embracing the "other" satisfies all our questions as to why we should embrace the "other."[53]

51 *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd ed (Holy See, 1997), I sec. 2, ch. 1, art. 1, par. 6, sec. 356, https://www.vatican.va/content/catechism/en/part_one/section_two/chapter_one/article_1/paragraph_6_man.index.html. It states: "[A human being] is the only creature on earth that God has willed for its own sake, and he alone is called to share, by knowledge and love, in God's own life. It was for this reason that he was created, and this is the fundamental reason for his dignity." See also Paul VI, *Gaudium et Spes,* Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (Holy See, 1965), ch. 2, sec. 24, https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html (hereafter *GS*).

52 In Luke 10:25–37, Christ tells us the two greatest commandments to love God and our neighbor. Somehow, logically, people tend to see the next question as "who is the neighbor Christ speaks of, so as we can follow the commandment."

53 Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 124. He states: "In the presence of God our rage over injustice gives way to forgiveness, which in turn will make search for justice for all

Christianity in Asia should stop overly concerning themselves in setting a hierarchy of who has embraced God more.[54] Instead, we could start by learning how God embraces the other religions and how God's act of loving embrace is taught and practiced in those religions. No more "lesser Christians" or "pre-Christians" as implied in *Ecclesia in Asia*, but just neighbors sharing with each other the ever-growing understanding of God's embrace.[55] Besides, God's acts of love in each culture and tradition are equally commendable and pleasurable. Placing oneself on top of a hierarchy in Asia on account of these nuggets of wisdom, as *Ecclesia in Asia* may seem to imply, is the wrong way to go, and is counterintuitive to a sincere desire to open our arms and learn from the other cultures.[56]

II. Waiting

Non-intrusive

Volf reminds us that opening our arms should stop before touching the "other."[57] This particularly vulnerable moment of pause differentiates the act of embracing for dialogue and the act of grappling for combat. This points out that not all gestures of opening arms projects humility and sincere docility. They may also be mere hypocrisy to simply catch the "other" in its most vulnerable position, to overpower, and force them to submission. We then allow the "other" to assess for themself the risks of violent intrusion that

possible. If forgiveness does take place it will be an echo of the forgiveness granted by the just and loving God."

54 The word "hierarchy" in this statement does not refer to the "hierarchy of truths" in *Unitatis Redintegratio,* Decree on Ecumenism (Holy See, 1964), ch. 2, sec. 11, https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decree_19641121_unitatis-redintegratio_en.html. It states: "When comparing doctrines with one another, they should remember that in Catholic doctrine there exists a 'hierarchy of truths', since they vary in their relation to the fundamental Christian faith." Here, "hierarchy" applies more to the truth claims in ecumenical dialogue, not religious organizations.

55 See Mong, "Is There Room for Christ in Asia," 230; While a fulfilment theory is more commendable than a conquest theory or an adaptation theory, it is also undeniably condescending to Asian religions making them pre-Christians or lesser Christians.

56 See Kavunkal, SVD, "Church and Mission in Asia." Kavunkal writes, "We will realize that [continuing the mission of Jesus of Nazareth] is a tremendous obligation than any claim of superiority or arrogant monopoly."

57 Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 142.

dialogue may digress to. We let the "other" realize that our inviting arms do not include this violence, that we do not want warranted or unwarranted oppressions either.

Leaving our arms wide open and hanging depicts our surrender and alliance to the power of truth than to the truth of power. Volf believes that while the truth of power is easy and convenient especially for the strong, Christ's kingdom is on a different plane.[58] Even having good reasons and motivations, Hobbes' Leviathan does not speak of the authentic human freedom that Christ offers in truth.[59] Our surrender is not the result of realizing that we are powerless against the "other," but that we are powerless without the truth. It is the truth that we no longer need to struggle indefinitely against the "other" to pass our own agenda, but simply wait for the power of truth to take control and guarantee reconciliation.

Our act of waiting is our act of witnessing to the power of the Holy Spirit for dialogue. We are certain that when we open our arms, we are still not the primary agents of dialogue, but mere participants in it.[60] It implies that there is not much we can do on our own, let alone by intrusive force to demand to be accepted. Hence our waiting is a way of trusting the incomprehensible works of the Holy Spirit in His proper time, that is, not intrusive but always inclusive.[61]

58 Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 266. He writes, "In the exchange with Pilate, Jesus argues against 'the truth of power' and for 'the power of truth.'"

59 Hobbes's Leviathan is founded on the argument that by absolute freedom human beings are wolves (destructive) to each other. But for Christ, it is when human beings are good to each other that they are truly free.

60 *EA* sec. 15 states: "The Synod was therefore right to see the Spirit of God as the prime agent of the Church's dialogue with all peoples, cultures and religions." The Spirit is the "agent of evangelization" (Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi,* Apostolic Exhortation [Holy See, 1975], sec. 75, https://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_p-vi_exh_19751208_evangelii-nuntiandi.html) and the main "principal agent of mission" (John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missi*, Encyclical Letter On the Permanent Validity of the Church's Missionary Mandate [Holy See, 1990], sec. 21 , https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_07121990_redemptoris-missio.html).

61 *GS*, sec. 26, states: "[The Spirit] guides the course of time and renews the face of the earth."

Moves the "Other"

Although we are not actually creating truths in "living together" and are simply referencing the Spirit of Truth, our act of waiting is not absolute passivity.[62] Instead, it is a constant grounding to the truth of our faith that we offer, a consistent genuine form of witnessing to the tradition that makes us who we are (contributing to the society's integral understanding of life).[63] Besides, we cannot simply enter into dialogue without delineating our identity and position as participant of the dialogue.[64] That is why a Christian who neither reads the Bible nor embraces a life of witnessing to the Gospel of their faith does not appeal to other Asian religions. However, a Christian who stands by their convictions through words and deeds, polishing their passive act of waiting into an active and genuine invitation, interests the "other" in dialogue.

Most importantly, this identity and conviction should be able to convince the "other" of the genuineness of one's "signaled desire, created space, and opened boundaries."[65] While the "other" may see promising results that can emerge from the dialogue, they also want to see the assurance that a genuine dialogue can really take place. If the "other" notices certain contradictions between one's cultural conviction and openness to the "other," the gesture of embrace comes across to the "other" as mere act of tolerance and a surface manifestation of hidden oppressive agenda. Besides, without appropriate grounded convictions, one will find the act of waiting unreasonably difficult, if not entirely impossible. Hence, our act of waiting is a moment of evaluation to not just furnish our convictions but also to prove to ourselves and to others our sincerity for dialogue.

Our act of waiting is not only a reassurance for those who are advocating dialogue, but also a corrective example for those who are against it. Waiting shows us an illustration of the efficacy and beauty of non-violent dialogue. Importantly, waiting never ends up a failure, but it simply delays success. What others could possibly see is either an invitation that gets

62 Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 142. He writes, "The halted movement of the arms outstretched toward the other has its own proper power, of course. This one-sidedness of action is not useless."

63 See Friedrich Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. Helen Zimmern (Modern Library Publishers, 1917). In aphorism 6 he writes: "It has become clear to me what every great philosophy up till now has consisted of—namely, the confession of its originator, and a species of involuntary and unconscious auto-biography; and moreover that the moral (or immoral purpose in every philosophy has constituted the true vital germ out of which the entire plant has always grown" (6).

64 Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 207. He writes, "Nobody stands nowhere."

65 Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 143.

reciprocated, or an invitation that has not yet been reciprocated. And the more we patiently wait for the appropriate welcome from the "other," the more we harness our conviction and show to the world that non-violence is achievable. Our act of waiting will be like a sun, unreservedly shining to both the advocates and non-advocates of non-violence, moving everybody towards dialogue.

Authentic Cultural Integration

True enough, our task is not merely to shine but to enlighten.[66] Our determination to set an example is not to commend ourselves above others, but to raise everybody up for a better understanding and practice of "living together." Waiting for embrace does not reach its goal without reciprocity. Our primary motivation remains cultural integration.[67]

However, authentic cultural transformation comes from within. When Christians mistake Asian religions as "thinned-out faith,"[68] or a culture of mere unreasonable impositions, we will also mistake cultural imposition as authentic cultural transformation. *Ecclesia in Asia* may seem to run into this very mistake.[69] Cultural expressions are simply expressions of what holds beneath, of what substantially constitutes the person's tradition, of the principles that hold their beliefs all together. Though how much other people may appear unreasonable to us for not sharing our thoughts, we cannot simply regard them as mindless brutes that go along with forced training rather than education. Needless to mention, we are not in a better position on knowing how to appropriately apply the truth of Christian faith in other cultures. Hence, the transformation of one's culture is only made possible by the realization of those who belong to that culture.

66 See Aquinas, Summa theologica II–II, q. 188, art. 6, "For even as it is better to enlighten than merely shine, so is it better to give to others the fruits of one's contemplation than merely contemplate." See also II–II, q. 180 a. 4, q. 182, a. 1.

67 "Cultural integration" here refers to the re-evaluation of unchristian practices in the culture, and not integration of Christian worship.

68 Volf, *Public Faith*, 20. He writes, "[Thinned-out faith is when] a person takes faith as [simply ritual] source of energy or healing for the body and soul, but not as a guide for shaping a vision of human flourishing, or when a person [simply] embraces the ends mandated by his or her faith."

69 *EA*, sec. 21 is mistakenly convinced with its focus of inculturation—"to borrow elements from human cultures […] so that faith can become part of people's cultural heritage, and different cultures will become expressions of the one Christian faith." Somehow, this is understandably effective if the motivation is simply to multiply nominal Christians.

Without welcoming responses of Asian cultures, the only thing that Christians can do is wait, live a witnessing life, and pray for the work of grace. And as grace comes from within, grace too makes use of the elements within the tradition. Besides, grace builds on nature.[70] Christians must realize that the work of cultural transformation is way beyond them as outsiders of the culture. Rather, it is only satisfied by the never-failing work of the Holy Spirit inside the culture. Only through this recognition can the welcoming embrace of Asians be genuine, and as such truly fulfilling. This takes time, but the wait is worth the genuine warmth of a close embrace.

III. Closing of Arms

Mutual Reciprocity

The warmth of close embrace is the goal of both the self and the "other."[71] The dialogue may have been initiated by the self and fulfilled by the welcoming arms of the "other," but this dialogue does not hold the self indebted to the other's generous approval, nor the other indebted to the self's generous initiative. All possible debts are paid through the embrace, where the "host is a guest, and the guest is the host."[72] Each individual partakes in mutual reciprocity not on account of their willingness to embrace and dialogue, but on account of what is felt and enjoyed in the embrace or dialogue. Thus, the dialogue is only sincere and productive when both the self and the "other" share this same goal of warm embrace without ulterior motives.

With the self or the other having a covert motive of assimilation or insincerity, closing of arms may go wrong in two ways. First, the self or the "other" may embrace too tight as to crush and assimilate the "other,"[73] hence inflicting pain and trauma. Or second, the self or the other may embrace too softly or far away to actually offer open space for the "other"—as though it seems there is no embrace to start with. In addition to reciprocity, Volf also adds that soft touch is necessary to make warm embrace possible so that the closing of arms not devolve into an act of assimilation or insincerity.[74]

70 Aquinas, Summa theologica I, q. 1, a. 8, ad. 2.
71 Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 143.
72 Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace,* 143.
73 Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 143.
74 Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace,* 143.

The soft touch is respectful to the other as an "other." In the act of embrace, it is crucial that the self is able to identify the "other." Mutual reciprocity is only possible when there is a movement from emptiness to fulfillment, from misunderstanding to understanding. It is for this reason that Volf regards the "inability-to-understand" as a crucial aspect of dialogue and embrace.[75] The ever-growing recognition of the "other's" uniqueness from the self propels the continuous moment of learning, and, without which, embrace becomes unnecessary. These moments of non-understanding continue to be there because the "other" is still the "other." Our touch of embrace continuously adjusts in this dynamic exchange, to just give the right amount of softness and have then a distinguishable mutual reciprocity with the "other."

Fusion of Horizons[76]

The "other" that remains the "other" in this mutual exchange does not evoke failure but rather dynamism and creative differentiation. First, by dynamism, one understands that beside the bilateral exchange, the self and the "other" is in constant growth and complex formation with other "others." There are elements of otherness that emerge, die out, evolve, or devolve, beknown or unbeknown to the self or the "other," as influenced by other "others." The fast pace of globalization emphasizes all the more this flexible reality of intermingled horizons. But this does not imply that genuine bilateral embraces are no longer possible, instead it illustrates the liveliness of these exchanges. Second, by creative differentiation, the "other" that remains an "other" projects the constant process of separating-and-binding.[77] The idea of distinction and separation is creation and binding. Binding does not mean assimilation, just as Gadamer's fusion of horizons does not mean mere combination. Volf points out that even in the exchange, we are "both distinct

75 Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace,* 144.

76 In a framework of dialogue that is against the assimilation of the "other" and the forgetting of oneself, this paper suggests a dialectical concept called "fusion of horizons." The proper way of engaging with the "other" is the proper way of "having a horizon." See Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd rev. ed., trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald Marshall (Continuum Publishing Company, 1989), 313. Gadamar writes: "'[T]o have a horizon' means not being limited to what is nearby but being able to see beyond it. A person who has an horizon knows the relative significance of everything within this horizon, whether it is near or far, great or small. Similarly, working out the hermeneutical situation means acquiring the right horizon of inquiry for the questions evoked by the encounter with tradition."

77 Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 65.

and related, and the boundaries that mark our identities are both barriers and bridges."[78] The distinction guides us to the kind of relation we should have towards the "other." We are to cross the boundaries, not tear them down.[79] Our fusion of horizons and binding is a new understanding of each one's role towards the "other," fitting our identities. After all, God's act of creation is also separating-and-binding to lay out the relation between a man and a woman as well as their relation to God and His creation. Problems arise when we try to mix up this order and not assume the responsibilities of our being. Hence, securing the otherness in this exchange features the dynamism and productiveness of our ontological differences.

Religions in Asia are gaining more dynamism and responsibility compared to those outside Asia. Recently in Asia, there is undeniable growth in the number of people identifying themselves as religious, in the number of new religions springing forth, in the spread of some religions to neighboring Asian countries, and in the impact of religions on current state policies. These religions remain distinct and unique in the sea of traditions, while assuming changing roles and responsibilities respective to each "other." And so, the vigorous "closing of arms" religions partake in Asia all the more raises the need to evaluate the responsibilities religions assume in Asian societies.

Human Flourishing as Primary Goal

Volf asserts that religions' responsibility is to assure authentic human flourishing.[80] In the midst of injustice, violence, and oppression, religion must be the conscience of society. Capitalists and politicians may subscribe

78 Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 65.

79 Regarding crossing boundaries, see Michael Barnes, *Theology and the Dialogue of Religions* (Cambridge University Press, 2002), 14. Barnes writes, "We practice our faith face-to-face with the other." In other words, to exist is to inter-exist. Regarding tearing boundaries down, see Edgar Javier, SVD, *Theology of Mission cum Introduction to Missiology* (Divine Word Institute of Mission Studies, 2019), 95: "In the 'passing over and coming back' fusion does not take place where identities—whether individual or group—are lost. Nor is it a border diffusion or dissolution. But it is a *crossing over* and a *returning from movements* so that the *coordinates* of one's identities may now be redrawn in a much richer way on due to the gift from the other" (italics original).

80 Volf, *Public Faith*, 54. He writes: "As a prophetic religion, Christian faith will be an active faith, engaged in the world in a noncoercive way—offering blessing to our endeavors, effective comfort in our failures, moral guidance in a complex world, and a framework of meaning for our lives and our activities. To be engaged in a

to a different understanding of what it means to be a human being. The enlightenment theory has also failed us.[81] Some modern and post-modern ideologies regard humanity in its finiteness and objectify it as perhaps a mere product of experience.[82] Volf believes that the human being can only be understood beyond its finiteness, in their relation to God and His love[83]—the understanding of human flourishing accommodated by religions.

Proper "closing of arms" for Volf is evaluated by its coherence to human flourishing attested by the "Crucified Messiah." It is the responsibilities we come up with in the dialogue with the "other" that projects our humble position towards God and unconditional love towards the "other." Our engagement with the "other" should firstly not manifest our prejudicial account of human justice but, rather, a surrender to divine justice for universal peace and, secondly, our unconditional love towards the "other."[84] Just as we [continuously] rediscover our intimacy with the Father through

world well, Christians will have to keep one thing at the forefront of their attention: the relationship between God and a vision of human flourishing."

81 Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 199. Volf states: "Enlightenment thinkers argued that the only impartial court of appeal is reason. […] From some time now, the idea of 'pure reason' has fallen into disrepute." Elsewhere he writes: "Modernity has failed to deliver on the promise of peace. It has also failed to displace religion in the name of reason" (219). Not only has the concept of justice been elusive through pure reason, it also brings into question how the countries who pride themselves on being enlightened have taken a huge part in painting the world with injustice and violence in World War I and II.

82 For one, Sigmund Freud characterizes the person through the objective relation between id, ego, and super ego. Yet, he is unable to specifically define the person in the moment of moral discernment. This is the precise sentiment of Martin Buber saying that the best way to understand the human person and action is referring to the person as an "I" or "You" rather than an "it" or mere object of observation and experimentation.

83 Regarding transcending human finiteness: through Christ's redemption, God divinized the human person. The relationship is no longer between mere creatures and Creator, but between children and Father. It is for this reason that Ambrose exclaimed that the Fall was a "Happy Fault": "O happy fault, that merited such a redeemer" ("The Exsultet: The Proclamation of Easter," *The Roman Missal in Latin and English for Holy Week and Easter Week* (The Liturgical Press, 1966), 183. Regarding humanity's relationship to God and God's love, see Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 28. Volf states: "[M]odernity has set its high hopes in the twin strategies of social control and rational thought. […] But if 'design' and 'argument' are not to create larger wounds than the ones they are seeking to heal, 'design' and 'argument' will themselves need to be healed by 'weakness' and 'foolishness' of the self-giving love."

84 Volf, *Public Faith*, 8–9. He writes: "Without the 'receptive ascent', there is no transforming message from God; without the 'creative return,' there is no

affirming our sense of stewardship to Him for everything He has entrusted to us, we also continuously "rediscover the ministerial structures the Church requires to offer human society through contemplating God's will."[85] Such is also how Volf's ascent-return principle for human flourishing should be applied in the "closing of arms" in Asia.[86]

The Asian Church should be an avenue for experiencing God's presence and action for the weak and the oppressed.[87] Asia is bombarded by issues and scandals against the poor, the weak, and those who cannot make a stand. Although *Ecclesia in Asia* did mention this particular context of Asia and even insisted to recall the Church's message of service to the people, especially the poor in the social, political, religious, cultural, and economic realities of Asia, it was not followed up. The document could have incited collaboration with all cultures in different levels of society, callimg out the injustices done to Asians, more than the concern of Christianization of Asia. The Church may have mentioned those in its social encyclicals, but *Ecclesia in* Asia could have been the perfect avenue. Besides, Jesus is very much concerned with the enduring social elements that can actively direct or influence human lives at any time. In Asia, salvation is closely knit to liberation. The Asian Church should manifest more Volf's idea of "closing of arms" that assumes specific roles towards human flourishing characterized by divine justice and unconditional love.

IV. Opening of Arms Again

Individual Responsibility

Bilateral dialogues may actually accommodate more effective initiatives towards human flourishing, but efforts may vary according to the capacities

engagement in the transformation of the world. Leave out either one, you no longer have prophetic religion."

85 Daniel Oh, "Mission Spirituality of Jesus" *Missiology* 40, no. 1 (2012): 77–82, 80.

86 See Volf, *A Public Faith*, 8: "'Ascent' is the point at which, in the encounter with the divine, representatives of prophetic religions [as well their adherents] receive the message and their core identity is forged—whether through mystical union with God, through prophetic inspiration, or through deepened understanding of sacred texts. The ascent is the *receptive moment.* 'Return' is the point at which, in interchange with the world, the message is spoken, enacted, built into liturgies or institutions, or embodied in laws. The return is the *creative* moment."

87 Oh, "Mission Spirituality," 81.

of each party. After an embrace, the self and the "other" do not dissolve into one, which would actually undo the embrace.[88] An embrace can only be an embrace if one and the "other" are distinguishable. And the goal of each party is not to dissolve into one but to come out of the embrace better than before and perform a better embrace to all "others" again and again. Each participant improves itself in a distinct way, refining the talents and sensitivities particular to their tradition. The unified effort towards human flourishing gets greater vitality through the different competencies supplementing each other. Besides, we aim for unity not uniformity.[89]

Uniformity in this sense is ambitious, unnecessary, and most importantly, neglectful to individual responsibility. As we are coming from different cultures and are shaping the suitable framework of living together, we are demanded by our very roots to flourish as a unique culture towards a more meaningful understanding of "living together." Not only are we the best fit for the job, but also, we are more likely the most compelled to do it. In so doing, we appreciate in us a sense of meaning in this responsibility, in our differences and unique judgments. After all, having differences and making judgments are not necessarily exclusionary acts for Volf.[90] Hence, we open our arms again not because it is the pessimistic reality of embrace.[91] Rather, we open again because we trust ourselves and the "other" to be in a better disposition to assume our own meaningful responsibilities, always remembering the embrace that had happened.[92]

Preservation of Integrity

Right memory preserves integrity. It is not the act of letting go after the embrace that entirely defines respect for the "other." Every embrace, for it to be a genuine embrace, ends in letting go. But what makes fruitful embraces different from disappointing ones is right remembering. In the complexity

88 Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 143.

89 Ranhilio Aquino, "Sitting at the Same Table," *The Manila Times*, November 23, 2020, https://www.manilatimes.net/2020/11/23/opinion/columnists/topanalysis/sitting-at-the-same-table/800163. Aquino writes, "[U]nity need not be uniformity. In fact uniformity would make unity an empty concept."

90 Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace,* 65.

91 The pessimism I mean here refers to the undeniable frailty of human actions, which may lead us to think that good things have an end, and that having fleeting embraces is life's absurdity.

92 Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace*, 234. He writes, "Forgetfulness is damnation; memory is redemption."

of human participation in these exchanges, human forgetfulness presents a challenge. The act of letting go remains a crucial part of the whole drama of embrace, as it requires right remembering to do it properly.[93] Without right remembering, "*bon voyage*" becomes "good riddance;" the "other" becomes a pest, if not a stranger.

For Volf, right remembering is only done by remembering the "first embrace" done by God for human beings. This is the only way we should understand all the succeeding embraces we had and we will have. We cannot let the imperfections of our embraces define the "self" and the "other" but rather let the "first embrace" do so. The "first embrace" teaches us that all of us deserve a loving embrace from another and that we are capable of doing the same,[94] even despite how our experience after the embrace is sometimes degrading, often regressing, and always unsatisfying.[95]

Constant Struggle

The "first embrace" is our reinvigorating soul to our failing experiences of human embrace. When "opening of arms," "waiting," or "closing of arms" devolves to hypocrisy, rejections, disappointments, or violence, we are tasked to still "open our arms again," being hopeful that this is the only way to experience the "first embrace" once again. Christians posturing themselves to engage with Asia, in open arms and seeing them as depositories of truth, in waiting and allowing them to freely inculturate Christian principles into their tradition, and in close embrace and having a dialogue with the poor of Asia, may actually find themselves failing many times for different reasons and in different degrees.[96] Yet, the Spirit of the Lord gives us hope and vibrancy to "open our arms again" making us remember that just as the "Crucified Messiah" stood triumphant by God's loving embrace, we will as well.

93 Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace,* 144.

94 Lest it be misunderstood, this statement does not imply that we can replicate the "first embrace." To do so is logically absurd and perversely ambitious.

95 The human embraces being always unsatisfying echoes Augustine. In Book 1, chapter 1 of *The Confessions* Augustine says, "[O]ur hearts are restless until they rest in You." Aquinas speaks of this human pursuit of ultimate satisfaction through the *exitus-reditus* event, that God is both the beginning and the end.

96 Regarding depositories of truth, see, e.g., Paul VI, *Lumen Gentium,* Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (Holy See, 1964), ch. 2, sec. 16, https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html. It states, "Whatever good or truth is found amongst them is looked upon by the Church as a preparation for the Gospel."

Seemingly, *Ecclesia in Asia* is not able to fully comprehend this collaboration between remembering Christ's embrace and proclaiming it through the work of the Spirit as a framework of dialogue with Asia. Indeed, "the chapter [of *Ecclesia in Asia*] on the proclamation of Jesus Christ is intimately linked […] to what it says in a few pages on the Holy Spirit, acknowledging the role of the Spirit in unifying people and building relationships."[97] The document does recognize the pneumatological character of doing Christian mission in Asia, presenting it as the "prime agent of the Church's dialogue with all religion, cultures, and peoples."[98] Yet unfortunately, this inspiring message is downplayed by the document's suspicion that this role of the Spirit might be used in Asia "as an excuse for a failure to proclaim Jesus Christ as one and only Saviour."[99] Our constant struggles should not be regarded as failures, and entrusting these struggles to the Spirit should not be considered as a separate and substandard option. Besides, the Federation of Asian Bishops's Conferences (FABC) understands the primacy of *Missio Spiritus* as not in any way competing with the explicit proclamation of Jesus Christ as Savior. In fact, it reiterates the central duty of proclaiming Christ as Savior.[100] However, a verbal proclamation is not usually the smart way to follow in Asia.[101] *Ecclesia in Asia* should have highlighted more its understanding of the role of the Spirit guiding Christian dialogue with Asian religions towards "mutual understanding and acceptance,"[102] to "bring into completion Jesus's mission of love and service in Asia."[103]

Conclusion

As it appears, Volf's Theology of embrace stands as a striking contrast against *Ecclesia in Asia*'s framework of engaging with the "other," which in this paper

97 See also Wilfred, "Ecclesia in Asia."

98 *EA*, sec. 15

99 *EA*, sec. 16

100 Franz-Josef Eilers, ed., *For All the Peoples of Asia: Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences*, Documents from 1970 to 1991, vol. 1 (Claretian Publications, 1992), 25. It states: "We [FABC] affirm that there can never be true evangelization without the proclamation of Jesus Christ. The proclamation of Jesus Christ is the center and the primary element of evangelization without which all other elements will lose their cohesion and validity."

101 Eilers, ed., *For All the Peoples of Asia*, 105. It states, "Christ cannot yet be proclaimed openly by words [in many places in Asia] but through witness of life."

102 *EA*, sec. 15

103 *EA*, sec. 17

refers to Asian religions. It presents itself as a critique to *Ecclesia in Asia* in four ways. First in its discussion of "opening of arms," Volf's framework may regard Asian religions no longer as pre-Christians or lesser Christians as *Ecclesia in Asia* may imply, but instead as religions equally embraced by God and unconditionally deserving of our open arms, ears, and respect. Second, in its discussion of "waiting." Volf's framework lays out the danger of oppression inculturation may devolve into, which *Ecclesia in Asia* may be guilty of. It shows that the adaptation of cultural elements (or even interreligious dialogue in general) is defined not by coercion but by freedom and mutual appreciation through the grace of the Spirit on His perfect time. Third, in its discussion of "closing of arms," Volf's framework highlights that assimilation or Christianization is not the primary motive for a dialogue with Asia, which *Ecclesia in Asia* may seem to insinuate. It rather insists on the common mission of religions to walk arm in arm towards authentic human flourishing that is characterized by justice and peace. And fourth, in its discussion of "opening of arms again," Volf's framework features that the role of the Holy Spirit does in no way compete with the proclamation of Jesus Christ as one and only Savior. "*Ecclesia in Asia* suffers from the preoccupation of saving Christ from the other saviors of Asian religions,"[104] while Volf's framework lets Christ do the saving and have everybody appreciate it through the power of the Spirit.

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104 Kavunkal, SVD, "Church and Mission in Asia."

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ARTICLE

Observing the Sabbath While the Body of Christ is Quarantined

Ana Petrache

Abstract
This article offers an in-depth examination of the religious challenges and creative adaptations that emerged during the March–April 2020 COVID-19 lockdown. Adopting an interfaith and ecumenical perspective, the study draws on semi-structured interviews with Christians, Muslims, and Jews in Rome and Bucharest. The analysis shows that the theological language of the Church as the Body of Christ, together with its connection to the Eucharistic celebration shared by both Orthodox Christians and Catholics, shaped the perception of the pandemic by critically engaging with state limitations on religious practice. By contrast, Jewish and Muslim practices of purification—linking ablution, hygiene—often rendered sanitary measures more theologically and ritually coherent. A marked contrast thus emerges: While many Catholic and Orthodox respondents expressed pronounced dissatisfaction rooted in ecclesiological understandings of the Church as the "body of Christ," Jewish and Muslim participants tended to integrate pandemic measures within established frameworks of ritual purity. Despite divergent responses in other domains, death and burial practices acted as a unifying element across traditions, as all communities confronted similar constraints and grief under governmental biopolitical regulations concerning the treatment of bodies. Finally, the article examines the proliferation of "homemade" rituals—such as the domestic Seder or Friday prayer—and the inherent limitations of digital technologies in reproducing the sensory and embodied dimensions of traditional religious practice. Notably, the shift to domestic ritual life often intensified personal engagement, relocating

responsibility from collective institutions to individual practitioners and underscoring the centrality of the body in contemporary theological reflection.

Keywords
COVID-19, Orthodox Christians, Islam, Judaism, body of Christ, rituals, digital religions, biopolitics

This article is an in-depth reflection on religious challenges and creative adjustments during the March–April lockdown of 2020, when observants from all religious denominations were obliged to experience religious life in isolation and in the absence of established community. My starting point is my own experience as a lay Catholic woman studying in Rome. This paper focuses on how other believers adapted established rituals while searching for meaning. To nourish my reflection, I conducted ten interviews. My case studies included Christians, Muslims, and Jews who spent the lockdown in Rome and Bucharest, and included one Orthodox rabbi, a male and female Sunni Muslim, a male and female lay Christian Orthodox, one Orthodox monk living in Romania, one Orthodox priest living in Rome, one Catholic sister who spent the lockdown in a congregation in Rome, and two Catholic priests in Rome, one with pastoral responsibilities and one without. Having one orthodox Jew and two Sunni Muslims compared with several Christians reactions is reflective of the religious structure of the population[1]. The semi-structured interviews were conducted in March and April 2021 and were conducted in Romanian, Italian, and English—in person for those in Rome and via digital technologies for the others. Their perspectives are to be considered ways to access various interpretations of the phenomenon. Comparing the reactions between two European countries can bring into the discussion various cultural issues.

Being interfaith and ecumenical, my reflection comparatively engages the specific challenges of each denomination and then focuses on general challenges. Different communities need to cope with different issues of religious life, and the explanatory angle of this article assumes that these

1 Romania has 0.02% Jewish population and 0.34% Sunni Muslim ("Afiliere Religioasă (2011)," Secretariatul de Stat Pentru Culte, updated 2011, http://culte.gov.ro/?page_id=132). Italy has 0.12% Jewish Population and 1.46% Muslim (Ufficio Nazionale per l'Ecumenismo e il Dialogo Interreligioso della Conferenza Episcopale Italiana, *Italia di oggi pluriconfesionale e plurireligioasa* [Unedi Roma, 2022], 24).

various aspects are determined by the structure of rituals. By ritual, I understand, as an operative definition, a stable pattern of activity in addressing the supernatural, and I assume that the structure of the ritual is socially established and recognized as such.[2] This focus on ritual is due first to the fact that the pandemic disrupted and transformed the common practice of rituals, and second because it is the performing of the rituals, more than the content of the belief, which distinguishes between observants and non-observants. Furthermore, the ritual is at the center of religious practice, but it cannot be reduced to its religious aspect. Rituals have various social functions, as they organize the community and give meaning by integrating actions in systems of representations.[3] By paying attention to the embodied human experience of ritual, this paper questions how the COVID-19 pandemic affected practicing Jews, Christians, and Muslims, and to what extent adjustments can be made in order to perform home rituals. In addition, it examines the relationship between religion and virtual life on how bodies and religious bodies (quarantined human bodies, the body of Christ, and dead bodies) were disturbed by the COVID-19 pandemic. The present research is at the intersection of two trends: emerging bodies theologies incorporating the body into the reflection on religious experience and the ritualistic turn in comparative theology.

It has been suggested that a focus on ritual can offer a better understanding of the religious other. Indeed, if embodied rituals are important in formatting religious identity, then the way they shape religious experiences needs to be considered in interreligious dialogue.[4] Moreover, the prohibition of collective rituals during the COVID-19 pandemic impoverished the religious experience of all faithful. This disruption of collective rituals made clear their performative power and their ability to produce meaning.

Religious experiences during the pandemic have been studied from different perspectives. Extensive surveys have analyzed different aspects of religious life in Italy and Europe,[5] and some Catholic and Orthodox

2 Jan G. Platvoet and Karel Van Der Toorn, eds., *Pluralism and Identity: Studies in Ritual Behaviour*, Numen Book Series Vol. 67 (Brill, 1995), 42–45. See also, Evan M. Zuesse, “Rito,” in *Dizionario dei riti*, ed. Mircea Eliade (Jaca Book, 2018), 408–410.

3 Gaëlle Clavandier, *Sociologie de la mort: vivre et mourir dans la société contemporaine* (Armand Colin, 2009), 89.

4 Marianne Moyaert, “Comparative Theology between Text and Ritual,” in *The Past, Present and Future of Theologies of Interreligious Dialogue*, eds. Terrence Merrigan and John Friday (Oxford University Press, 2017), 184–201.

5 Berenika Seryczyńska, Lluis Oviedo, Piotr Roszak, Suvi-Maria Katariina Saarelainen, Hilla Inkilä, Josefa Torralba Albaladejo, and Francis-Vincent

theologians have tried to offer insights from their experience.[6] Another important category of studies has focused on the legal framework, balancing between the interference of the state and religious freedom.[7] A study conducted in France, which analyzed religious congregation reactions during the pandemic, argues that rites' flexibility appears to be the main factor in explaining the differing reactions of religious denominations, and it also stresses that highly ritualized cults—Catholic, Lutherans, and especially Christian Orthodox—face more challenges in adapting rituals in times of pandemic.[8] A similar claim can be made for Orthodox Judaism compared with Liberal Judaism in the face of the COVID pandemic[9].

Anthony, "Religious Capital as a Central Factor in Coping with the COVID-19 Clues from an International Survey," *European Journal of Science and Theology* 17, no. 2 (2021): 43–56. For Italy see, Francesco Strambi, "La religiosità degli italiani alla prova della pandemia. Un approfondimento sui dati dell'indagine ResPOnsE Covid-19," Clip Salute, May 25, 2020, https://www.clipsalute.it/2020/05/25/la-religiosita-degli-italiani-alla-prova-della-pandemia-un-approfondimento-sui-dati-dellindagine-response-covid-19/.

6 Walter Kasper, ed., *Comunione e Speranza-Testimoniare la fede al tempo del coronavirus* (Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2020); N.T. Wright, *God and the Pandemic: A Christian Reflection on the Coronavirus and its Aftermath* (Zondervan, 2020); Jean Claude Larchet, *Petite théologie pour les temps de pandémie* (Editions des Syrtes, 2021); Maxim Morariu, *Gânduri de pandemie* (Renașterea, 2020); Lluis Olviedo, "Theology in Times of Pandemic," *Studia Humana* 10, no. 1 (2021): 34–40.

7 Antonio Fuccillo, Miriam Abu Salem, and Ludovica Decimo, "Fede interdetta? L'esercizio della libertà religiosa collettiva durante l'emergenza COVID-19: attualità e prospettive," *CALUMET—Intercultural Law and Humanities Review* 10 (2020): 109–139; Francesco Alicino, "Costituzione e religione in Italia al tempo della pandemia," *Rivista telematica* 19 (2020): 1–24; Louis-Léon Christians, "Religion et crise sanitaire: Les nouvelles certitudes du droit," *Revue théologique de Louvain* 51, no. 4 (2020): 566–595.

8 Pierre Ouzoulias, "Les cultes religieux face à l'épidémie de Covid-19 en France," L'Office parlementaire d'évaluation des choix scientifiques et technologiques (OPECST), Note à l'attention des membres de l'Office, July 2, 2020, 15–17, http://www.senat.fr/fileadmin/Fichiers/Images/opecst/quatre_pages/OPECST_2020_0028_note_cultes_covid19.pdf. This is a document issued for the French Parliament, based on the opinions of several religious experts: a historian of religion, a philosopher, bishops, a priest, a Chief Rabbi, and the president of the French Council of Muslim Faith. It is one of the most complex research reunifying aspects on religious freedom, the adjustment of rituals, the limit of personal worships, financial, and psychological aspects and the enforcement of the neutrality of the state pursuant to the Covid-19 pandemic.

9 David Graham and Jonathan Boyd, "Six Takeaways about Jewish Life under Lockdown," Institute for Jewish Policy Research, September 2022, https://www.jpr.org.uk/sites/default/files/attachments/Six%20takeaways%20about%20Jewish%20life%20under%20lockdown.Final_.pdf, 3.

My own perspective regarding religious experience during the pandemic was shaped by the following interpretation key. Reading William Cavanaugh's "The Church in the Streets: Eucharist and Politics" (2014) on the evening of Maundy Thursday, the precise moment of the liturgical celebration of the Last Supper, I found this passage: "if the Eucharist remains quarantined in a separated, supernatural, sphere, then is not the true body of Christ, the *corpus verum,* at all."[10] I realized that the expression "quarantined body of Christ" reflected my own spiritual experience of the lockdown in Rome. Quarantined for Lent and in isolation from the usual practice of attendance of Paschal Triduum made me feel that not only human bodies were quarantined but also the Body of Christ. The expression captures some insights concerning the experience of lay Catholics and Orthodox Christians around the world who were forced into quarantine and for whom it was practically impossible to participate in communion. Theologically, it also suggests the experience of Christ in the tomb for the three days and thus provoked me to reflect on the incarnate nature of Christian life. Additionally, Bruno Latour has noted the "unforeseen coincidence between a general confinement and the period of Lent" as a good opportunity to reflect on what is important and what is derisory.[11] He stresses that the English term quarantine and the Italian "quaresima" comes from the same Latin root, *quadraginta,* meaning "forty," reflecting the 40-day period of Lent.

As the two interpretations concerning quarantine stress, being separated from Christ for a period of time to enhance preparation for future union has a spiritual meaning, but the pursuit of different forms of *sine die* quarantine dramatically changes and challenges the common worshipping in different religious congregations. In the following pages, this article aims to describe the transformation of religious life for the respondents as described in their own words. The article shares wide-ranging experiences and information about the participants' backgrounds. By putting into dialogue Christian, Jewish, and Muslim perspectives, the article discusses both the common challenges and the specific difficulties of each community. I want to emphasize an important point of contrast between Christians on one hand and Jews and Muslims on the other. Although all religious denominations have been affected by the same measures of confinement, it

10 William T. Cavanaugh, "The Church in the Streets: Eucharist and Politics," Modern Theology 30, no. 2 (2014): 384–402; See also Cavanaugh, "The Body of Christ: The Eucharist and Politics," Word and World 22, no. 2 (2002): 177.

11 Bruno Latour, "Is this is a Dress Rehearsal?," *In the Moment* (blog), *Critical Inquiry,* March 26, 2020, https://critinq.wordpress.com/2020/03/26/is-this-a-dress-rehearsal/.

seems that Christians expressed a higher level of dissatisfaction concerning these measures. Perhaps, Jews and Muslims, being in a minority position in Romania and Italy, wanted to prove that they are good citizens by supporting state confinement measures. To carefully avoid any form of criticism toward their communities, it is possible that they abstained from expressing discontent. While Christians feel safe enough to critically engage with the state, Jews and Muslims focus more on demonstrating their support for the state. Yet, there is another plausible hypothesis. The image of the Church as the Body of Christ is essential to Eastern Orthodox and Catholic theological narratives and, therefore, the Eucharist is at the center of the Christian experience. The Church is the Body of Christ, thus simultaneously the faithful are members of the Body of Christ and during the Eucharistic celebration they nourish themselves with the body of Christ.[12] I believe that the usage of this terminology of the body opened a higher degree of vulnerability in their perception of the pandemic. The Church imagined as the Body of Christ, in contrast to the people of God, for Jews, and *umma* for Muslims, influenced the perception of how public authorities governed fragile bodies during the pandemic. The Christian understanding of the Church as the Body of Christ, based on the Apostle Paul's teachings, further developed in Eucharistic ecclesiology—centered around the Eucharist as the presence of the real body—triggered a stronger theological reaction compared with Jews and Muslims. Christians, Muslims, and Jews agree on the sacrality of the human body and the need for ritual purification before the encounter with God. Yet, Catholics and the Orthodox connect the imagination concerning bodies with the doctrine of the Incarnation and of the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist.

Furthermore, the interviewed Muslims and the rabbi are persons who give increased attention to purity of the body, compared with their fellow Christians. In their religious practice, the discipline imposed on the body is central. Avoiding contagion with unclean products for religious reasons is part of their religious heritage. Clear boundaries between pure and impure bodies, which became central in sanitarian restriction, play an important role in Islam and Judaism. Perhaps this focus made them more receptive to measures of purification practiced during the pandemics.

The Christian representation of the Church as the Body of Christ and the Jewish and Muslim habits of purification remain in the shadow of what has been said and done, yet they offer a new horizon of meaning. Taking them into consideration can suggest a different interpretation. The ways in

12 See Henri Cardinal de Lubac, SJ, *Corpus Mysticum: The Eucharist and the Church in the Middle Ages* (University of Notre Dame Press, 2007).

which the respective religions teach practitioners to imagine bodies in turn shaped reactions regarding pandemics and confinement.

No Common Public Worship

The Italian Government imposed very restrictive quarantine measures in 2020. Individual movement was forbidden, except for reasons of strict necessity or health needs, and consequently, all public gatherings were prohibited. Thus, from March 9th until May 18th public Masses were suspended, although some parish churches remained opened a few hours a day for individual prayer. Pope Francis encouraged obedience to civil authorities.[13] "The Italian State did not have the authority to close churches, but somehow the Italian Conference of Bishops (CEI) and the Pope were ready to do this because they understood the danger," said a Catholic priest. Starting from the 4th of May, the country entered a deconfinement stage, with the opening of non-essential shops, while the prohibition on public worship continued. At this point, the CEI began the process of negotiating with the state to permit the re-opening of public masses; on the 7th of May an agreement was signed permitting public worship starting May 18th.[14] A similar protocol imposing sanitation measures in mosques was also signed with the Italian Islamic Religious Communities.[15]

Addressing the question of unforeseen measures, a Carmelite parish priest from my interviews said:

> I understand the official position of the state. It is not the responsibility of the state to acknowledge celebration conditions in every church. Consequently, it assumed the easiest decision. But my impression was that the Italian Church gave up its liturgical life too easily. Maybe in the end, it was the right decision, but it could have been done in a different way, with more sorrow. It seems to me it is a lack of testimony concerning the centrality of Mass in Christian life.

13 Alessandro Tira, "Libertà di culto ed emergenza sanitaria," *Giustizia Insieme,* May 15, 2020, https://www.giustiziainsieme.it/it/diritto-dell-emergenza-covid-19/1089-liberta-di-culto-ed-emergenza-sanitaria-il-protocollo-del-7-maggio-2020?hitcount=0.

14 Tira, "Libertà di culto."

15 "Protocollo con le comunità islamiche," La Comunità Religiosa Islamica Italiana (COREIS) website, May 15, 2020, https://www.coreis.it/documenti-ufficiali/protocollo-con-le-comunita-islamiche.

> There was a certain unity of the people of God, but with no courage to witness, for non-believers. Christians could seem like all others, maybe they did some extra charity.

In his statement one can see the regret that the institution of the Church did not negotiate with the state over restrictions on Mass celebrations. In other words, the rhetoric of the state, which reduced citizens to potentially dangerous bodies, was embraced by the Church.

A bit critical, the priest further commented: "Mass attendance was considered a non-essential activity, and the people of God renounced too easily, like they have been released to fulfil an obligation. There could have been a rebellion against this decision." This moderately critical statement brings to light the centrality of the mystical Body of Christ and the analogies of how human bodies participate in this Body by coming together in liturgical worship. What lies here are not only questions of praying in common but how *Eucharistic gathering is the physical place where the faithful are in direct presence with what is sacred*. The Eucharistic celebration is the physical space where the faithful find themselves in the direct presence of the sacred.

Consecrated persons from religious orders living in cloisters were dramatically affected by the virus in the first stage of the pandemic.[16] Consequently, priors enforced a strict discipline on going out of the convent. Additionally, when the parish churches started reopening to the public, convents and monasteries postponed public openings. It is plausible the number of deaths of monks and nuns significantly influenced the Vatican's position on the health crisis.[17] Protecting the vulnerable bodies of elderly people was at stake in the Vatican's decision to enforce a strict distinction between inside and outside and also impose strict confinement. All activities with people from outside were stopped to protect the fragile brothers and sisters. A religious sister explained:

> [T]he children stopped coming for catechesis in the center and people stopped coming for retreat. So we very rarely see people to interact with, except for the sisters in the community. Prohibition on all interactions with the exterior was meant to create a safe space in the cloister by avoiding

16 Francesco Ognibene, "Il lungo calvario delle suore italiane. Decine di decessi nelle comunità," Avvenire website, April 21, 2020, https://www.avvenire.it/chiesa/pagine/il-lungo-calvario-delle-suore-italiane-decine-di-decessi-nelle-comunit.

17 Ricardo Benotti, Covid-19: preti in prima linea (Edizioni San Paolo, 2021).

> any contamination and enforcing the image of those living in the cloister as one body.

In any case, “religious life was deeply transformed for most of the population,” noted a Catholic priest. Another priest observed a decrease in parishioners’ attendance of the Mass, “some because they are really vulnerable, people over 85, but also families with young kids who opted to attend an online Mass of their choice, peacefully staying home.” He added: “One of the mothers from the parish insisted on finding out if at present time she is obliged to attend Mass weekly, and to my knowledge, the decree cancelling weekly Mass obligation was not yet lifted.” He added that “in the long term this can change the structure of parish life, even though now we have reopened, parish life is poor.” Attendance at mass is more than common worship in Catholic tradition. For the believer the question of the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist produces an ontological difference and therefore changes spiritual life.

From the Eucharistic Symposium to Snack Eucharist

Even though churches remained open, going out for prayer was not considered a valid reason to leave home. Some churches offered communion during certain hours. On the way to the supermarket, it was, to a certain extent, possible to request communion without the public celebration of service. Offering the body of Christ while avoiding public celebrations was not perceived by the Church as spiritual consolation for not attending Mass, but a statement about the need for Eucharistic food for spiritual life. Although the possibility to receive communion may have been perceived as a blessing that other practicing Christians from around the world lacked, receiving it without liturgical context may distort the spiritual experience. As an Italian Catholic priest says:

> Receiving communion is more than receiving the consecrated body; it supposes the experience of liturgical life in its full dimension, receiving it out of the liturgical context can create the impression of almost magic, since it is impossible to enter into a prayer atmosphere in one minute. We had 10-15 people coming daily to request communion, after morning and evening rosary, also on Sundays, but it is not just about receiving it, but also about

how one experiences it, having communion without Mass is impoverishing.

One can see here an attempt to accommodate spiritual and physical heath, since the person is both body and spirit. "There is a certain risk," he continued, "One person became accustomed to asking for communion without Mass. She comes every day at 6:45, rings the bell of the convent, and she has communion like this." In his words there is special attention regarding the question of the power of the ritual to build community and communion as well as an emphasis on the fact that coming together in prayer constitutes the Body of Christ.

Due to restrictions on individual movements, other denominations not living near a house of worship needed to figure out solutions within the limits of legality. A Orthodox Christian in Italy asked for spiritual assistance during Lent, and this resulted in one Orthodox priest from the diaspora risking a large fine to go to confession and offer communion for parishioners living around Rome. "I cannot let people be without spiritual assistance," he told me, adding the following anecdote: "Somebody from our parish is working for the sanitation service, so, using his vehicle and uniform, we visited maybe fifty houses, especially around Easter, and dressed like a sanitary worker, I managed to avoid the police." As we will see in the next part, Orthodox Christians have been the champions of contesting state restrictions in the name of religious freedom. In shaping their arguments, an important aspect was the spiritual need to receive the body of Christ. What we glimpse here is that suspension of liturgical practice made visible the nature of the Church as one body around the faithful consuming the body of Christ. It is the dialectical power of negativity that reveals through absence what Graham Ward called a theology of the body as *societas*.[18]

Shared Spoon Communion[19]

In Romania, from the 26th of March until the 15th of May, participation of devotees to the common worship was suspended to avoid contagion.[20]

18 Graham Ward, "The Metaphysics of the Body" in *Apophatic Bodies: Negative Theology, Incarnation, and Relationality* (Fordham University Press, 2010), 225–250, 242.

19 For a history of the use of the spoon, see Alkiviadis C. Calivas, "A Note on the Common Communion Spoon," Orthodoxia website, May 25, 2020, https://ocl.org/a-note-on-the-common-communion-spoon/

20 Secretariatul de Stat pentru Culte, "Libertatea religioasă în România pe timpul pandemiei COVID-19," Secretariatul de Stat pentru Culte website, July 2020, http://culte.gov.ro/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/

From my interviews, the rabbi emphasized that this measure "should not be considered as a prison, but rather as a shelter." On the contrary, priests and deacons could perform holy liturgy and share it online. Spiritual assistance, confession, and communion were legally allowed for old people on request.[21] An Orthodox priest mentioned that he did not distinguish between old and young people: "I visited those who have asked me to hear their confessions and offered communion. Among them, some were afraid of the virus, some others of the large fines enforced by the police for going out without a valid reason." One deacon said, "It is not possible that a spiritual father lets his children go without food (the Eucharist is perceived as a spiritual food)." Additionally, there is also a practical aspect. A lay Christian Orthodox recounts:

> The parishioners will not forget if the parish priest refuses to give them communion for sanitary reasons! Parishioners can in the future sanction the priest's behavior, and if any problem were to appear in the parish, we are dependent on their financial support…The priest allowed some of them into the basement of the church: one week somebody, another week somebody else. In normal times, we have 10-15 persons, so I'm speaking about allowing 3-4 people in the church.

The difficulties portrayed here come from the belief in the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist. It is this belief that causes so much pain on the restriction to participate in the Eucharistic symposium. Another lay person mentioned that her spiritual father visited old people but postponed meeting younger ones.

In Rome before COVID-19, Catholics had the choice to receive communion in their hands or on their tongue. Additional sanitarian concerns suspended communion on the tongue. In contrast, Catholics in Bucharest continued to practice communion on the tongue. In the Byzantine tradition, communion is administrated with a spoon, the same spoon for the entire congregation, and consequently debates concerning the possibility that the body of Christ can be a means to transmit the disease (COVID-19) appeared. Some Orthodox voices argued that the supernatural nature of the

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Libertatea-religioasă-în-România-în-perioada-pandemiei-de-COVID-19-din-5-februarie-2021.doc.

21 Iulian Dumitrașcu, "Noi măsuri privind slujbele și activitățile sociale bisericești," Romanian Patriarchy website, March 22, 2020, https://basilica.ro/noi-masuri-privind-slujbele-si-activitatile-sociale-bisericesti/.

Eucharist makes it impossible for it to transmit the disease, but some others insist that if the material part of Eucharist can suffer corruption, it can also transmit the disease. Some theologians suggest, going back to the ancient liturgical practice of St. James, receiving communion in hand.[22] For the faithful, receiving communion is a real encounter with the body of Christ, the most important moment is therefore a concrete act of eating the body and drinking the blood and not a spiritual elevation in prayer.

At the first stage of the pandemic, the Romanian Orthodox Church (ROC) suggested that devotees who were worried about the contagion may receive communion, not from the chalice but from the pre-consecrated Eucharist for the sick.[23] After public Masses began again in May, the state, by a ministerial decree from the relevant institutions, suggested "avoiding communion, in the cases where disposable teaspoons and glasses cannot be offered."[24] However, this idea scandalized a sector of practicing Christians and priests and provoked many debates concerning the possibility of changing an established ritual. Some voices considered the state's decisions to influence an established ritual as a serious attack against religious freedom. What disturbed the people and produced such strong reactions against the state was a certain shared imagination about the Body of Christ. This tension and defense mechanism is even more interesting considering that the Orthodox tradition does not have the history of contesting state power that the Catholics have. In Romania, the communist regime entailed a culture of silence and conformity, with religious contestation and dissidence almost absent.

The testimonies bring into view an analogy between individual bodies, political bodies, and the Church body. In state confinement measures, the Orthodox perceived a clash between the political body and the Body of Christ. If the Church is the place where the faithful partake in the Body of Christ, restrictions on Mass were perceived not only as restrictions on public gatherings, but as a serious limitation in encountering the sacred.

22 Nikos Kosmidis, "A Search for a Theology of Life: The Challenge of COVID-19 for Orthodox Ecclesiology and Religious Practices," *The Ecumenical Review* 72, no. 4 (2020): 624–635.

23 Iulian Dumitrașcu, "Patriarhia Română: Măsuri sanitare și spirituale în timp de epidemie," Romanian Patriarchy website, February 27, 2020, https://basilica.ro/patriarhia-romana-masuri-sanitare-si-spirituale-in-timp-de-epidemie/.

24 Secretariatul de Stat Pentru Culte and Ministerul Sănătății, Ordin nr. 1.070/826/2020, enacted May 15, 2020, https://legislatie.just.ro/Public/DetaliiDocument/22583.

A good part of concern has been explained in terms related to eucharistic practice. The ROC's official message refused to change the liturgical tradition and used a single chalice and spoon for communion.[25] This means that, in practice, a lot of parishes continued the established ritual, using the same shared spoon. One lay theologian commented: "Certainly the body of Christ cannot make you ill, but other people's saliva from the chalice, yes." This manner of expression attempts to reconcile a scientific approach with the sacrality of the body of Christ. Another lay person replied:

> I didn't ask to receive communion with a plastic spoon. I trust the Eucharist. When I first started to go to the Orthodox Church, it was difficult for me to receive communion after others, but now I don't think about this anymore.

Prohibition to attend the Easter Vigil scandalized a lot of Romanians. In the Byzantine tradition at midnight there is the ritual of lighting candles, and the Easter service starts with the priest calling Christians to come and receive the light. Everyone who is baptized—and even those who never attend church service—are invited to perform this ritual, which is both social and religious. One lay Orthodox confessed:

> I was so disappointed. I had hoped right up until the last moment that I could attend Easter Vigil. Somehow, I imagined that I would go to church and hide inside. I had asked my spiritual father if he would allow me to come in, but he refused, and the police were all around.

Initially, there was an agreement between the Romanian Patriarchy and the Romanian Police to distribute the Easter light to all houses with the help of police officers. The decision created both hilarity and debates concerning state-church separation, and thus, the ROC kept the initiative to distribute the light but asked the help of volunteers.

In Rome, police officers regulated the distribution of palms offered at the entrance of the Church for Palm Sunday. As the Italian Catholic priest noted:

25 Gheorghe Anghel, "Îndrumări bisericești pentru starea de alertă," Romanian Patriarchy website, May 14, 2020, https://basilica.ro/indrumari-bisericesti-pentru-starea-de-alerta/.

> We have blessed the palms. At a certain point there was a congregation of people in front of the Church, and thus the police came to enforce social distancing, but they did not stop us; maybe it is an Italian sensibility.

The candle lighting and the palms are concrete signs of the celebration; these objects connect the faithful with the feast. Their function is to be brought home and therefore to connect the household with the church. In this situation, what is important is the dynamic of the body, the fact that bodies need to move in space to obtain the blessed candles and palms. The public debate in Romania focused on issues related to religious practice and divided the society between defenders of the Orthodox identity and their critics, accusing the faithful of irrational behavior and increasing the contagion. One Romanian sociologist observed media exposure of the ROC compared with the religious life coverage in other Western countries, where this topic had a marginal position.[26] To explain this, he invokes the popular aspect of religious life in Romania and the anthropology of religious gesture. I would add an embodiment of religious gestures (kissing icons, touching the holy relics, shared spoon, etc.). On the same topic, a Greek anthropologist compared Western secularized society with non-Western communities. She argues that changing rules and rituals in the light of a crisis for scientific reasons reflects the experience of Western secularization, but it seems very controversial in non-Western communities.[27]

26 Mirel Banica, "Biserica Ortodoxă Română la vreme de molimă. Inventar de etapă," Contributors website, June 8, 2020, https://www.contributors.ro/biserica-ortodoxa-romana-la-vreme-de-molima-inventar-de-etapa/.

27 Istratii Romina, "Restricting Religious Practice in the Era of COVID-19: A De-westernised Perspective on Religious Freedom with Reference to the Case of Greece," Political Theology Network (blog), April 15, 2020, https://politicaltheology.com/restricting-religious-practice-in-the-era-of-covid-19-a-de-westernised-perspective-on-religious-freedom-with-reference-to-the-case-of-greece/. The author stresses that in Greece some priests have been arrested because they decided to open churches despite legal restrictions. Also, in Romania priests have been fined for ignoring the ban on religious service. Later on, the Constitutional Court of Romania declared that huge fines for ignoring quarantine measures were unconstitutional. Consequently, people were required to contest in court the fine they received. See Constitutional Court of Romania, "Media Release from May 6, 2020," Curtea Constituțională a României website, May 6, 2020, https://www.ccr.ro/comunicat-de-presa-6-mai-2020/.

Homemade *Jumu'ah* (Friday Prayer) and Homemade Seder—But No Homemade Eucharist

Rituals are always embodied practices and never just a state of mind. Ritual disciplines the body, and the body participates in the ritual. Before analyzing collective and individual rituals one needs to remember that ritual is the place where bodies have religious experiences, and by which rituals bodies express a certain agency. Moreover, performing the ritual depends on material conditions: like having a place to perform the ritual, or having a minimum number of participants. Some rituals, like the Eucharist, cannot be performed in the absence of a consecrated person, which is as important as the absence of a quorum. These practical conditions provoke a switch in the religious life towards rituals that can be performed alone or with the family, such as individual prayer or reading holy texts. Maybe the most interesting parts of the religious experience in the midst of the pandemic are homemade rituals and adjustments of religious life. Yet the fact remains that some religious rituals are entrusted to specialists: priests, rabbis, imams, and other administrators of the sacred who have both the know-how and the authority to perform established rituals.

The rabbi and the imam have the authority and the knowledge to lead in prayer the community, but it was practically impossible without a minimum number of male observants. This led to the decision to close synagogues and mosques even in countries where the law permitted to keep these houses of worship open for individual prayers; subsequently, it was also impossible to transmit these types of prayers online. One Muslim woman said, "During Ramadan, we were always performing *tarawih* [voluntary night prayers performed by Muslims exclusively during Ramadan] prayers, but we couldn't during this period, instead, we read the Quran together; this was allowed also online."

Similarly, in Judaism, the kaddish cannot be performed in the absence of a minimum number of ten members above the age of thirteen.[28] The rabbi maintained:

> If you have enough people, you perform the prayers, if not, no. When conditions are fulfilled, the common worship is

28 Giacomo Kahn, "Coronavirus: Comunita' Ebraica Roma, Sospese Ceremonie Religiose in Sinagoghe," Shalom Comunità Ebraica di Roma website, March 10, 2020, https://www.shalom.it/blog/roma-ebraica-bc7/coronavirus-comunica-ebraica-roma-sospese-cerimonie-religiose-in-sinagoghe-b771121.

> performed, when the conditions are not achieved, we do not perform the common worship. In this sense, the quarantine is neither preventing, nor helping to perform religious duties. This is not the first time in history when Jews cannot go to the Synagogue, my great-grandfather was the only Jew in his community, he was going to the Synagogue only for great religious feasts.

Religiosity in the Jewish framework appeared to be connected to a Judaism performed at home, still connecting the individual and the community. Jewish identity is ensured by performing the same ritual although not in the same place. In both Orthodox Judaism and Sunni Islam, the individual is bound to the community by clear non-negotiable rules, like observing the *Mitzvoth* (commandments) or the practices of *salat* (prayer) or *zakat* (charity) for Muslims. In a way it can be said that the sense of belonging to the community is already imprinted in the body.

Another important question arising from the rabbi's account concern the level of religious education: Are devotees prepared to perform established rituals alone? Morning and evening prayers for Christians, or five daily prayers in Islam, can be considered simple, but some other practices suppose a more complex ritual, and observants may need specific advice to perform these rituals.

This brings into discussion the question of know-how. Sisters or lay persons involved in parishes possess an in-depth knowledge of religious rituals. Innovative applications of rituals can only be envisaged given a prior acquaintance of the existing ritual. Furthermore, this shapes the debate around the question of discernment concerning the adjustment of the ritual and personal responsibility, which presumes that believers are rooted in their own traditions. The rabbi stated:

> Some members of the congregation used to rely on the officiant attending in a passive way, and now everybody realizes that they are accountable, and they shall put into practice the ritual by themselves. We are not only part of the community; everyone is responsible for his own practice.

Accountability for their own ritual has an intellectual part in learning the meaning and content of the ritual, but more importantly a practical part. Performing certain acts of worship, in this case embodying the ritual gesture by themselves, is seen as an occasion for a deeper experience compared to a classical situation where the faithful came to synagogue to see and hear in a passive way what the celebrant is doing.

Thinking about the next step, one Orthodox monk stressed: “After the pandemic, the urgent need of the Orthodox Church will be catechism. People are zealots but often lack necessary knowledge about religion.” The same subject arises during a discussion with a Muslim man: “The imam taught me via Zoom to perform feasting prayers. I have become the imam of my house, praying with my wife and children.” A Catholic priest also noticed that families started doing more than entrusting children to catechism, for instance by reading the Bible with them at home. When contrasting individual and collective rituals, a decisive importance is accorded to commitment and an integral participation in the ritual: homemade rituals become occasions to deepen one’s faith by performing the ritual independently.

Religious experience in the time of a pandemic depends first on the exact position of each member of the community. For the Catholic and the Orthodox Church, the priest is the minister of the sacraments. For male consecrated persons, living Lent and Easter in lockdown was like “experiencing a hermit monastic life.” “We have calmly prayed and focused on Mass,” said an Italian priest. He continues, “[B]ut in the conscience of any priest is the fact that sacerdotal service is not for himself, but for the people of God.” This resulted in discriminatory access to the sacraments for lay people and female religious orders (with the exceptions of some female orders who have priests living in the same buildings). Consequently, and only for them, it was possible to continue a normal sacramental life.

A male congregation in Rome, aware of this privileged access, decided not to celebrate Paschal Vigil. As an Assumptionist priest says:

> In communion with the people of God, we decided to fast together and, consequently, to abstain from Easter celebrations. We suppressed the celebration of the most important Christian feast of the year, and like millions of other Catholics watched the Pope’s celebration online. The way these priests understood their function was derived from an image of the Church as a body where members need to serve each other. Priests are members of the Body of Christ with the privilege to celebrate the Eucharist, but this privilege is to be used for the benefits of all members.

Praying via Digital Technologies

The pandemic generalized the practice of providing Mass online. This exceptional practice was determined by the will to accommodate the spiritual needs of the ill and immobile persons who could not attend in person. In the case of an incarnated religion like Christianity, by investigating the consequences of this form of disembodied worship, one can ask if religion was losing its corporeal reality and becoming a mere show and tell.[29] Several Protestant Churches opted for virtual communion, which means bringing elements from their own household (bread, wine) and consuming them during the livestream Eucharist.[30] The point of contrast between different Protestant churches and the Catholic Church is the belief in the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist. This belief is a decisive factor in deciding material criteria to participate in communion. For a Catholic, after Vatican II, participation in the Eucharist is the most perfect act of religious life. Due to the suppression of Mass, Catholics around the world were invited by the Pope to engage in spiritual communion. From the Middle Ages, the Catholic church has developed the tradition of spiritual communion,[31] but home-streaming pajama spiritual communion has very different psychological effects and can secularize the ritual. As a lay Christian confessed: "It would have been terrible without online Masses, but still, for

29 Vincezo Bova, "Credere, obbedire, convertire. Chiesa cattolica Italiana e Pandemia," Osservatorio delle Libertà ed Istituzioni Religiose, *Osservatorio delle libertà ed istituzioni religiose,* April 14, 2020.

30 Edward Foley, "Spiritual Communion in a Digital Age: A Roman Catholic Dilemma and Tradition," *Religions* 12, no. 4 (2021): 1–12. Because of this practice, I voluntary excluded Protestants from my survey as well as Reformed Christians and Evangelicals. In their cases, the discussion is more complex and implies a lot of Eucharistic and ecclesiological assumptions different from church to church. Online Eucharistic streaming and digital Eucharist are two different topics intertangled. Although almost no congregation was against live streaming the celebration, livestreaming Sunday mass can encourage preparing your own home-made communion in the protestant milieu; this is why, one Anglican priest, Andrew McGowan, Dean and President at Berkeley Divinity School at Yale, argues that Eucharist cannot be celebrated in isolation from the community and suggests that only other services, like evening and morning prayers, could be transmitted online. Thus, he does not recommend celebrations of the eucharist via digital technologies. See Andrew McGowan, "Liturgy in a Time of Plague: A Letter to a Colleague," Saint Ronan Street Diary (blog), published March 14, 2020, http://abmcg.blogspot.com/2020/03/liturgy-in-time-of-plague.html.

31 Edward Foley, "Spiritual Communion in a Digital Age," 6. Some medieval theologians distinguish between reception *corporaliter* and reception *spirtualiter,* whereas Foley stresses the difference between spiritual communion and Eucharistic adoration.

me, it was very difficult to pray online." Because ritual performances are made to engage with the whole person, as a social, imaginative, emotional, and embodied mind, as Moyaert asserts, virtual rituals proved to not have enough power to discipline the body, and thus, to create a context that nourished the need of belonging to a community.[32] Yet, in this difficult period, the need to come together in prayer became stronger, since collective rituals are more effective in affirming an identity. Therefore, members from all communities learned very quickly how to use digital technologies to share online services, whether that be "zooming" to attend sermons, rosary prayers, or the sharing of psalms and hymns in WhatsApp groups. The ritual and its structures shaped the relationship with technology, and Orthodox and Catholic communities shared online masses but refused to confess online. "Confession was almost completely missing in this time, since normally it is done in closed spaces," testified a Catholic priest. An exception among those with whom I spoke, a young Orthodox priest said: "Why not do it online? Grace was the first Wi-Fi in history." If most Christians are skeptical about the validity of online sacraments, this is related to the physical separation from the sacraments. There is a vast literature of debates on online communion that cannot be analyzed here, but it is important to underline that arguments from this field connect theology of the Eucharist with theology of the body.[33]

On the contrary, catechism continued online in Italy for both Catholics and Orthodox. In Romania, confessional religious education is part of the public education system, and consequently, it followed educational restrictions.

Muslim communities used Zoom to organize Ramadan events and read the Quran together. While some rabbis in Israel allowed Zoom to facilitate celebrations with friends and family at a distance, they restricted its usage for the Sabbath and Seder (worshippers were allowed to open Zoom before the Sabbath and close it when the Sabbath ended).[34] Before

32 Moyaert, "Comparative Theology between Text and Ritual," 193.

33 See C. Andrew Doyle, *Embodied Liturgy: Virtual Reality and Liturgical Theology in Conversation* (Church Publishing, 2021); Andrew Village, "Attitude Toward Virtual Communion in Relation to Church Tradition during the COVID-19 Pandemic in the United Kingdom," *Journal of Empirical Theology* 35, no. 1 (2022): 95–117; Katherine G. Schmidt, *Virtual Communion: Theology of the Internet and the Catholic Sacramental Imagination* (Fortress Academic, 2021).

34 Noam Zion and Mishael Zion, "Seder in Time of the Plague: Reflections, Suggestions, Readings, Activities for a Seder where Families are Separated," Shalom Hartman Institute website, updated March 2021, https://static.hartman.org.il/dev/uploads/2021/03/Coronavirus-Seder-Planner-Updated-2021.pdf.

the pandemic and the generalization of virtual reunions, Graham Ward asked the question: What is happening with the bodies when communities become imagined? He argues that when belonging to religious or political communities became abstract, in contrast to the experience of being rooted in a concrete community, "bodies become virtual, disposable, because [they are] dispersed across networks of symbolic exchanges, enmeshed in the march of metaphors (to cite Nietzsche)."[35] For him, this situation is an example of "bad metaphysics" that urges a rethinking of the body, both as an individual and as a political body. In light of his idea, one can see that during online prayers the faithful participated only by their cognitive functions. Perhaps this is an unforeseen example of reducing the body to the spirit. In the absence of the usual sets of gestures, sounds, smells, and positions, all of which compose a ritual, the faithful's experience of the sacred was diminished.

Arguments against mediation of technology play a role in the refusal of some congregations using virtual mass. Yet, this refusal might be informed by an anthropological study of the embodied experience, a refusal to reduce the person to their will and intellect which can attend online. In this sense, the pandemic offered a lesson on the importance of incorporating the body in theological reflection.

Indeed, some orthodox communities refused to use technology for feasts. The rabbi I interviewed expressed his reservations: "We have used Zoom for the preparation of the ceremonies, we have taught people how to perform the rituals, but technology cannot be used during the Sabbath."[36] He added: "In my opinion, using Zoom for Sabbath is not a solution; it is better to respect the feast alone." It is possible, however, for the Pascal Seder. As this rabbi notes: "Usually, we celebrate the Seder surrounded by family, but it is possible to do it alone as well. For example, Maimonides said: 'If you are alone, you should ask and replay it for yourself.'" It would be an error to assume that his perspective is determined only by a conservative way of understanding the relationship with technology. His words testify that ritual is a collective event connecting the individual with the community, even when one is doing the ritual alone.

35 Ward, "The Metaphysics of the Body," 232.

36 Also in Italy, Zoom was used for religious education; see "L'Italia ebraica e il coronavirus, il racconto sui media israeliani," Moked Pagine Ebraiche website, March 3, 2020, https://moked.it/blog/2020/03/30/litalia-ebraica-coronavirus-racconto-sui-media-israeliani/. The French Chief Rabbi enforced using Zoom for education but not for the Sabbath or Pesach dinner (Ouzoulias, "Les cultes religieux," 18-20).

Digital technologies enhance interfaith dialogue, as can be witnessed during an online event in Romania, which reunited an Orthodox priest, a Catholic priest, an Adventist pastor, and an imam, all expressing interfaith solidarity and reflecting together on the vulnerability and the difficulties of religious life in time of pandemic.[37] During the pandemic, diverse religious communities realized the urgency to pray together. May 14th was dedicated to fasting and praying to end the pandemic.[38] In Romania, during normal times congregations avoid praying together, but the exceptional danger justified new approaches. Theological differences have been left aside in front of the common danger and the common objective to implore the end of the pandemic.

As the COVID-19 restrictions were lifted, an interfaith prayer for peace was held in person, called "No One is Saved Alone: Peace and Fraternity," promoted by the Sant' Egidio Community, which was organized in the presence of Pope Francis, the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, Chief Rabbi of France Haïm Korsia, Superior General of the Human Fraternity, Mohamed Abdelsalam Abdellatif, the Italian president Sergio Mattarella, and other religious leaders from around the globe.[39] This encounter is organized every year, yet, the event in 2020 insisted on the need to go out of confessional boundaries. Family, brotherhood, and common home were the religious metaphors used to speak about the need of mutual accountability and interconnection. Religious narratives about brotherhood in Abrahamic tradition tell the story of a biological relation that must become spiritual through spiritual effort.

37 Asociația pentru Dialog și Valori Universale (ADVU), "God in the Time of Pandemic" (title of a conference organized ADVU on May 21, 2020). The leaders and volunteers from ADVU came from the Turkish Muslim community in Romania, and their focus is to promote intercultural and interfaith dialogue. See ADVU, "Coronavirusul și Dumnezeu," Facebook, May 21, 2020, https://www.facebook.com/ADVURO/posts/957494871382062. Some of the questions addressed by ADVU at the conference include: Should the pandemic be considered a form of God's punishment? Is the pandemic helping us to realize the fragility of the human being? What can faith communities do to avoid domestic violence, especially in this time of pandemic? Most notably, questions related to freedom of religion have been addressed.

38 Vatican News, "Covid-19:Faithful Respond to Pope's Invitation to Pray on 14 May," Vatican News website, May 12, 2020, https://www.vaticannews.va/en/church/news/2020-05/covid-19-faithful-respond-to-popes-invitation-to-pray-may-14.html.

39 Sant' Egidio, "No One is Saved Alone: International Meeting of Prayer for Peace," Sant' Egidio Incontri Internazionali di Preghiera per la Pace website, October 20, 2020, https://preghieraperlapace.santegidio.org/pageID/31256/langID/en/tab/31288/Rome-2020.html.

The COVID-19 Pandemic as an Intensifying Factor in Religious Life

One editorial observed that religious communities in the time of a pandemic can intensify responses.[40] In my opinion, the pandemic plays an intensifying factor. It accelerated all pre-COVID-19 tendencies, and thus the pandemic sped up and intensified all kinds of pre-COVID-19 customs, both by increasing and decreasing religious life.[41] Thinking about post-COVID-19 effects, one French Catholic priest said, "Statistics show that after the lockdown in France religious practice declined by 30 percent."[42] On the contrary, a Romanian Orthodox priest in diaspora reported, "After the lockdown, Mass participation increased, and in order to respect social distance, we needed to start it at 6:00 a.m." A Muslim woman stated, "In fact, our faith grows stronger, because we are helpless, and we have nothing. Everything is at the disposal of Allah and we are tested in this world." Similarly, a Catholic sister said, "The restrictions from going out rather intensified my prayer life, during those times, and on a daily basis we had retreats, conferences, and Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament, but online with the Bishop of the Diocese. So, it was a period of more prayer for me." Likewise, a man from the Muslim community considered:

> During the pandemic we had more time to reflect on the meaning of our religion. I took more responsibility of my own religious practice and also on educating my children. Every day I used to read with them one page of the Quran, whereas in normal times we may read a page a week. I did the five prayers every day, studied more on the life of the Prophet, and the meaning of fasting.

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40 Wesley J. Wildman, Joseph Bulbulia, Richard Sosis, and Uffe Schjoedt, "Religion and the COVID-19 Pandemic," *Religion, Brain and Behavior* 10, no. 2 (2020): 115–117.

41 "COVID-19: La religiosità degli italiani alla prova della pandemia", A survey conducted in Italy between April 20th and May 15th stresses that practicing Catholics follow more masses online than before the pandemic. Contrary to my observations, the study assumes a general growth of religious practice https://lastatalenews.unimi.it/covid-19-religiosita-italiani-prova-pandemia

42 This claim appeared in one of my interviews, but additional sources enforce it: Héloïse de Neuville and Caroline Celle, "Messe du Dimanche : Ces paroissiens qui manquent à l'appel depuis le confinement," *La Croix* website, January 7, 2021, https://www.la-croix.com/Religion/Messe-dimanche-paroissiens-manquent-lappel-confinement-2021-01-06-1201133460 .

The interviewed persons read the disruption of standard activities as a passage between active life and contemplative life. Putting economic activities on hold and dedicating oneself to prayer and reading Scriptures is what keeping the Sabbath means for a Jewish practitioner. In Jewish thought the Sabbath supposes the resting of the body which brings spiritual benefits. During the Sabbath the body is no longer used as a productive instrument, therefore it becomes a receptacle of the sacred. The above testimonies witness a similar experience during the confinement.

Quarantined in *Secula Seculorum*

Governing bodies is a central aspect of political practice, especially during a pandemic. However, these bodies are not just living bodies, but also dead bodies. Until this point, I have explained how differences in the structure of the ritual ground differences about what is permitted or not during the pandemic. But death proved to be a unifying factor; it seems that concerning dead bodies and the suspension of burial service there is no substantial difference. If quarantine is an isolation for a limited amount of time, burial is a prolongation *sine die* of this isolation in order to protect society from possible contagions. (Looking into the mirror, maybe this analogy with death is one of the reasons why part of the population had psychological issues with isolation measures.) A study on funeral practices observes that every stage of the funeral chain (end of life, farewell, moment of death, and mourning ceremonies) were fundamentally disturbed by the COVID-19 crisis.[43] It adds, the status of the deceased body was deeply altered, associated with biomedical waste and handled with care to avoid contaminating the living.

In Italy, the suspension of religious services applied to funeral services as well.[44] Firstly, to avoid all gatherings; and secondly, because it presumed that the bodies remained contagious even after death. Religious denominations accommodated state decisions, and no funerals were held in public squares, in churches, or in cemeteries until late April. From April 26th, 2020, funeral

43 Pierre Ouzoulias, "Crise du funéraire en situation de Covid-19: mort collective et rituels funéraires bouleversés," OPECST Note à l'attention des membres de l'Office, July 2, 2020, 1, 30, http://www.senat.fr/fileadmin/Fichiers/Images/opecst/quatre_pages/OPECST_2020_0027_note_rites_funeraires_covid19.pdf.

44 Sergio Mattarella, "Decreto del Presidente del Consiglio dei Ministri 8 marzo 2020," Gazzetta Ufficialle della Repubblica Italiana website, March 8, 2020, https://www.gazzettaufficiale.it/eli/id/2020/03/08/20A01522/sg.

services were limited to fifteen people.[45] Although funeral services are not a sacrament, there is a fundamental human right to be buried in a dignified manner and in accordance with one's own will or the will of the family, and it is a right acknowledged by the Italian state. Furthermore, during the state of emergency, cremation was preferred for COVID-19 victims, although it was not mandatory.[46] The Union of Islamic Community in Italy criticized this option as it is contrary to the Islamic ritual of inhumation.[47] Additionally, Italian Muslims, especially in Northern Italy, had to cope with the lack of burial space in non-Catholic cemeteries.[48] Most Muslim residents prefer to have the deceased repatriated to their country of origin for burial in a Muslim cemetery; however, this was not possible during the lockdown.[49]

Restrictive legislation on funeral services applied in Romania during the emergency period, reducing service attendance to eight people, but funeral services were not banned.[50] Referring to the sensitive balance between caring and protecting life and piety for the dead, a rabbi confessed:

45 Annalisa Cocco, "La Scelta della Cremazione in stato di pandemia/The "Choice" of Cremation in a Pandemic State," *Actualidad Jurídica Iberoamericana* 12 (2020): 86–95.

46 Cocco, "La Scelta della Cremazione." The author argues that cremation was a choice not only for sanitary reasons avoiding contagion but also for personal reasons. Taking into account the high number of deaths in that period, it was difficult to find an burial place close to family's residence. See also Ministero della Salute, "Circolare 08 aprile 2020, n. 12302—Indicazioni emergenziali connesse ad epidemia COVID-19 riguardanti il settore funebre, cimiteriale e di cremazione," Studio Cerbone & Associatí website, April 8, 2020, https://www.studiocerbone.com/ministero-della-salute-circolare-08-aprile-2020-n-12302-indicazioni-emergenziali-connesse-ad-epidemia-covid-19-riguardanti-il-settore-funebre-cimiteriale-e-di-cremazione/ .

47 Unione delle Comunità Islamiche d'Italia (UCOII), "Vademecum Ritualià Funebre per la Comunità Islamica Italiana," UCOII, March 2020, https://ucoii.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/VADEMECUM-RITUALITA-FUNEBRE-PER-LA-COMUNITA-ISLAMICA-IN-ITALIA-1-1.pdf. For the situation in the US and a debate on Muslim duties related to funerals, see Jianhui (Jane) Xiong, Nazila Isgandarova and Amy Elizabeth Panton, "COVID-19 Demands Theological Reflection: Buddhist, Muslim, and Christian Perspectives on the Present Pandemic," *International Journal of Practical Theology* 24, no. 1 (2020): 5–28, 20.

48 Stefano Dambruoso, "Covid-19 e la sfida delle sepolture islamiche," *Formiche* website, June 12, 2020, https://formiche.net/2020/06/sepolture-islamiche-coronavirus/,. See also Antonio Cuciniello and Paolo Branca, eds., *Malattia, Morte e Cura: Mulsmani e l'Emergenza Sanitaria* (Vita e Pensiero, 2020).

49 The same problem exists in France: Ouzoulias, "Les cultes religieux," 30.

50 Secretariatul de Stat pentru Culte, *Secretariatul de Stat pentru Culte* (Litera, 2019). The debate on funeral service is an ongoing debate, although the number of persons

> We honored the memory of the dead by ensuring the burial ritual without endangering other lives. Once, I received a call and somebody asked me to accept more than eight participants to the inhumation ritual, how can I accept that if the authorities have decided these are strictly necessary protective measures?

In both Romania and Italy, the COVID-19 deceased were buried naked, although in Italy clothing was allowed to be placed near the body, even while embalmment and cosmetic rituals where prohibited.[51] The law does not provide details concerning Jewish and Islamic ablution rituals, but from the interviews I conducted, the practice was reduced to symbolic gestures. In Italy it was impossible to say the prayers without the minyan, the required number of ten males required by Jewish law to be present for a religious service. A non-virtual adjustment was suggested with some Italians asking the opened synagogues in Israel to recite Kaddish in the memory of the deceased.[52] Flowing from these political decisions, a contemporary French philosopher, Vincent Delecroix, is investigating this practice. As he puts it:

> So, the dead will be allowed to bury the dead, in order to preserve the life of those alive. But what would happen if a modern Antigone decided to assert the archaic law of what is owed to the dead against the modern law of health precaution?[53]

This rhetorical question is utterly disturbing, since in Sophocles's tragedy Creon's decision is rooted in a vision of the common good of the city and, hence, the body of the enemy of the people is a powerful political symbol. Thus, Polynice's body should not be buried, nor mourned. In direct

allowed to participate in funeral services has increased. According to a press release of the Minister of Health from April 8, 2021, there was a negotiation with religious leaders from several denominations, and clothing was allowed to be placed near the body. See Ministry of Health, "Media Release April 08, 2021," https://web.archive.org/web/20210409092229/http://www.ms.ro/2021/04/08/ministerul-sanatatii-a-organizat-astazi-8-aprilie-a-c-la-sediul-ministerului-o-intalnire-cu-secretariatul-de-stat-pentru-culte-si-reprezentanti-ai-cultelor/.

51 For Romania, see Ministerul Sănătății, "Ordin nr. 570 din 6 aprilie 2020," Portal Legislativ website, April 6, 2020, http://legislatie.just.ro/Public/DetaliiDocument/224715; and for Italy, see "L'Italia ebraica e il coronavirus."

52 "L'Italia ebraica e il coronavirus."

53 Vincent Delecroix, "La morte chez nous," *Revue Esprit,* May 2020, https://esprit.presse.fr/article/vincent-delecroix/la-mort-chez-nous-42713.

opposition to his decision, Antigone assumes a different vision of the common good based on *pietas* towards the deceased and the right to mourn.[54] Creon's decision to exclude a body from funeral service can be interpreted as the ultimate expression of political power. During the COVID-19 pandemic, all bodies presumably contagious have been considered public enemies, and it can be argued that state decisions concerning funeral service are a form of biopolitics, since the treatment of a dead body became the object of political decisions.

"Maybe the most inhuman aspect of the pandemic was the fact that people have died alone, without the comfort of friends or family, and this is a terrible experience, both for those who left and for those who remain behind," stated a priest. Catholic priests accompanied coffins (some at the cemetery, some from the houses of the deceased) and said brief prayers, but with no funeral service, some celebrate a Requiem Mass for the deceased alone and/or on Zoom and in the absence of the body and of the family. From my interviews in Rome, one Catholic priest said that he was invited by the deceased family to bless the body, and, for him, this was the most tragic part of pandemic. When it became possible to pray, some families requested a Requiem Mass. The same was true for an Orthodox priest in Italy, who performed both funeral services and the special memorial services consisting of psalms, litanies, hymns, and prayers. These were offered three, nine, or forty days after the person had died, but before the actual burial of the body. While the body was in the morgue, waiting for repatriation, the priest performed the memorial service for the family. Not all used Zoom for the mourning; a Muslim from Romania stated, "My father died, and I could not participate because he was in Turkey and I was not allowed to travel, and there was no option for Zoom, but they sent me some pictures." The absent body became a specter haunting the memory of those who remained. This is a traumatic experience variously recounted by the three traditions. As the work of Derrida underlines, the specter is the opposite of a body, but only a former body can become a specter.[55] Besides, the time when the specters haunt is the time out of joint, a non-linear time similar to the one experienced during the pandemic.

Death was both visible and invisible in public spaces.[56] The army tracking the transporting of coffins from Bergamo to remote cremation sites was maybe one of the most powerful images of the pandemic; the numbers

54 Hrvoje Cvijanović, "Death and the City: Political Corpses and the Specters of Antigone," *Political Perspectives: Journal for Political Research* 9, no. 2 (2019): 7–37.

55 Jacques Derrida, *Spectres de Marx* (Galilée, 1993), 25.

56 Delecroix, "La morte chez nous."

of deaths were published daily at 6:00 p.m.[57] People quarantined at home checking the daily numbers of the deceased was an apocalyptic experience in Italy. One Catholic priest confessed: “I am still checking it, every day, but I have noticed that different countries have different policies on this issue. In France, for instance, the statistics cover the number of contagions and not the number of deaths.” The decision of counting dead and/or alive bodies is a political one.

Finally, to enforce quarantine measures during the state of emergency, public authorities in Italy and Romania closed cemeteries, since visiting them was not considered a valid reason to go out.[58] This decision resulted in further anguish and distress. There is no doubt that this measure was addressed to living bodies, yet, in the general atmosphere it was perceived as a quarantine also for dead bodies.

Some Conclusions

Reflecting on religious life during the pandemic in an interfaith manner helps to identify common challenges and vulnerabilities, such as disembodiment, loneliness, sorrow; one can observe common tendencies of increasing social-distance charity by developing an awareness to those in distress. It takes a commitment to nourish one’s own faith with alternative activities, whether that be online or individually. Maybe the most notable aspect is that homemade religious life increased personal commitment: collective responsibility to fulfil rituals was replaced with individual responsibility. Overnight everyone became the master of ceremony for their own house. This focus on individual devotion and observance can, to a certain extent, challenge the traditional role of religious leaders, but it can also help to revaluate the place of faith in each person’s life. Ritual modifications not ingrained in tradition threaten the orthodoxy of the congregation. Accordingly, addressing the question of ritual accommodation can bring into discussion issues related to authority and the role of religious leaders. Rituals can be adjusted to a limited extent, and there is a need to provide guidelines rooted in tradition in order to distinguish between practices that can be adapted and practices that need collective worship. Most often, religious leaders are the guardians of this knowledge. Ritual accommodations require both creative thinking and expertise, and expertise implies theological

57 Statistiche Google Malattia da coronavirus, https://health.google.com/covid-19/open-data/explorer/statistics?loc=IT

58 Secretariatul de Stat pentru Culte, “Libertatea religioasă în România.”

formation and historical knowledge of similar situations. Invoking past challenges of religious life, such as references to early Christianity, to the experience of Christians during the communist regime, or to quoting hadiths related to quarantine, helped people find adequate responses to deal with isolation measures.

Among the wide range of reactions from respondents described above, differences can be noted, both cultural and religious. In my opinion, differences are due to cultural expectations, shaped by the level of religiosity of the country, obedience, trust in the civil authorities, and by the particular requirements and duties of each religion, but future work is required to demonstrate these connections.

For my part, I tried to extract from the interviews and from the literature review ways of imagining the body and the ritual imprinted in religious traditions. The way in which Christian theologians think of individual bodies and the corporate body of the Church as the body of the Incarnate God made an important difference in shaping the perception of the pandemic, as did Jewish and Muslim habits of purification connecting ablution with hygiene. The comparative approach I developed spotlighted implicit hermeneutics of the body imbedded in each religion. Perhaps, hermeneutics of the body and the structure of the ritual are the two key factors that merit special attention because they determine the ability to preserve rituals in the exile of digital technologies. Taking into account the tendency towards digitalization, in the future all religious communities may consider enlarging their reflections on bodies, until now shaped by questions of abortion, sexual behavior, and euthanasia. These reflections could address the question of physical presence in common worship, the status of dead bodies, and last but not least, how religions should understand the double meaning and function of the Latin term *religare* (rereading and reuniting) in the digital age.

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ARTICLE

Wood of Sacrifice and Wood of the Cross: The Aqedah in Judaism and Christianity

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Abstract

This article explores the figure of Isaac and the sacrifice of Isaac by Abraham in both Judaism and Christianity. First through a broad exploration and then through an in-depth analysis of two influential thinkers—St. Augustine and Rashi—this paper will explore how the concept of the Aqedah came to be understood by each religious tradition and ultimately demonstrate how both Judaism and Christianity grappled with and integrated the Aqedah into their own traditions. By drawing on a variety of sources throughout the first several centuries of the growing division between Judaism and Christianity, this article argues that both religions were engaged in a broad exchange of ideas about shared, foundational religious figures and a seminal historical moment that came to be interpreted as a more encompassing systematic symbol. Though this exchange was often polemical, by highlighting the centrality of shared religious motifs and re-examining them through a modern lens, this article hopes to provide an academic perspective in the pursuit of building a shared tradition of scriptural study, ultimately providing direction and inspiration for modern Jewish-Christian dialogue.

Keywords

Aqedah, Judaism in antiquity, Rashi, St. Augustine, Second Temple, parting of the ways

Introduction

After the death of Jesus Christ, Christianity did not automatically become its own religion, though it can be easy to skip over the intervening centuries. In reality, during the emergence of Rabbinic Judaism and Christianity from the first-century religious milieu, both religions canonized their works of scripture and cemented their religious praxis—often through violence or unintentional collaboration—in contrast to the "other." The division was neither immediate nor clear; on the contrary, the two religions separated over centuries, often influencing each other in the process.[1] The results of these influences can still be isolated and identified today.

By primarily examining significant interpretations of the Aqedah, this article will demonstrate how the two traditions examined the story of Isaac's sacrifice and over time developed interpretations of the same story that supported religion-specific needs. While this article does not attempt to directly trace the provenance of these interpretations, it does show that both religions were engaged with motifs that developed over time in a way that can seem parallel. They were operating in the same milieu and responding to similar pressures.

This article is a development of the kind of scholarship about the "parting of the ways" that can be found most predominantly in two works. The first is Daniel Boyarin's *Border Lines: The Partition of Judeo-Christianity* and the second is James Dunn's work *The Parting of the Ways: Between Christianity and Judaism and Their Significance for the Character of Christianity.* Similar to Boyarin's argument that the development of Logos Christology can be seen as parallel to Judaism's Memra theology, I argue that the development of the Aqedah interpretations in both religions are parallel.[2] The purpose of this article is to continue adding to the body of work that Dunn articulates in the preface to the second edition of his book *The Parting of the Ways*. Dunn writes:

> [A] principal part of my endeavor was to demonstrate the common roots in first-century or late-second Temple Judaism shared by both Christianity and rabbinic Judaism, in the hope that a fuller appreciation of our common heritage would help forward the process of mutual understanding

1 For more on the "parting of the ways," see for example James D.G. Dunn, *The Parting of the Ways: Between Christianity and Judaism and their Significance for the Character of Christianity*, 2nd ed. (SCM Press, 2000), 301–37 and Daniel Boyarin, *Border Lines: The Partition of Judeo-Christianity* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 1–86.

2 Boyarin, "The Crucifixion of the Memra: How the Logos Became Christian," in *Border Lines,* 128–47.

> and genuine dialogue […] My [Dunn's] concern was, and still is, that Christians should realize the extent to which Christianity has been shaped by its Jewish heritage […] and how that Jewishness of Christianity continues to be integral to its identity.

While Dunn is writing primarily about the Jewishness of Christianity, this article expands on that and looks at how both religions influenced each other as they developed in the same milieu. While not focusing on the provenance of the specific motifs and interpretations, the fact that similar motifs can be found in both religions in a variety of sources is an example of what could be called creative hermeneutics. David Burrell introduces this concept in his work *Towards a Jewish-Christian-Muslim Theology*. Burrell writes that "conceptual patterns, often developed separately, can illuminate one another once we see them as executing cognate explorations. This approach reflects the fresh face of interfaith inquiry."[3]

By expanding upon Boyarin's focused study of the parallel development of the Christian logos and the Jewish Memra, using Burrell's "creative hermeneutics" and following the path initially envisioned by Dunn, this article advances Jewish-Christian dialogue and adds to the growing scholarly consensus about the porous borders that separated "Judaism" and "Christianity" in the centuries immediately following the death of Jesus and the destruction of the Second Temple.[4] Authors like Boyarin and Dunn have already convincingly laid out arguments for the porous nature of the two religions. The communities most likely lived together and continued to share worship practices including keeping traditional dietary laws; it would not be for several centuries that the communities would separate.

As each religious tradition sought to distinguish itself from the other, defining itself in opposition to the other, stubbornly persistent (and pernicious) ideas about entrenched separation of the two religions took

3 David Burrell, *Towards a Jewish-Christian-Muslim Theology* (John Wiley and Sons Ltd., 2011), xii.

4 The research for this article was greatly inspired by a course on the Aqedah given by Professor Massimo Gargiulo at the Cardinal Bea Centre for Judaic Studies (Massimo Gargiulo, "Dalla legatura di Isacco alla croce di Cristo: il sacrificio del figlio nell'esegesi ebraica e cristiana" [course EC2044, The Cardinal Bea Centre for Judaic Studies at the Pontifical Gregorian University, Rome, Italy, October 2019–January 2020]). My thanks to Professor Gargiulo for his feedback on initial drafts of this article.

root, such as supersessionism[5] from the Christian perspective (necessarily separating and putting Christians above Jews) and the Medieval halakhic rules mandating Jewish separation from the idolatrous Christian communities (enforcing physical, as well as religious, separation).[6] By re-examining these initial stages to find correlating patterns of exegesis, can we re-imagine a future of Jewish-Christian dialogue rooted in scriptural companionship?

Themes Within the Aqedah in Jewish-Christian History

The nature of the "Jewish" and "Christian" communities that begin the exchange of analysis focused on Genesis 22 is not easily categorized. Karin Zetterholm argues that instead of looking at the first-century communities as "Jewish" and "Christian," one should instead differentiate among Jewish communities: one more rabbinically inclined, and the other "Jesus-centered."[7] Zetterholm builds on the framework of the "parting of the ways" and applies the relatively recent understanding of the early environment in the Judeo-Christian communities. She draws important conclusions about the way that scholars engaged in polemic and how that polemic shifted and influenced their own tradition's motifs or understandings. According to Zetterholm, the "porous" nature of the borders between "Rabbinic Jews" and what she refers to as "Jesus-oriented Jews" allowed for a flow of ideas that ultimately shaped each tradition's understanding of the Aqedah.

Because the communities were all fundamentally Jewish with variations in their acceptance of Jesus' teachings, Zetterholm points toward shared spaces like the synagogue where different understandings of the Aqedah

5 For example, Justin Martyr clearly articulates the founding points of supersessionism in "Dialogue with Trypho" that we can recognize centuries later, namely the abrogation of the Law by Jesus and the arrogance of the Jewish population in maintaining the customs after Christ's death. See Justin Martyr, "Dialogue with Trypho," eds. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 1 (Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1885), published by Peter Kirby, Early Christian Writings, https://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/justinmartyr-dialoguetrypho.html.

6 Maimonides details this separation in the Hilkhot Avodah Zarah 9 where the "Canaanites" are ruled to be idolaters and thus cannot be interacted with. "Canaanites" are understood to be Christians. See Karma Ben Johanan, "Uncensored: Recovering Anti-Christian Animosity in Contemporary Rabbinic Literature," *Harvard Theological Review* 114, no. 3 (2021): 393–416.

7 Karin Hedner Zetterholm, "Isaac and Jesus: A Rabbinic Reappropriation of a 'Christian' Motif?" *Journal of Jewish Studies* 67, no. 1 (2016): 102–20.

could be shared. Two major motifs developed over the centuries that influence the way the Aqedah is interpreted today: the "completion" of the sacrifice and the "willingness" of Isaac. Both ideas about Isaac, according to Zetterholm, influenced the understanding of Christ's sacrifice and were subsequently re-absorbed into Rabbinic analysis.

While fully examining the "chain of transmission" inherent in Zetterholm's thesis is beyond the scope of this article, her argument offers a more complete understanding of the closeness between Judaism and Christianity in the first centuries after the death of Jesus and the destruction of the Temple. Even without completely agreeing with her idea that the religions actively introduced shared motifs from one to the other, it does further reinforce the parallel development of both religions in the same milieu for hundreds of years. The following motifs of the Aqedah demonstrate the parallel development.

The Sacrifice "Carried Out"

The "Aqedah" is "the binding," not necessarily "the sacrifice," of Isaac. Yet the question of whether Isaac intended to actually be sacrificed became a crucial question. Some Jewish and Christian writers took up the idea that the sacrifice was as valid *as if* it had been carried out while others argued that Isaac was sacrificed and then resurrected.

Two first-century Jewish sources imply that the sacrifice was, in some way, carried out or should be considered as having been completed and set the stage for later Jewish sources that fully consider the sacrifice as having been completed. In 4 Maccabees, the story is retold as: "Isaac, seeing his father's hand, with knife in it, fall down against him, did not flinch" (16:18–20).[8] While not immediately obvious, the passage hints that Abraham's hand was not stayed by God's angel but rather, after "Abraham reached out his hand and took the knife to kill his son" and before "the angel of the Lord called to him from heaven," Abraham's hand fell with the knife, harming his son. Josephus's *Antiquitates Judaicae* considers the sacrifice as if it had happened, writing "and the deed *had been done* if God had not opposed it."[9]

8 Translation from H. Anderson, ed., *Old Testament Pseudepigrapha* (Doubleday & Company Inc., 1985), 561.

9 Flavius Josephus, *Antiquitates Judaicae* 228 (hereafter *AJ*), trans. William Whitson, *The Works of Flavius Josephus*, (John E. Beardsley, 1895), published online by Perseus Digital Library, https://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus:text:1999.01.0146.

In approximately the twelfth century, this motif is again picked up by *Bamidbar Rabbah*, when Abraham says, "O consider the act as though Isaac's ashes were being heaped up upon the altar."[10] Isaac Kalimi explores this with examples from the *Midrash Mekilta Rabbi Shimeon bar Yohai* and the *Midrash Tanhuma*. In these, one can consider the hand of Abraham separately from the knife; though the angel of God commands Abraham not to lay his *hand* on the boy, this does not mean that Abraham did not wound Isaac in his zeal to obey God.[11] Kalimi writes:

> He (= Abraham) took up the knife to slaughter him (Isaac), until there came forth from him one-quarter of his blood. And Satan came and knocked Abraham's hand, so that the knife fell from his hand. And when he put his hand to take it up, a heavenly voice went forth and said to him: "Lay not your hand upon the lad" (Gen. 22:12); and if it had not done so, he (Isaac) would have been slaughtered already.[12]

Less common is the view that Isaac was indeed sacrificed but then returned to his body or resurrected from the ashes. The *Pirqe Rabbi Eliezer* (ca.630–1030 CE) and the *Targum Chronicles* (ca. 350–1150) both speak about Isaac's death or ashes and his return.[13] These Jewish perspectives on the completion of the sacrifice—whether the intention of Abraham made it *as if* the sacrifice had been carried out or whether Isaac was indeed harmed or even killed—share an emphasis on the faith of Abraham and his will to follow God's will. This important theme, developed in different ways through this motif, is

10 *Numbers Rabbah* 17:2, Unless otherwise noted, all *Midrash Rabbah* translations are taken from the Sefaria Community Translation (2022), https://www.sefaria.org/Bereshit_Rabbah.17.4?lang=bi&with=all&lang2=en..

11 Isaac Kalimi, "'Go, I beg you, take your beloved son and slay him!': The Binding of Isaac in Rabbinic Literature and Thought," *Review of Rabbinic Judaism* 13, no.1 (2010): 1–29.

12 Excerpt from the *Midrash Tanhuma*, Vayerha 23, quoted in Kalimi, "The Binding of Isaac in Rabbinic Literature and Thought," 22.

13 For example: "Rabbi Jehudah said: When the blade touched his neck, the soul of Isaac fled and departed, (but) when he heard His voice from between the two Cherubim, saying (to Abraham), "Lay not thine hand upon the lad" (Gen 22:12), his soul returned to his body, and (Abraham) set him free, and Isaac stood upon his feet" (*Pirqe Rabbi Eliezer* 31:10, trans. Rabbi Gerald Friedlander [Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co. Ltd.,1916], published on Sefaria, https://www.sefaria.org/Pirkei_DeRabbi_Eliezer.31.5?lang=bi) . Dates are approximate and are sourced from Sefaria website. See Kalimi, "The Binding of Isaac in Rabbinic Literature and Thought," 24.

included by Rashi in his commentary on Genesis which will be explored later in this article.

Christian writers also dealt with this motif; however, Isaac's sacrifice is firmly seen as incomplete and a precursor to Christ's ultimate sacrifice. Understandably, the "completion" of the sacrifice of Isaac became a theme in Judaism. It was developed and referred to starting in the early first century and continuing through to the medieval period, as illustrated above, and perhaps in reaction to the Christian exultation of Christ's sacrifice as the "complete" sacrifice in contrast to Isaac's, which was "incomplete" and, by extension, the inferior sacrifice. For example, in two first- and second-century writings, Christ finishes what Isaac started. In the *Epistle of Barnabas*, Isaac is referred to as a "type," but it is Christ who ultimately completes Isaac's interrupted sacrifice. The sacrifice of Isaac is incomplete until Christ comes to fully accomplish it.[14] Similarly, Melito of Sardis writes that "Isaac did not suffer," contrasting this with "Christ did suffer"—another allusion to the incomplete sacrifice of Isaac being completed by Christ.[15]

Interestingly, even the idea of Isaac's resurrection can also be found in early Christian writing. In Paul's Epistle to the Hebrews, Paul also writes of Abraham's faith and that "Abraham reasoned that God could even raise the dead, and so in a manner of speaking he did receive Isaac back from death" (11:17–19 NIV). Origen's *Homily Eight on Genesis* expands on this idea, declaring that not only did Abraham believe in resurrection but he also carried through with the actions of the sacrifice with the knowledge that he was merely a prefiguration of "the image of future truth; he knew the Christ was to be born from his seed, who also was to be offered as a truer victim for the whole world and was to be raised from the dead."[16] Origen's analysis of the Aqedah is intertwined with his polemics against the Jewish people. The depth of the penetration of the motif of the "completion" of Isaac's sacrifice in Jewish writings across the centuries is more than understandable when considering the polemical environment from which this motif originates.[17]

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14 *Epistle of Barnabas* 7:1, trans. J.B. Lightfoot, *The Apostolic Fathers* (Macmillan and Co., 1891), published by Peter Kirby, Early Christian Writings, https://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/barnabas-lightfoot.html.

15 Melito of Sardis, *On Pascha*, trans. Alistair Stewart-Sykes (St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2001).

16 Origen, *Homilies on Genesis and Exodus*, trans. Ronald E. Heine (The Catholic University of America Press, 1982), 137–38.

17 Origen, *Homilies on Genesis and Exodus*, trans. Ronald E. Heine, 137–38. In addition to insisting on the superiority of Jesus to Isaac, Origen in the same paragraph questions: "How, then, are they 'sons of Abraham' who do not believe what has happened in Christ, which Abraham believed was to be in Isaac?" (137).

We can already begin to see how the shared motif of Isaac's "sacrifice" (completed or not) advanced or underscored important theological developments that would become core components for the two developing religions. We will continue to see this with the motif of Isaac's "willingness" to be sacrificed.

The Willingness of Isaac

The second important motif regarding the Aqedah is the willingness of Isaac. In Genesis, Isaac only questions where the sacrifice is, not knowing he is the intended sacrifice. In subsequent interpretations, his willingness to be sacrificed becomes an important motif both for Jewish and Christian sources and eventually, along with the understanding of the "completion" of the sacrifice, becomes a backbone for the Christian prefiguration of Christ seen through Isaac.

In an early appearance of this motif, Josephus writes that Isaac, upon learning the true nature of the intended sacrifice, "was of such generous disposition as became the son of such a father, and was pleased with this discourse [… and] went immediately to the altar to be sacrificed."[18] Two texts roughly 400 years later emphasize Isaac's eagerness. In *Genesis Rabbah*, Rabbi Isaac suggests that as Abraham went to bind Isaac, Isaac replied:

> Father, I am a young man and I am concerned lest my body shake from fear of the knife and I will trouble you, and lest the slaughtering will be invalid and it will not be considered a sacrifice for you. Rather, tie me very well.[19]

In the *Midrash Tanchuma*, the sacrifice becomes the task of two people, not just one. "'If he has chosen me,' Isaac replied, 'I shall willingly surrender my soul to Him ... they went both of them together (ibid., v. 8), of one mind: convinced that one was to slaughter and the other to be slaughtered."[20]

Several early Christian writings echo this motif. The first-century *Epistle of Clement* depicts Isaac as willingly accepting his sacrifice: "Isaac, with

18 Josephus, *JA* 1.232, trans.Whiston.

19 *Bereshit Rabbah* 56:8, trans. Sefaria.

20 *Midrash Tanchuma-Yelamedenu*, Vayera, Siman 23:3, trans. Samuel A. Berman (KTAV Publishing House, Inc., 1996), published by Sefaria, https://www.sefaria.org/Midrash_Tanchuma%2C_Vayera.23.4?lang=bi.

perfect confidence … cheerfully yielded himself as a sacrifice."[21] And again in the Paschal homily by Melito of Sardis, Isaac did not struggle, panic, or grieve at his impending sacrifice but rather, silently accepted his sacrifice.[22] And interestingly, just as in *Midrash Tanchuma,* Isaac becomes an active collaborator by being of "one mind" in the approach to the sacrifice. So too does Origen write that Isaac, by carrying the wood and taking on "the duty of the priest," he becomes "both victim and priest" who "contribute[s] equally with the priesthood itself."[23]

The willingness of Isaac is a strongly-held motif in both Second Temple and Rabbinic Judaism and is shared with the early Christian community.[24] While the "completion" of the sacrifice is a point of tension in the Jewish and Christian writings examined above, the willingness, and indeed at times the urging of Isaac to be sacrificed, is an important motif for both religions. Both communities developed and benefitted from an expanded reading of the Aqedah but for different reasons. For Christians, the incomplete nature of the sacrifice of Isaac and the willingness of Isaac buttress the understanding of the Aqedah as a prefiguration of Christ, an important continuity for a religion that views Christ as the "fulfillment" of what came before. Meanwhile, for the Jewish people, the "completion" of the sacrifice and the willingness of Isaac became important measures and examples of Abraham's and Isaac's perfect faith in the face of persecution, an example for the Jewish community as it continued to coalesce into the Rabbinic Judaism that exists today.[25]

Up to this point, this article has broadly explored two major motifs in the analysis and interpretations of the Aqedah in Judaism and Christianity over a broad historical period. Points of similarity and tension have been highlighted but the overarching emphasis has been on the development of similar motifs in a similar time period and milieu. This article will now single out two influential thinkers, St. Augustine (d. 430 CE) and Rashi (d. 1105 CE), and explore these motifs in their writings. While they lived in greatly different time periods, they roughly represent the breadth of the time period this article has explored and, more importantly, they each have a significant

21 *1 Clement* 31:1, trans. J.B. Lightfoot, *The Apostolic Fathers* (Macmillan and Co., 1891), published by Peter Kirby, Early Christian Writings, https://www.earlychristianwritings.com/text/1clement-lightfoot.html

22 Melito of Sardis, *On Pascha*, trans. Stewart-Sykes, 76.

23 Origen, *Homily on Genesis* 8, trans. Heine, 141.

24 Kalimi, "The Binding of Isaac in Rabbinic Literature and Thought," 19.

25 Zetterholm, "Isaac and Jesus," 109, 111.

influence and serve as theological reference points for their respective religions.

St. Augustine and the Aqedah

St. Augustine discusses the Aqedah in the influential work, *The City of God*, and in a lesser-known work, *Answer to Faustus, a Manichean.* Augustine's interpretation of the Aqedah is immediately preceded by—and therefore should be viewed in the light of—supersessionist imagery. This reflects a continued development of a polemic from earlier Christian authors like Origen, as described above, who, by viewing the Aqedah as a prefiguration for Christ, consequently disparaged the Jewish people.[26] In the preceding chapter of his analysis of the Aqedah, St. Augustine describes the figures of Hagar and Sarah as representing the Old and New Testaments, respectively. Sarah, writes Augustine, "is the symbol of the heavenly Jerusalem," whereas Hagar is cast out, just as the Old Testament is; the subtext being that the Old Testament (Hagar) is no longer relevant because the New Testament (Sarah) is fertile.[27] *Answer to Faustus, a Manichean* similarly undercuts the authority of the Hebrew scriptures by writing that they are truly divinely inspired—but only insofar as they prefigure the coming of Christ.[28] In Augustine's perspective, the Aqedah is important only because it was incomplete and a prefiguration of Christ's sacrifice. From this, however, Augustine's analysis becomes much more similar to some of the Jewish writers we examined above. He emphasizes Abraham's obedience to God as a way to grow in self-knowledge. Furthermore, the challenge given by God had a twofold purpose: 1) to demonstrate to the whole world the faithfulness of Abraham and 2) to demonstrate to Abraham himself his own capabilities.

Augustine also reasons that the only explanation for Abraham's obedience *must* have been his belief in "the immediate resurrection of his son as soon as the sacrifice was over,"[29] another point of commonality, as explored above. It is important to note, however, that while both Jewish and Christian writers embraced this motif, the ramifications are significantly different. For the Jewish audience, Zetterholm muses that perhaps "by reappropriating the idea of the atoning effect of Jesus's death and attributing

26 Cf. Origen, *Homily on Genesis* 8, trans. Heine.

27 St. Augustine, *Concerning the City of God against the Pagans*, trans. Henry Bettenson (Penguin Classics, 1972), 693.

28 St. Augustine, *Answer to Faustus, a Manichean,* trans. Roland J. Teske, SJ (New City Press, 2007), 125–157.

29 St. Augustine, *City of God*, trans. Bettenson, 694.

to Isaac, the rabbis endowed Rabbinic tradition with a theological idea identical to that of their rivals while simultaneously ensuring that Rabbinic Jews, for whom such an idea may have held some attraction, would not join a Jesus-oriented group.[30] For the Christians of course, Abraham's belief in the resurrection of his son closely connects to God's sacrifice of His Son and firmly establishes Christianity as the true fulfillment of the Old Testament.

But while the sources examined echo that Abraham believed in resurrection, it is only Jewish sources that understand Isaac to actually have been killed. For Christians, and for Augustine, Isaac's escape from harm set up a situation that would be repeated and completed by Christ. Augustine writes, "What other ram to be sacrificed was caught by his horns in the bush but him who was hauled to the frame of the cross […]?"[31] While this appears at first glance to be in continuity with the Rabbinic teachings that viewed the ram "as if" Isaac had been killed, it is a clear distinction from the Jewish tradition. For Augustine, the sacrifice was only symbolic and fundamentally incomplete. In the Jewish writers examined above, the sacrifice was carried out *as if* it had been Isaac and therefore fulfilled all requirements for atonement.

Rashi and the Aqedah

Rabbi Shlomo Yitzchaki, better known as Rashi, wrote his authoritative commentary on Genesis between 1075 and 1105 CE. Rashi's commentary on Genesis, while not a culmination, is certainly a crucial development that both incorporates and builds upon centuries of interpretations of and polemics that use the Aqedah. He emphasizes the piety of Abraham as an example of faith but, unlike St. Augustine, deemphasizes the willingness of Isaac by focusing predominantly on Abraham.

Rashi focuses on the faith and character of Abraham in Hellenistic and philosophical terms, more similar to Philo's treatment of the Aqedah in *On Abraham* than to that of the *Pirqe Rabbi Eliezer* as mentioned above. Rashi writes that God draws out this process "so as not to confuse him suddenly lest his mind become distracted and bewildered … so that he might more highly value God's command."[32] Here we see the Hellenistic influence in the importance given to the clarity of mind and its direct relationship to being

30 Zetterholm, "Isaac and Jesus," 118.

31 St. Augustine, *Answer to Faustus, a Manichean,* trans. Teske, 141–42.

32 Rashi, *Commentary on Genesis* 22:2, in *The Pentateuch and Rashi's Commentary*, trans. Abraham Ben Isaiah and Benjamin Sharfman (S. S. & R. Publishing Co., 1949).

highly rewarded, viz., an action done with full intention and clarity of mind is worthier than an action done unknowingly or by compulsion.

Philo writes in *On Abraham* of the opposing forces within Abraham: his strong emotions of love and tenderness for his son and the steadying strength of will over his emotions. Abraham was "mastered by his love for God" and ultimately "overcame all the fascination expressed in the fond terms of family affection."[33] *On Abraham* focuses on the mind's conquering of the body's emotions several times, such as in section 175 when Isaac asks where the sacrifice is and Abraham "admitted no swerving of body or mind" but was able to steadily continue the deception of his son.[34] For Philo, being free from compulsion is of the utmost importance in part because it differentiates the sacrifice of Isaac from the sacrifices that the Greeks—perhaps the audience to which Philo partially addresses *Of Abraham*—are accustomed. The freedom of Abraham's choice makes him worthy of praise, a theme reflected by Rashi.

It is because of this framework that Rashi chooses to highlight Abraham's actions and not the willingness or co-actions taken by Isaac that other Jewish authors include in their interpretations. While it is mentioned that Isaac eventually understands his impending doom, none of the actions that are characteristic in other Rabbinic writings, such as Isaac demanding his father bind him tighter or descriptions of Isaac's age as a young man, fully complicit in his sacrifice, are mentioned.[35]

Despite this, Rashi judges the sacrifice to be fully worthy of the atonement of all of Israel, not because of Isaac's willingness but because of the faithfulness and obedience of Abraham. Zetterholm describes atonement as related to Isaac and Isaac's sacrifice as a clear way that the Christian exegesis influenced the Rabbinic view of the character of Isaac. Rashi is an example of the generations of Rabbinic writers that involved atonement in their characterizations of the Aqedah, though he differs in the emphasis that he puts on Isaac. Instead of the actions of Isaac leading to atonement, it is the fact that Isaac was (or "as if he were") sacrificed by Abraham that atones for the sins of Israel.[36]

33 Philo, *On Abraham* 170–171, trans. F.H. Colson, *Philo Volume VI: On Abraham, On Joseph, On Moses*, Loeb Classical Library 289 (Harvard University Press, 1935), 84–87.

34 Philo, *On Abraham* 175, trans. Colson, 86–87.

35 "Although Isaac then understood that he was travelling on to be slain, yet." Rashi, *Commentary on Genesis* 22:8, trans. Isaiah and Sharfman.

36 As Rashi argues, "The Midrashic explanation is: May God see this Binding of Isaac every year to forgive Israel and to save them from punishment … the ashes

Conclusion

The importance of this analysis lies in the demonstration that across a broad range of time, from the early 5th century of St. Augustine to the 12th century of Rashi, the writings of the leaders of the Church and of the Jewish community reflected that both communities were engaged with theological and community development in similar ways and utilized similar motifs to develop critical theological ideas. For Christians, Isaac became more deeply a typology of Christ. Whereas for Jews, Isaac's willingness more clearly became an example for the whole Jewish community. However, in this development toward "separate" ends, both religions engaged with motifs that were similar and had significant overlaps. This article adds to the growing school of thought—outlined in the introduction—that seeks to recognize that the intertwined nature of Jewish and Christian religious tradition, scripture, and praxis is ultimately a centuries-late response to the Christian ideas of supersessionism and separation that, when institutionalized and internalized over centuries, contributed to and fueled pogroms, ghettoization, and, ultimately, the Shoah. By recognizing, tracing, and understanding the shared intellectual and scriptural history, this paper adds to the new tradition begun after *Nostra Aetate* that finds a way forward in peace and collaboration for two religions, bound by the same covenant and united in brotherhood. Specifically, by examining shared intellectual history, new doors are opened for continued collaborative analysis and interpretation.

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of Isaac heaped up as it were and serving as a means of atonement" (Rashi, *Commentary on Genesis* 22:14, trans. Isaiah and Sharfman).

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ARTICLE

Monotheism and its Religious Alternatives: Some Neo-Perennialist Perspectives on the Divine Reality

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Abstract

Vladimir Lossky's focus on the apophatic and contemplative nature of theology may be extended to argue for a kind of "neo-perennialist" understanding of the faith traditions of the world. This neo-perennialism seeks to avoid the flaws of classic perennialism but to retain its belief that there is "one mountain but many paths to the summit" in relation to the Divine Reality and to maintain its distinction between esoteric and exoteric aspects of any authentic faith tradition, with the latter acting as "signposts" on the particular spiritual paths associated with such traditions. The present paper is intended as an extension to the arguments of the author's book, *Exploring Religious Pluralism* (Cambridge University Press, 2024), focusing on its implications for understanding the relationship between monotheistic faith traditions and certain other traditions that are either non-theistic or polytheistic. Central to this study is the belief that what Brian Davies has called "theistic personalism" and David Bentley Hart has labelled "monopolytheism" has distorted much modern monotheistic thinking, and that what is required is a return to traditional theistic metaphysics that stresses that God is to be seen as the source of being.

Keywords

apophaticism, David Bentley Hart, interfaith dialogue, Vladimir Lossky, monotheism, monopolytheism, neo-perennialism, non-theistic faith traditions, polytheism, theistic personalism

Introduction

Arguments for religious pluralism—the belief that several different faith traditions are equally valid—have usually been philosophical in nature, as in the well-known work of John Hick.[1] Such arguments suggest that we should reject both exclusivism, which denies the value of any faith tradition but one's own, and inclusivism—at least in its usual form—which sees at least some other traditions as being partially valid even though proclaiming only incomplete or distorted versions of one's own tradition's "truths."[2] The present paper seeks to provide another kind of argument for pluralism. Its purpose relates to those many religious believers who already quasi-instinctively believe or suspect that, in relation to moving towards what the monotheist calls God, there is "one mountain but many paths to the summit." My intention is, quite simply, to provide a more plausible theoretical justification for accepting that pluralistic analogy than has previously been available.

I shall do this by expanding aspects of my recent book *Exploring Religious Pluralism* (henceforth *ERP*) in terms of the relationship between monotheistic faith traditions and non-theistic and polytheistic ones.[3] My main argument, while arguably complementing some of the arguments of pluralistic philosophers, will relate to that book's focus on the pluralistic perspectives associated with perennialism, not in its classic form—which I believe to be significantly flawed—but in terms of a kind of neo-perennialism that I believe avoids the flaws of classic perennialism. In this neo-perennialist perspective, "natural" human religiosity—while variable in the experiences and "beliefs" to which it has given rise—may be seen as legitimately pointing towards what some call God and others refer to in ways that are either non-theistic or polytheistic. For this reason, in what follows I shall sometimes

1 John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendent* (Palgrave Macmillan UK, 1989).

2 Regarding inclusivism, I have suggested at least the possibility of being open to the validity of religious pluralism but of adopting what I call *reciprocal inclusivism* as a necessary methodological strategy; see Christopher C. Knight, "Reciprocal Inclusivism: A Methodology for Understanding the Faiths of the World," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 55 (2020): 609–629; also *ERP* (see note 3) 194–204.

3 Christopher C. Knight, *Exploring Religious Pluralism: From Mystical Theology to the Science-Theology Dialogue* (Cambridge University Press, 2024). I shall refer frequently to that book as *ERP* in what follows, though it should be noted that in a short study of this kind I can do no more than indicate where some of the detailed arguments to which I shall refer can be found in it. However, my focus in this study is rather different to that to be found in the earlier book, so that it is companion to it rather than simply a resumé of its arguments.

use, not the monotheistic term God, but another term: the Divine Reality. This latter term can, I shall suggest, incorporate the perspectives not only of the monotheistic faith traditions, but also of certain kinds of polytheistic understanding, and of what some Buddhists—despite refusing to speak about God—call the "Unborn, Unoriginated, Uncreated, Unconditioned."[4]

As a kind of "test case" for—and illustration of—the strengths of this whole argument, I shall not only focus on some interesting analyses made by others about the relationship between certain monotheistic and non-monotheistic faith traditions, but also on something that is not considered in those analyses or in *ERP*. This is the way in which most people in the western world view theology and the philosophy of religion—whether they regard these disciplines as meaningful or otherwise—as attempts to articulate historical and philosophical truths about a hypothetical "bodiless person" called God and about the interactions between this uncreated entity and created things. I shall argue in this paper that these disciplines are not of the kind that fall straightforwardly into these categories, and that much of what now passes for monotheistic belief is in fact distorted by what Brian Davies has called "theistic personalism" and David Bentley Hart has labelled "monopolytheism."[5] What is needed, I shall argue—and not only by monotheists but also by those adhering to other faith traditions—is a return to traditional theistic metaphysics that stresses, first and foremost, that God is to be seen as the source of being.

Central to this whole approach is the argument, set out in *ERP,* that the Divine Reality is indeed an objective reality but that little that is said about this Reality within the different faith traditions may be regarded as definitive in philosophical or historical terms. Rather, I argue that that what is legitimately offered to us in any authentic faith tradition is not a set of narratives and doctrines that must be seen as articulating historical and philosophical "truth claims." Rather, these narratives and doctrines are to be seen as signposts to guide those on different pathways that authentically offer a spiritual journey towards this Reality. Each such pathway, I argue, is associated with a particular faith tradition and its characteristic signposts are to be understood as essentially contemplative in nature rather than as being a set of "truth claims" in any abstract sense of that term.

4 See William Stoddart, *An Illustrated Outline of Buddhism: The Essentials of Buddhist Spirituality* (World Wisdom, 2013), 3.

5 See Brian Davies, *An Introduction to thew Philosophy of Religion,* 2nd ed (Oxford University Press, 1993) and David Bentley Hart, *The Experience of God: Being, Consciousness, Bliss* (Yale University Press, 1993) 127–128.

The Contemplative Dimension

To talk about religious narratives and doctrinal statements as signposts that are contemplative in nature risks a possible misunderstanding. This is because the word contemplation is often now understood in the way that the *Cambridge English Dictionary* defines it: "serious and quiet thought for a period of time."[6] The English word has its origin, however, in the Latin word *contemplatio*, which points to its relationship to what in Latin was called a *templum*—a building for worship or a piece of ground set aside and consecrated for divination of auspices. This origin points us towards the way in which the word contemplation is still often used in a religious context: not as "thinking about" something but entering into a state of direct, intuitive apprehension of the nature of that thing.

My focus on contemplation has its origins in the perspectives articulated by one of one of the most influential Eastern Orthodox Christian authors of the twentieth century, Vladimir Lossky. Those who are aware of Lossky's interpretation of early Christian perspectives often focus on his defence of negative theology: the practice, found in some early Christian writers, of focusing on what God is not rather than on what God is. This kind of "negative theology" is certainly part of Lossky's analysis but—as he himself has stressed—his "apophatic" perspective is not to be understood only in terms of the distinction between the negative theology that he analyses and the path of cataphatic or positive theology, which proceeds by affirmations rather than negations. Rather, the kind of apophaticism that Lossky perceives in much early Christian literature—and advocates as still relevant to theological understanding—relates not only to negative theology but also to a broader sense of the way in which the terms used in religious language should not be regarded as circumscribing the realities towards which they point. The radical apophaticism defended by him relates, as he puts it, to "an attitude of mind which refuses to form concepts about God" so that "theology will never be abstract, working through concepts, but contemplative: raising the mind to those realities which pass all understanding."[7]

Lossky sees this attitude especially in the late-fifth- or early-sixth-century Christian writer who adopted the name of a first-century figure, Dionysius the Areopagite. Lossky emphasizes, however, that this attitude can be found

6 *Cambridge English Dictionary Online*, s.v. "contemplation," accessed November 2025, https://dictionary.cambridge.org/us/dictionary/english/contemplation.

7 Vladimir Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, (James Clarke & Co. Ltd., 1957) 39 and 43.

earlier than these "pseudo-Dionysian" writings, and especially in the work of the fourth-century bishop, Gregory of Nyssa, who recognized that the concepts we form "in accordance with the understanding and the judgement which are natural to us, basing ourselves on an intelligible representation, create idols of God instead of revealing to us God Himself."[8]

This kind of apophatic approach, however, is not peculiar to Christianity but has parallels in many faith traditions. In Judaism, for example, a kind of apophaticism is to be found in the medieval thinking of Maimonides, though arguably it has only become prominent within Jewish thinking in modern times.[9] In a comparable way, in the Hindu world, the Upanishadic sense that Brahman—the highest universal principle, the ultimate Reality—is *neti neti* (neither this nor that) has been expanded in the work of the influential medieval writer, Sankara.[10] The twentieth-century Buddhist scholar, Marco Pallis, has, similarly, stressed that the Buddhist tradition's reluctance to speak about God (or even about the self) should be understood in terms of the "apophatic method which Buddhism favours."[11]

It is, however, in strands of Islamic thinking that we find an attitude that is in some respects most similar to the Christian approach analyzed by Lossky. The apophaticism to be found in Islam's Shiʿite strand of thinking, for example, is related to a sense of the unknowability of God's essence that is comparable to the same stress that exists within Lossky's Eastern Orthodox tradition (in which the distinction between God's essence and energies became especially influential through the work of Gregory Palamas in the fourteenth century, though the distinction can be found much earlier.)[12] The Arabic term for "negative theology" is *lahūt salbī*, the practice of which involves the use of *taʿṭīl*, which means "negation." As Mohammad Ali

8 Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, 33 (paraphrasing Gregory of Nyssa, *Life of Moses* II.165).

9 See e.g. Michael Fagenblat, ed., *Negative Theology as Jewish Modernity* (Indiana University Press, 2017).

10 See Ioan Dura, "'Defining the Indefinable': The Hermeneutics of the Upanishadic Negation *neti neti* in Sankara's Apophatic Theology," in *Proceedings of the XXIII World Congress of Philosophy*, ed. Konstantinos Boudouris (Greek Philosophical Society, 2018), 89–94.

11 Marco Pallis, *A Buddhist Spectrum: Contributions to Buddhist-Christian Dialogue* (World Wisdom, 2003), 131.

12 See e.g. the discussion in Kallistos Ware, Bishop of Diokleia, "God Immanent yet Transcendent: The Divine Energies according to Saint Gregory Palamas," in *In Whom We Live and Move and Have our Being: Panentheistic Reflections on God's Presence in a Scientific World*, eds. Philip Clayton and Arthur Peacocke (Eerdmans, 2002).

Amir-Moezzi writes, this teaching is related in Shiʿite teaching to the way in which God is seen in terms of "two ontological levels." As he describes:

> [F]irst, of the Essence (*ḏāt*). This is said to be forever inconceivable, unimaginable, above all thought, beyond all knowledge. It can only be described by God through revelations and can only be apprehended by a negative apophatic theology […]. However, if things were to remain so, no relation would be possible between the Creator and His creatures. Thus God, in his infinite grace, lets blossom in his own being another level: of Names and Attributes (*asmāʾ wa ṣefāt*) by which He reveals himself and makes himself known. This revealed level, recalling the *Deus revelatus* of Christian theology, is no longer God the Unknowable, but God the Unknown who aspires to be known. It is the exoteric, manifest, revealed level of God that can be known in Him.[13]

I have argued, in *ERP*, that this apophatic, "mystical" approach to the nature of theological language may be extended to allow any particular faith tradition to be adhered to without requiring the assumption that it provides a set of propositional truths that necessarily deny the "competing" truths provided by other faith traditions. Instead, I argue, it seems to permit us—in terms of the "one mountain, many paths to the sumnmit" analogy—to see the narratives and doctrines associated with any particular faith tradition as a set of signposts to aid those who have begun their spiritual journey from the cultural starting point to which that tradition relates. The possibility that there might be other valid starting points—and other wayside signposts for those pursuing their spiritual journey along a different contemplative path towards the same destination—does not seem to be precluded by this understanding.

Have a Bit of Nous!

The colloquial use of the term *nous*, meaning "common sense," reflects one aspect of what ancient philosophers meant when they used this word, but

13 Mohammad Ali Amir-Moezzi, "Shiʿite Doctrine," in *Encyclopaedia Iranica* online, published July 20, 2005; updated January 14, 2013, http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/shiite-doctrine.

this was not the main thing that they had in mind.[14] These philosophers were talking primarily about a mental faculty that they believed exists, at least potentially, in all of us: a faculty that enables us to perceive intuitively what is true or real. A complication here is that the word *nous* is often now rendered in English translations of Greek texts as "intellect" because of its early translation into Latin as *intellectus.* This English translation is, however, potentially misleading to people today because the English term intellect is now understood more narrowly than when the translation into Latin was made. In modern English, the term intellect is now often seen as referring to nothing more than the seat of discursive reasoning. However, the term *nous*—at least in ancient philosophical usage—referred to something quite different, viz., to an essentially intuitive mental faculty that enables what was called noetic discernment of what is true or real, an apprehension that is quite distinct from that which arises from use of the discursive rational capacity.

This distinction—more obvious in the Greek vocabulary of the patristic and Byzantine periods than in modern English[15]—is an interesting one because it is only recently that a comparable distinction has become common among us once again, largely because of our current scientific knowledge of the functions of the two hemispheres of the brain. Through the work of Iain McGilchrist, in particular, we are becoming increasingly aware of the way in which, in the culture of the western world, we have for several centuries attributed great value to the capacities that we now associate with the left hemisphere of the brain—our quantitative and analytical capacities—but have tended to attribute little value to the capacities that arise from the right hemisphere, which are related to creativity, emotion and intuition.[16]

14 In certain parts of Britain, people criticize someone else's lack of common sense by saying "have a bit of nous!" This last word, *nous*, when pronounced in this colloquial way, to rhyme with mouse, simply reflects an old-fashioned British pronunciation of a Greek word. In modern Greek and in theological and philosophical circles, however, this word is now usually pronounced to rhyme, not with mouse, but with moose.

15 In the Greek of the patristic period and of later Byzantine writing, the distinction was often made clear by the use of a different term—*dianoia*—to describe the discursive rational capacity.

16 See Iain McGilchrist, *The Master and His Emissary: The Divided Brain and the Making of the Modern World*, expanded edition (Yale University Press, 2019). What McGilchrist does not do, it must be emphasized, is think of the two hemispheres of the brain as doing completely different things (as was once widely thought.) Rather, he emphasizes that, while both are involved in all mental processes, they contribute to these processes in different ways. Each hemisphere is associated with a different kind of attention, which (so to speak) "creates" in us two different versions of the

It cannot be said that the right hemisphere capacities that McGilchrist describes correspond exactly to the capacities that the ancient Greeks ascribed to the *nous*. There are, nevertheless, considerable overlaps between the two understandings so that, if we take McGilchrist's sense of western culture's lack of balance seriously, we need to think about how the concept of the *nous* was used in a comparable way in early Christian and Islamic theological thinking and to ask ourselves whether ignoring its implications seriously unbalances our modern thinking and experience.[17]

That this lack of balance exists in our current theological thinking is indicated by the fact that, when we examine the use of the term *nous* by early Christian theologians, we find that the noetic apprehension arising from the full use of the *nous* was seen by many of them as central to what they called, in Greek, *theōria*: the contemplation of God (and also of creation, which they sometimes saw as an essential preliminary to the contemplation of God).[18] The *nous* was seen by them, in fact, as what some of them called the "eye of the soul" and it was understood as something quite distinct from the capacity for discursive reasoning. Its intuitive grasp of reality was seen as needing to be used in a balanced way in relation to that reasoning so as to avoid the danger that the concepts we form "in accordance with the understanding and the judgement which are natural to us, basing ourselves on an intelligible

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world that we can either integrate into a unified understanding or keep apart. In our present western culture, he argues, we have become enslaved to the analytical version of the world provided by the left hemisphere and have under-valued or even ignored the more holistic, intuitive version provided by the right hemisphere. He argues that a well-adjusted approach must correct this imbalance and that—as the title of his book indicates—the proper relationship between the two should be one in which the "emissary" left hemisphere serves the "master" right hemisphere rather than tending (as in our western culture) to usurp all power and influence. He explores the religious meaning of this understanding in Iain McGilchrist, *The Matter with Things: Our Brains, Our Delusions, and the Unmaking of the World*, vol. 2 (Perspectiva, 2020), 1193–1303, in which he notes that the term *God* "is obfuscated and overlaid with so many unhelpful accretions that [...] it is not surprising that people recoil from this idol. It's not just that, obviously, God is not some old man sitting on a cloud, but that very much else that is often believed, or at any rate believed by atheists to be believed by theists, badly gets in the way of an understanding" (1200).

17 In the Islamic world, the influence of a neo-Platonic understanding of the *nous* is often perceived by modern scholars in the work of early Islamic philosophers like al-Farabi, Ibn Sina, and Ibn Rushd.

18 The contemplation of nature was seen in this way especially by Maximus the Confessor (d. 664), though the concept goes at least as far back as the fourth century work of Evagrius Ponticus. See Christopher C. Knight, *Eastern Orthodoxy and the Science-Theology Dialogue* (Cambridge University Press, 2022), 10–11.

representation, create idols of God instead of revealing to us God Himself."[19] In modern western theological thinking, by contrast, this "eye of the soul" concept is frequently ignored or undervalued.

It is noteworthy that McGilchrist's sense of our undervaluing the intuitive capacities associated with the right side of the brain has, in recent years, led to a new appreciation of the concept of spiritual intelligence and—among a few at least—to explorations linking this concept to the ancient concept of the *nous*.[20] In particular, Petre Maican has pointed out the relevance of disability theology in relation to this, arguing that the loss of innate cognitive capacities in senile dementia does not diminish what is most important about personhood. This understanding, Maican argues, may be expanded in terms of the concept of the *nous*, and this reflects my own emphasis on the way in which that concept is still used within Eastern Orthodox Christianity, underlining the way in which the *nous* should be seen as in some sense separate from other mental functions, in the sense that it is what truly links the human mind directly to the "mind of God."[21]

There are, admittedly, several distinct, if related, understandings of the *nous* to be found in theologians of the early part of the Common Era, due in part to the ways in which they took up one or other of the different nuances of the term to be found in ancient Greek philosophers such as Aristotle, Plato, and the Neo-Platonists. Nevertheless, the concept of the *nous* was widely used by these theologians in relation to its perceived function as what one modern scholar has called "a connector, the medium by which we relate to God, the ordering principle of our relation to the complex that

19 Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, 33 (paraphrasing Gregory of Nyssa, Life of Moses II.165).

20 This topic of spiritual intelligence is addressed in general terms by various authors in an edited volume: Marius Doborantu and Fraser Watts, eds., *Perspectives on Spiritual Intelligence,* Routledge Science and Religion Series (Routledge, 2024). It is also the focus of a recent special issue of the journal *Christian Perspectives on Science and Theology* 3 (2024) titled "Artificial and Spiritual Intelligence: Proceedings of the 2023 Conference of the International Society for Science & Religion," and guest edited by Doborantu and Watts.

21 See Petre Maican, "Spiritual Intelligence and Dementia: A Theological Re-evaluation of the *Nous*," *Christian Perspectives on Science and Theology* 3 (2024): 54–71; Christopher C. Knight, *Science and the Christian Faith: A Guide for the Perplexed* (St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2020), 107–111; Christopher C. Knight, "The Human Mind in this World and the Next: Scientific and Early Theological Perspectives," *Theology and Science* 16 (2018): 151–165.

is our selves, and the director of external relations, inasmuch as our moral existence stands at its command."[22]

An aspect of this usage is a sense that the *nous* should be seen as the organ of a kind of contemplation that transcends discursive thinking. Indeed, in many strands of late antique and medieval Christian thinking, the *nous* was seen as central to the relationship between the human person and God: the point at which the human mind is in some sense in direct contact with the divine mind. Faith itself was often seen as related to the *nous,* and in general the *nous* was seen as "the highest faculty" in humans, through which—provided it is purified—one knows "God or the inner essences of created things by means of direct apprehension or spiritual perception."[23] The full noetic perception to which the unfettered use of the *nous* gives rise was, however, regarded as being at least partially eclipsed in "fallen" humanity, and this eclipse was seen as remediable only through what we might now call spiritual practice.

This kind of focus on non-discursive contemplation is not only reflected in the apophatic understanding that Lossky has advocated from a Christian perspective but also has parallels in several non-Christian faith traditions (such as the Sufism of the Islamic world) which have comparable notions of the existence of a kind of "spiritual sight" that needs to be cultivated. Among the implications of this notion of spiritual sight is, in fact, the possibility that it provides new ways of exploring attitudes towards the relationship between these traditions, leading us to see several of these traditions as being equally valid.

The relevance of Lossky's thinking to this conclusion lies primarily in the way in which his focus on the importance of contemplation—if it is extended in a way that he himself does not consider—seems to permit any faith tradition to be seen as one to which its adherents can remain faithful without assuming that it provides a set of propositional truths that necessarily deny the "competing truths" provided by other faith traditions. Rather, the narratives and doctrines associated with any one tradition may be seen in the way that I have suggested: as a set of signposts to aid those who have

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22 A. N. Williams, *The Divine Sense: The Intellect in Patristic Theology* (Cambridge University Press, 2007), 234.

23 In relation to Gregory of Nyssa's understanding, see, for example, Martin Laird, *Gregory of Nyssa and the Grasp of Faith: Union, Knowledge and Divine Presence* (Oxford University Press, 2004). Also see Bruce Foltz, *The Noetics of Nature: Environmental Philosophy and the Holy Beauty of the Visible* (Fordham University Press, 2014) 248–249. (The implicit reference here is to the understanding that was most highly developed in the seventh-century work of Maximus the Confessor.)

entered upon their spiritual journey from the starting point provided by the particular tradition to which they adhere. The possibility that there might be other valid starting points—and other wayside signposts for those pursuing their spiritual journey along a different contemplative path towards the same destination—does not seem to be precluded by this understanding.

An aspect of this argument is Lossky's contention that a radically apophatic approach implies, in theology, acceptance of a degree of apparent logical inconsistency—what is sometimes called antinomy—that contemporary analytic philosophy would usually reject. In this apophatic framework, not only will "theology will never be abstract, working through concepts, but contemplative: raising the mind to those realities which pass all understanding." In addition, as Lossky goes on, this is why the dogmas of the Christian tradition "often present themselves as antinomies […] It is not a question of suppressing the antinomy by adapting dogma to our understanding, but of change of heart and mind enabling us to attain to the contemplation of the reality which reveals itself to us as it raises us to God, and unites us, according to our several capacities, to Him."[24]

In *ERP*, I have set out an argument that this kind of emphasis on spiritual growth through contemplative practice, and on the role of antinomy, has implications for many of the philosophical arguments sometimes used to attempt to refute a pluralistic understanding. In these anti-pluralistic arguments, incompatibilities between the doctrinal "truth claims" of different faith traditions are stressed in order to conclude that pluralism is incoherent because no more than one of these "competing" claims can be true. If we accept Lossky's antinomic approach to theology, however, then apparent incompatibilities of this kind cannot automatically be seen as definitive for assessing complementarity at a deeper, contemplative level.

The point here is that when we expand Lossky's understanding to differences between the doctrinal frameworks of the various faith traditions of the world, these frameworks may—at least in principle—be seen as something other than as sets of "truth claims" of an abstract kind. They may be seen, instead, as relating more to the noetic apprehension that arises from the purified *nous* than to "philosophical truths" developed through discursive reasoning, of the kind often assumed by analytic philosophers of religion. Such philosophers are—as John Cottingham has put it—"prone to use the 'fruit-juicer' method" of looking at words in isolation from the total context in which they are used, requiring "the clear liquid of a few propositions to be extracted for examination in isolation from what they take to be the

24 Lossky, The *Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, 43.

irrelevant pulpy mush of context."[25] This approach leads them—as Mikel Burley has observed —to have "a tin ear for possibilities of sense, especially with regard to religions or cultures very different to those with which they are familiar."[26]

In this context, the "one mountain, many paths to the summit" analogy allows us to get a sense of how more than one set of narrative and doctrinal "signposts" may authentically give guidance on journeys along different spiritual paths with the same ultimate destination. In the context of what I have said about the *nous* and about apophaticism, we can expand our sense of how this analogy may legitimately be used by seeing with greater clarity how, as the mountain's summit is approached along any one path, an intuitive, noetic understanding of the divine Reality can gradually develop, in which supposedly "incompatible" descriptions of that Reality are transcended, since they may be seen not as "truth claims" but as "means" or "methods" that act as signposts along a particular spiritual pathway.

This language of "means" or "methods" is not, admittedly, usually associated with Lossky's understanding and he himself was not a pluralist. However, Lossky's main points about the contemplative nature of theological language may be seen as comparable to those found among the advocates of another, comparable kind of understanding, the framework of which does use this kind of language. This is the framework of the pluralistic school of thought associated with the work of scholars like René Guénon and Frithjof Schuon, which is sometimes referred to as the Traditionalist school, sometimes as perennial traditionalism, and sometimes—as in what follows—simply as perennialism.[27]

Perennialism and Esoteric Ecumenism

While often associated primarily with certain Islamic scholars, the perennialist school of thought has followers in many different faith traditions, including Christian scholars such as Huston Smith, a Methodist, Jean

25 John Cottingham, "The Lessons of Life: Wittgenstein, Religion, and Analytic Philosophy," in *Wittgenstein and Analytic Philosophy: Essays for P. M. S. Hacker,* eds. Hans-Johann Glock and John Hyman (Oxford University Press, 2009), 209.

26 Mikel Burley, "Reincarnation and the Lack of Imagination in Philosophy," *Nordic Wittgenstein Review* 5, no. 2 (2015): 39–64.

27 There are in practice minor differences between those who use these terms, but there is sufficient overlap between their understandings to make it appropriate, in the context of our present exploration, to treat these terms as effectively synonymous.

Borella, a Roman Catholic, and the Eastern Orthodox scholar, James Cutsinger.[28] While these perennialist Christians express their views in slightly different ways, they all reflect the following perspective articulated by William Stoddart, in his *Foreword* to a multi-author (and multi-faith) collection of perennialist essays on Christianity:

> The perennial philosophy—which is true universalism and true ecumenism—is, at least extrinsically, a recognition of the divine origin of each religion. The essence of each religion is pure truth. And the various religions clothe that truth in garments of different designs and colors. "In my Father's house are many mansions." This saying of Christ's applies not only to Heaven, but also to earth. The function of the various religions is to express the truth, and to offer a way of salvation, in a manner suited to the different segments and ethnicities of mankind. Each religion comes from God and each religion leads back to God. Each religion, moreover, comprises a doctrine and a method, that is to say, it is an enlightening truth coupled with a saving means.[29]

A central perennialist belief—that the nearer one approaches the metaphysical truth at the heart of one's own tradition, the more one will recognize the existence of spiritual paths other than one's own that lead to the same intuitive understanding—is one that is much older than perennialism in its modern form. It may, for example, be found in an essentially Neo-Platonic form in Renaissance writers such as Marsilio Ficino and Giovani Pico della Mirandola. However, the dominant current version of perennialism—while acknowledging this earlier thinking as part of its heritage—has its main roots elsewhere, most notably in René Guénon's interpretation of the Vedantic traditions of India, originally published in French in 1925.[30]

28 See e.g. Huston Smith, *Forgotten Truth: The Common Vision of the World's Religions* (HarperCollins, 1976); Jean Borella, *Guénonion Esoterism and Christian Mystery* (Sophia Perennis, 2005); James S. Cutsinger, *Advice to the Serious Seeker: Meditations on the Teaching of Frithjof Schuon* (State University of New York Press, 1997).

29 William Stoddart, "Foreword," in *Ye Shall Know the Truth: Christianity and the Perennial Philosophy*, ed. Mateus Souras de Azevedo (World Wisdom, 2005), x–xi. I should perhaps note that I myself avoid speaking of differences between "ethnicities" and focus, instead, on cultural differences.

30 René Guénon, *Man and His Becoming According to the Vedānta*, trans. Richard C. Nicholson (Sophia Perennis, 2001; original French edition: *L'Homme et son devenir*

Both the older and the more recent forms of perennialism have sometimes been classified as manifestations of what in the Renaissance was called perennial philosophy (*philosophia perennis*).[31] However, some within the school now avoid this term and prefer the term "perennial wisdom" (*sophia perennis*) because they see wisdom—with its connotation of metaphysical discernment—as closer to what is meant by them than is the term "philosophy," which is used in the narrow sense assumed in the "analytic" school, at present dominant in the philosophy of the English-speaking world. This discernment is seen by perennialists as providing the ability to distinguish what they call the esoteric core of any particular faith tradition from its exoteric aspects.[32] These exoteric aspects are seen, not as pointing to "incompatibilities" between the "truth claims" of various faith traditions, but simply as constituting part of the "means" or "methods" by which adherents of any particular tradition are led towards an intuitive grasp of its esoteric core. (These means or methods are not purely verbal, however, but relate to the contemplative or liturgical use of narratives and doctrines together with various non-verbal practices.)

Perennialists' sense of the essential identity of each authentic faith tradition at this "core" level has meant that their personal choice of a particular tradition to which to adhere is not based on an exclusivist or even inclusivist sense of that tradition's correctness. Indeed, they often seem to see themselves as having more in common with those of their fellow-perennialists who adhere to faith communities other than their own than they do with those of their co-religionists who fail to make the perennialist distinction between the exoteric and the esoteric that is so important to them. It has therefore been possible for those who accept the school's basic assumptions to find homes in several different faith communities, both monotheistic and otherwise. Some leading perennialist writers, such as Marco Pallis and Alfred Bloom, for example, have been converts to

selon le Vedānta [Les Éditions Traditionnelles, 1925]).

31 In the Renaissance period, the term perennial philosophy was used to describe the notion that the philosophies of Pythagoras, Plato, Aristotle and Plotinus expounded the same truths as Christianity. Subsequently, in modern perennialism, the term was expanded to cover the metaphysics of other traditions, notably Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam.

32 This word esoteric indicates something usually "hidden" but it has the unfortunate connotation, for some, of small groups providing "secret" practices and teachings. As I indicate in *ERP*, however, it can relate, not to such groups, but to the gradual growth of a "deeper" understanding than is usual of the public teachings and practices of various faith traditions.

Buddhism, which does not speak about God.[33] Perennialist ideas are also to be found in the polytheistic Hinduism of the period immediately prior to Guénon's work on Vedantic metaphysics—especially in the work of the Hindu reformer Ram Mohan Roy and of the mystics Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekenanda. (Another Hindu, Ananda Coomaraswamy, is often regarded almost as a co-founder, with Guénon, of perennialism in its modern form.)[34]

One of the things that distinguishes perennialists from many other pluralists is that they have in general stressed the necessity of adherence to a *particular*, historically-rooted faith tradition for the spiritual growth necessary before one can discern the metaphysical truth at the heart of all valid traditions. This stress on the importance of particular, historically-rooted traditions has had the effect of insulating most perennialists from any temptation to a syncretistic combining of aspects of different traditions. For perennialist thinking, only certain traditions or sub-traditions can provide what I have called the "signposts" required for progress along a particular spiritual pathway, though in practice perennialists have not always agreed on which traditions or sub-traditions may legitimately be seen in this way. (For example, Guénon, who was effectively the founder of perennialism in its modern form, initially rejected Buddhism as a valid Traditional religion because he saw aspects of its teachings as unacceptable. Only gradually—under the influence of other perennialists—did he accept at least early Buddhism as valid. He also tended to reject Christianity and had considerable doubts about the more positive view of it that was later developed by Schuon.)[35]

The Continuing Relevance of Perennialist Insights

The perennialist understanding that I have described has, we should note, recently become unfashionable in the academic field of religious studies, partly because of valid objections to its classic form. The most important of these objections—with which I agree—are that classic perennialists tend to impose an interpretative framework on historical and empirical evidence in a questionable way and also often exhibit nostalgia for a fictional past in

33 See especially Pallis, *A Buddhist Spectrum* and Robert D. Baird and Alfred Bloom, *Religion and Man: Indian and Far Eastern Religious Traditions* (Harper and Row, 1972).

34 See Ananda Coomaraswamy, *The Essential Ananda Coomaraswamy*, ed. Rana P. Coomaraswamy (World Wisdom, 2004) for an anthology of his writings.

35 Frithjof Schuon, *Fullness of God: Frithjof Schuon on Christianity*, ed. James S. Cutsinger (World Wisdom, 2004).

which it is assumed there existed a "primordial tradition" that has now been partially lost. My sense of the validity of both of these objections is precisely the reason that I advocate, not perennialism in its classic form, but a kind of *neo-perennialism*, in which these problems are avoided through a focus on human religiosity rather than on very questionable historical beliefs.[36]

This focus on human religiosity has arisen in part from the model of divine action that I have developed as a component of my work on science-engaged theology. This model—as Sarah Lane Ritchie has observed—exhibits significant parallels, at the conceptual level, with two other components of what she has described as a "theological turn" in 21st century discussions of divine action among science-engaged theologians.[37] These are the revision of scholastic understandings developed within the Roman Catholic world by Michael Dodds and the focus on the Holy Spirit developed within the Pentecostal and charismatic strands of Protestant thinking by James Smith and Amos Yong.

In these parallel developments, Ritchie notes, the metaphysical basis of the model of divine action that has been dominant among science-engaged theologians for several decades is radically challenged in much the same way as in my own model. All the proponents of this theological turn—despite their different starting points—challenge the earlier model's assumption of an essentially autonomous universe that God must influence from "outside" through some sort of "causal joint." They instead posit, in their various ways, a universe that is to be understood only in terms of the divine presence within it, arguing—as Ritchie puts it—that mainstream proposals "are dependent upon question-begging metaphysical commitments, which in turn inadequately frame the entire divine action conversation. These presuppositions involve basic ontological questions about the God-nature relationship, and especially the question of what, exactly, it means to be properly 'natural.'"[38]

One aspect of this parallelism relates to the basic understanding of nature. Just as, in my own Eastern Orthodox framework, there is "no 'pure'

36 It is the fact that these historical beliefs have no independent evidence that constitutes, in my judgement, the main impediment to accepting classical perennialism. These beliefs seem to be nothing more than an implausible attempt to "explain" a plausible kind of pluralistic understanding.

37 Sarah Lane Ritchie, "Dancing Around the Causal Joint: Challenging the Theological Turn in Divine Action Theories," *Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science* 37 (2017): 362–379; Sarah Lane Ritchie, *Divine Action and the Human Mind* (Cambridge University Press, 2019).

38 Ritchie, "Dancing Around the Causal Joint," 361.

nature to which grace is added as a supernatural gift," so also, says Ritchie, the pneumatologists "deny the implicit deism that would legitimize the notion of an autonomous natural world apart from the Spirit of God."[39] Another similarity lies in the understanding of miraculous events. Such events may be seen, in my own approach, as an aspect of the "natural" functioning of the world that may be spoken of in terms of the scientific notion of regime change or (following Augustine) the theological concept of "higher" laws of nature.[40] In a comparable way, the pneumatological approach is, as Ritchie observes, one in which, if "some events seem more supernatural than others, this is due to varying levels of creaturely response and openness to the Spirit." Such events are, she goes on (quoting Smith), "sped-up modes of the Spirit's more regular presences."[41]

In the context of the present paper, however, the real importance of the "theological turn" in the discussion of divine action lies not in these "science-engaged theology" issues but in the way in which it has given rise, in *ERP,* to a "single act" model of divine action that I have extended to defend the notion of what we might call a *single act of divine revelation*. This concept is not only compatible with religious pluralism generally, but has also provided a way of developing a very particular understanding of religious pluralism through a focus on human religiosity and on the kind of associated neo-perennialism that I have developed.

While my understanding of divine action—with its move away from any separation between the natural and the supernatural—reinforces the kind of neo-perennialism that I have developed, there are, we should note, widespread objections to classic perennialism which may be seen as being applicable also to my neo-perennialism, so that we need to understand why these objections are, at best, only partially valid.[42] The main issue here is

39 Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, 101; Ritchie, "Dancing Around the Causal Joint," 374.

40 *ERP*, 143–144.

41 Ritchie, "Dancing Around the Causal Joint," 375, quoting James A. K. Smith, "Is the Universe Open for Surprise? Pentecostal Ontology and the Spirit of Naturalism," *Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science* 43 (2008): 879–896, 892. What is meant here seems to be that, as in my own model, the miraculous is not to be understood in terms of any separation between natural and the supernatural.

42 It is noteworthy, in relation to this separation, that Eastern Orthodox Christianity, while it makes a strong distinction between the created and the uncreated, does this in a way that denies the separation between the natural and the supernatural that has become quasi-instinctive in much western Christian thinking. In this respect, Orthodoxy's approach is comparable to that which arises from the critique of that separation that is to be found in the 20th century Ressourcement

that both classic perennialism and neo-perenialism tend to assume that faith traditions have emerged historically—albeit sometimes in a complex way—from foundational religious or "mystical" experiences, and that there is a common core to these experiences that relates them directly to the Divine Reality.

This way of understanding religious experience and its relationship to faith traditions reflects the common understanding of an earlier generation of scholars such as W. T. Stace.[43] In recent years, however, this understanding has been widely criticized within the field of "religious studies" by advocates of the "contextualist" or "constructivist" thesis advocated by scholars like Stephen Katz, who stress not only the danger of "cherry picking" certain experiences and ignoring others (in the way that they often see as characteristic of much perennialist thinking).[44] Critics like Katz also insist that the context provided by a particular tradition will inevitably influence or even "construct" such experiences. The more extreme "constructivist" of these scholars have—as one of them has put it—attempted "literally" to reverse "the perennialist claims on mysticism" by highlighting "the importance of religious institutions, doctrines, scriptures, and established norms and practices in grounding, catalyzing, and even constructing mystical experiences."[45]

This attempted reversal may be seen as partially valid, not least because of the empirical research into religious experience that was initiated by Alister Hardy in the mid-twentieth century.[46] This research is important because it does not "cherry pick" certain experiences to reinforce an existing thesis but is based on surveys of those who have undergone what they themselves see as unusual experiences of a "religious" kind. These

movement in the Roman Catholic church (see Hans Boersma, *Nouvelle Théologie and Sacramental Ontology: A Return to Mystery* [Oxford University Press, 2009]). Indeed, I have suggested that the Eastern Orthodox approach goes further because it has a distinctive understanding in which events that seem "above nature" may be seen as anticipations of the "natural" as it is to be experienced fully in the "world to come." Such events are, in this sense, only above the "subnatural" state in which we exist in a "fallen" cosmos, not above the "truly natural" world that is the ultimate goal the created order. See Knight, *Science and the Christian Faith,* 177–195.

43 W. T. Stace, *Mysticism and Philosophy* (Macmillan, 1960).

44 Stephen C. Katz, "Language, Epistemology, and Mysticism," in *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis*, ed. Stephen C. Katz (Oxford University Press, 1978) 22–74.

45 Aydogan Kars, *Unsaying God: Negative Theology in Medieval Islam,* AAR Academy Series (Oxford University Press, 2019), 8.

46 See e.g. Alister Hardy, *The Spiritual Nature of Man: A Study of Contemporary Religious Experience* (Oxford University Press, 1979).

surveys indicate, among other things, that the content of such experiences may often be expressed by those who report them in terms of a religious or philosophical tradition to which they already adhere, indicating that the contextualist thesis has an element of validity.

In *ERP*, I have argued, nevertheless, that the shaping of experience by an existing religious framework is in practice only partial and may often involve no more than interpretation of experiences that have a common, "unconditioned core." This possibility of such a core is, in fact, suggested not only by Stace's own work but by a number of factors that have become evident since his work was published. These factors are, however, frequently ignored by defenders of the contextualist thesis in its "constructivist" form, who remain convinced that—as one of them has put it—mystical experiences should not be seen as "the experiential seed of religious institutions and doctrines" but should be seen, instead, as "their fruit."[47]

One of these countervailing factors, I have argued, relates to the way in which much of the present use of the contextualist thesis relates to an "anti-perennialist" strand of thinking that has developed as part of the very questionable "recipe knowledge" that is often now exhibited by scholars within the religious studies field.[48] This term "recipe knowledge" has its origin in the sociology of knowledge, and it refers to the way in which people often operate by using a kind of spurious "knowledge" that has become quasi-instincive because it has effectively lost any roots in the attempt at objective thinking that it may have had at some period in the past. We need, therefore, to ask whether this concept may be applicable to aspects of the way in which the academic field of religious studies has developed in recent decades, especially in relation to the common reaction against the perennialist belief that—despite the evident surface differences between faith tradition—there may, at a deeper level, be a core that is common to at least some of those traditions, which relates to universal aspects of human religiosity.

There are several reasons for adopting this belief in a common "core." One of these is the way in which—as the empirical research of Alister Hardy and his successors has indicated—"religious" experiences are not, as was once widely thought, rare occurrences that come only after long immersion in a particular faith tradition. In practice, they are relatively common and

47 Kars, *Unsaying God*, 8.

48 See Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (Doubleday & Company, 1966), which develops Alfred Schutz's thinking on this topic.

often occur in people with no religious affiliation, so that in many cases the discourses and practices of particular faith communities cannot be seen as a causal factor in their occurrence. Another point is that, even if we still think that the majority of religious experiences can be explained in terms of some version of the contextualist thesis, there are other experiences—what Robert Forman calls "pure consciousness events"—which are not fundamentally linguistic and conceptual in nature and are not influenced by context or prior expectation.[49] As Steve Taylor has commented, we must take into account what he calls "extratraditional awakening experiences" if we are to be true to historical and empirical evidence.[50]

Yet another point to take into account is the historical observation that the descriptions and interpretations of their experiences, given by those widely acknowledged as mystics, have often had an equivocal relationship with their own faith tradition's doctrinal frameworks, and this has frequently led to their being regarded as suspect or even as heretical within their own faith communities. This sense of dissonance suggests that there is often something in such experiences that does not conform to contextualist assumptions.

Perhaps the most important observation that I make is, however, not related directly to these particular issues. It arises from developments in the cognitive science of religion, in which what is sometimes called a "dual-process" understanding has been explored. (This understanding may be related to McGilchrist's analysis of the functioning of the two hemispheres of the brain, which I have already noted.) In this dual-process understanding, two cognitive modes are distinguished: a system that is largely intuitive (sometimes described in its religious manifestations as "imagistic" or "shamanistic") and a more discursively oriented system that is, in evolutionary terms, a later development.

In relation to this dual-process understanding, the occurrence of extraordinary "mystical" experiences by those whose religious affiliation is to a "doctrinal" framework is an important indication of the validity of Fraser

49 Robert K. C. Forman, "Pure Consciousness Events and Mysticism," *Sophia* 25 (1986): 49–58.

50 See Steve Taylor, "From Philosophy to Phenomenology: Arguments for a 'Soft' Perennialism," *International Journal of Transpersonal Studies* 35 (2016): 17–41. For Taylor, these "extratraditional awakening experiences" suggest the need, from a transpersonalist perspective, for a "soft" form of perennialism that arguably complements the perspectives outlined in this book in certain ways, even though this "soft" form is seen by him as questioning the kind of metaphysics that I endorse.

Watts's observation that, in relation to religious apprehension, capacities that have emerged only relatively recently in human evolution "exist side by side with older ones."[51] This observation is reinforced by the way in which, even among those who usually focus on discursive capacities in relation to their religious apprehension, there sometimes occur "mystical states" which, as William James once observed:

> [S]eem to those who experience them to be also states of knowledge. They are states of insight into depths of truth unplumbed by the discursive intellect. They are illuminations, revelations, full of significance and importance, all inarticulate though they remain; and as a rule they carry with them a curious sense of authority for after-time.[52]

In the light of all these considerations, the present tendency of certain scholars to blithely dismiss perennialist or neo-perennialist perspectives clearly needs to be challenged, and I have argued that while perennialism in its classic form certainly has aspects that need to be questioned, its neo-perennialist form deserves to be treated by scholars as, at the very least, a valid research program.

Here, the important thing, from the perspective of the present study, is that classic perennialism, despite its faults, may be seen to have a number of positive characteristics that can be retained in a neo-perennialist framework. One of these positive characteristics relates directly to what I have said about the *nous* because perennialists emphasize the way in which—in the ancient traditions that they view as authentic—the human person is seen as composed of three levels of being: spirit, soul, and body. (In Greek, for example, ancient and medieval writers spoke of *pneuma* or *nous*, *psyche,* and *soma*; in Latin, they spoke of *spiritus* or *intellectus*, *anima*, and *corpus*; and in Arabic of *rūḥ* , *nafs*, and *jism*.) While the differences between traditions in their use of this threefold classification are sometimes insufficiently acknowledged by perennialists, what is relevant to our present exploration is their use of it to point to the importance of a capacity that they usually associate with the "spirit" component of what it is to be human. Like those

51 Fraser Watts, "The Evolution of Religious Cognition," *Archive for the Psychology of Religion* 42 (2020): 89–100, 93.

52 William James, "Mysticism" from Lectures XVI and XVII of his *The Varieties of Religious Experience* as reprinted in Douglas W. Schrader and Ashok Kumar Malhotra, eds., *Pathways to Philosophy: A Multidisciplinary Approach* (Pearson, 1996), 416.

who stress the *nous* in a Christian or Islamic context, perennialists see this capacity, not as the seat of discursive, rational thinking but as something that operates at a deeper, intuitive level. This understanding leads them to stress that perceiving the esoteric "truth" that they see as being at the heart of all authentic faith traditions involves an essentially intuitive kind of spiritual intelligence, since they believe, with Guénon, that true metaphysics "constitutes an immediate, or in other words, intuitive knowledge, as opposed to the discursive and mediate knowledge that belongs to the rational order."[53]

This aspect of classic perennialist understanding is one of the things that can, in my judgement, be retained in the kind of neo-perennialism that I advocate, together with its related disdain for modern philosophy of the analytic kind, especially when it is applied to religious doctrines. This attitude—which exhibits parallels with the expansion of Lossky's approach that I have outlined—is rooted in the belief that that what philosophers in the analytic tradition usually take to be the "truth claims" of the doctrinal languages of the world's faith traditions are in fact no more than part of what perennialists and neo-perennialists call the exoteric aspects of those traditions, which are seen by them as constituting part of the "methods" or "means" by which adherents of different faith traditions are guided along the particular spiritual pathways that have been developed in those traditions towards the goal of full noetic insight. What they see as important is the way in which—as one makes progress along any one of these spiritual pathways—one will increasingly apprehend these doctrines'esoteric meaning in a noetic manner. Because this esoteric meaning is grasped intuitively rather than discursively, it is not, for perennialists, to be understood in terms of apparently competing truth claims. Rather, this esoteric meaning is seen by them as identical in all authentic faith traditions, so that their understanding of pluralism is sometimes labelled by them as esoteric ecumenism.[54]

53 René Guénon, *The Essential René Guénon: Metaphysics, Tradition, and the Crisis of Modernity*, ed. John Herlihy (World Wisdom, 2009), 105.

54 See e.g. Frithjof Schuon, *Christianity/Islam: Essays on Esoteric Ecumenism* (World Wisdom, 1985); James S Cutsinger, "Hesychia: An Orthodox Opening to Esoteric Ecumenism," in *Paths to the Heart: Sufism and the Christian East,* ed. James S. Cutsinger (World Wisdom, 2002).

“Incompatibilities” between Various Faith Traditions

Philosophers in the analytic tradition—which is at present dominant in English-language philosophy—are, as I have noted, “prone to use the ‘fruit-juicer’ method” of looking at words in isolation from the total context in which they are used, so that they develop “a tin ear for possibilities of sense, especially with regard to religions or cultures very different to those with which they are familiar.”[55] In terms of this method, one of the apparent “incompatibilities” between faith traditions can seem a very stark one. This is the apparent irreconcilability of the notion of a “personal” God, as found among adherents of the Abrahamic faith traditions, and that of a non-personal Reality, of the kind perceived in those strands of Buddhism that speak about the “Unborn, Unoriginated, Uncreated, Unconditioned.” The moment we begin to look in detail at the context in which notions of “personhood” and “non-personality” are used in real (as opposed to philosophically fruit-juiced) faith traditions, however, we find that the starkness of the choice between these two views of the Divine Reality may be more apparent than real.

The assertion that “non-personal” Buddhist understandings constitute a kind of atheism, for example, has been criticized as “neo-Buddhism” by the Buddhist writer, Marco Pallis, who—as already noted—stresses that his own tradition’s reluctance to speak of God (or even of the self) should be understood in terms of the “apophatic method which Buddhism favours.”[56] Moreover, we need to recognize that this awareness of Buddhist apophaticism may be especially important in relation to the Buddhist concept of *śūnyatā*—usually translated as “emptiness”—which is often taken as indicating that Buddhist thought has never had any sense of an ultimate reality. Not only, as Abraham de Cea has noted, have comparisons between the Christian notion of God and the Buddhist one of emptiness been made by D. T. Suzuki, Thomas Merton, and the Kyoto school in a way that has “greatly contributed to the apophatic interpretation of emptiness.”[57] In

55 Cottingham, “The Lessons of Life,” 209 and Burley, “Reincarnation and the Lack of Imagination in Philosophy,” *Nordic Wittgenstein Review* 4, no. 2 (2014): 40.

56 Pallis, *A Buddhist Spectrum*, 131.

57 See the emphasis on parallels between Zen Buddhist perspectives and those of the Christian mystic, Meister Ekhart, in Daisetz Teitaro Suzuki, *Mysticism: Christian and Buddhist* (Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1957). Also see Thomas Merton, *Zen and the Birds of Appetite* (New Directions, 1968). Finally, the Kyoto school of philosophy has frequently drawn attention to the parallels between its thinking and that of the Meister Ekhart. See the review of the school given by Bret W. Davis, “The Kyoto School,” in Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, eds. Edward N. Zalta and Uri

addition, as de Cea also notes, we must take into account comparisons made by members of what he calls the "Masao Abe-John Cobb group," who see Masao Abe's dynamic interpretation of Buddhist "emptiness" as exhibiting important parallels with the emphasis on *kenosis* (self-emptying) to be found in important strands of Christian thinking.[58] (It also has, we should note, parallels with Jewish kabbalistic thinking about the concept of *tsimtsum*.)[59]

These considerations all point to the legitimacy of William Stoddart's perennialist assertion that Buddhist thinking does not entail denial of some kind of Absolute.[60] He quotes, as evidence of this, the description of the Absolute attributed to the Buddha himself in the Udāna passage of the Kuddaka-Nikaya (or "Collection of Little Texts," the fifth part of the Pali canon):

> *There is an Unborn, Unoriginated, Uncreated, Unconditioned. If that Unborn, Unoriginated, Uncreated, Unconditioned were not, there could be no escape from this that is born, originated, created, conditioned. But because there is That which is Unborn, Unoriginated, Uncreated, Unconditioned, an escape from this that is born, originated, created, conditioned can be proclaimed.*[61]

The "Unborn, Unoriginated, Uncreated, Unconditioned" that this text proclaims may at first sight seem very far from the "personal" God of much theistic thinking, but there may be good reasons to be careful about how we understand the notion of a "personal" God. In particular, we need to recognize that there is much in the metaphysics of most of the main monotheistic traditions that points beyond the "theistic personalism" that many modern theists understand their belief in God to entail. As David Bentley Hart has argued throughout his book, *The Experience of God*, classical

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Nodelman, published February 27, 2006; last modified April 9, 2019, https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2022/entries/kyoto-school/. The quotation at the end of the sentence derives from Abraham Vélez de Cea,"A New Direction for Comparative Studies of Buddhists and Christians: Evidence from Nāgārjuna and John of the Cross," *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 26 (2006) 139–55, 139.

58 Masao Abe, "Kenotic God and Dynamic Sunyata," in *The Emptying God: A Buddhist-Jewish-Christian Conversation*, eds. John Cobb and Christopher Ives (Wipf and Stock, 2005) 3–68. Also see the essays that follow Abe's essay in *The Emptying God.*

59 See e.g. Agata Bielik-Robson, "'Humbled onto Death': Kenosis and Tsimtsum as the Two Models of Divine Self-Negation," *The Free Library*, published October 1, 2024, https://www.thefreelibrary.com/%22Humbled+onto+Death%22%3a+Kenosis+and+Tsimtsum+as+the+Two+Models+of...-a0814375446

60 Stoddart, *An Illustrated Outline of Buddhism,* 1–3.

61 Stoddart, *An Illustrated Outline of Buddhism,* 3, citing Kuddaka-Nikaya, Udāna, 80ff.

theistic metaphysics does not speak of God as *a* being but as the timeless source of being. Because of this, classical theism is far removed from what many theists in the modern period—including philosophers in the analytic tradition—have assumed the term God to mean. Indeed, says Hart, the classical metaphysics of the main theistic traditions may be seen not only in those traditions but also in Buddhism in its Mahayana form, at least in relation to its formulations of "Buddha consciousness or the Buddha nature, or even to the earliest Buddhist conception of the Unconditioned."[62]

When examined from this perspective, the notion of the "Unborn, Unoriginated, Uncreated, Unconditioned" found in strands of Buddhist thinking may be seen as far closer to traditional theistic metaphysics than is the notion of a temporal, "personal" God upheld by many theistic believers of the present day. Indeed, what Stoddart calls the "Supreme State" envisaged in Buddhism and the "Supreme Being" envisaged in theistic traditions may, as he argues, be seen as "expressions of the same transcendent Reality: That which is absolute, infinite, and perfect" so that the apparent difference between Buddhism and theistic faith traditions is, from this perspective, no more than "a difference of point of view or angle of vision."[63]

Moreover, just as there is a range of views among Buddhists about whether their tradition is atheistic, so also there is a range of understandings within the Christian tradition of how the concept of a "personal" God may legitimately be used. Indeed, as those familiar with that tradition will be aware, notions that verge on the non-personal are far from uncommon. Whether we examine the medieval understanding expressed in Eckhart's understanding of the Godhead, for example, or the modern one of Paul Tillich, with its notion of God as "being-itself," we find that a complex set of understandings is found in Christian history.[64]

The importance of this spectrum of opinions within faith traditions is, however, often underestimated or even ignored, not only by ordinary theistic believers but also by those whose primary academic training has been in philosophy rather than theology. The Christian philosopher, Richard Swinburne, for example, has claimed that "the most elementary claim of

62 David Bentley Hart, *The Experience of God: Being, Consciousness, Bliss* (Yale University Press, 2013), 4.

63 Stoddart, *An Illustrated Outline of Buddhism,* 1.

64 For a brief analysis, see Bernard McGinn, "The God beyond God: Theology and Mysticism in the Thought of Meister Eckhart," *Journal of Religion* 61 (1981): 1–19. In relation to "being itself" see Guy B Hammond, "Tillich on the Personal God," *Journal of Religion* 44 (1964): 289–93.

theism" is that "God is a person, yet one without a body."[65] There are, however, more theologically-aware scholars, like Adrian Thatcher, who see this notion not only as philosophically incoherent but also as failing to recognize that in the Christian world "most respected theologians [...] both ancient and modern, have no use for the modern term 'person' in relation to God."[66] Swinburne's view is, in Thatcher's judgment, "unwarrantable and misrepresents what the [Christian] theological tradition says about God."[67] He perhaps overstates his case when he says that belief that God is a person is "foreign to Christian theology, with the unfortunate consequence that a philosophical defence of it is not only mistaken: it is also pointless."[68] Nevertheless, as the cases of Eckhart and Tillich illustrate, there are certainly strands of the Christian tradition of which his observation is true.

Another example of the way in which a misreading of the "truth claim" that God is personal can lead to confusion is to be found in the tendency of some philosophers and theologians to conflate this notion with another: that of God as a *temporal* being, whose experience of the flow of time is much like our own. They often dismiss any notion of the non-temporality of God—what Brian Davies calls "the classical view of divine eternity"—as the "God of the philosophers" and fail to take into account the way in which this notion has roots in mystical experience as well as in ancient and medieval philosophical understanding.[69] (As F.C. Happold has noted, "the mystic feels himself to be in a dimension where time is not, where 'all is always now'" so that such experience is not understandable "unless one is prepared to accept that there may be an entirely different dimension from that of clock time or indeed of any other sort of time.")[70]

Failing to take seriously not only this mystical dimension of the question but also the modern scientific understanding of time as part of the created cosmos, these advocates of God's temporality dismiss the subtle view of the relationship between God and time that was dominant in patristic and medieval Christian thinking and claim that temporality is intrinsic to a

65 Richard Swinburne, *The Coherence of Theism* (Oxford University Press, 1977), 1n1.

66 Adrian Thatcher, "The Personal God Who is a Person," *Religious Studies* 21, no. 1 (1985): 61–73, 71.

67 Thatcher, "The Personal God," 61.

68 Thatcher, "The Personal God," 71.

69 Brian Davies, *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion*, 2nd ed. (Oxford University Press,1993), 141.

70 F. C. Happold *Mysticism: A Study and an Anthology* (Penguin, 1963), 48.

proper understanding of God's "personal" nature.[71] However, in my work on divine action—as I explain in *ERP*—the modern focus on temporality as an aspect of God's "personal nature" may be seen as a major distorting factor in discussions of that action among science-engaged theologians. Moreover, I point out, there are, from an apophatic perspective, basic flaws in the way in which modern philosophers such as J. R. Lucas argue that to "deny the temporality of God" is to deny "that he is personal in any sense in which we understand personality."[72] While this may be true, I argue, it is irrelevant because it fails utterly to acknowledge the kind of radically apophatic perspective that "refuses to form concepts about God" which means that we should see our own understanding of personality as irrelevant to this issue.[73] From this apophatic perspective, our own understanding of personality may be precisely one of the projections—"in accordance with the understanding and the judgement which are natural to us, basing ourselves on an intelligible representation"—which "create idols of God instead of revealing to us God Himself."[74]

Another issue that seems to some philosophers to present a stark choice between different faith traditions is that which arises from the monotheism of the Abrahamic traditions and the polytheism of the various Hindu traditions. Once again, however, a theological and historical understanding of these traditions questions the commonly-assumed nature of this supposed incompatibility.

We need, for a start, to recognize that many Biblical scholars see the monotheism of the Abrahamic traditions as having developed from an earlier polytheism only slowly during the period covered by the Hebrew

71 This subtle view was expressed by Thomas Aquinas in terms of what has been called the "classical view of divine eternity" (Davies, *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion*, 141) and—in an even more subtle way—by Maximus the Confessor; see Sotiris Mitralexis, *Ever-Moving Repose: A Contemporary Reading of Maximus the Confessor's Theory of Time* (Cascade, 2017). Regarding time and the created cosmos: One of the main differences between Newtonian mechanics and its replacement—Einstein's relativistic mechanics—is the way in which Newton saw space and time as absolutes within which the universe unfolds, while Einstein saw them simply as aspects of the created order, which were in fact interdependent in a way that means that distances and time intervals between events may be different for different observers.

72 J. R. Lucas, "The Temporality of God," in *Quantum Cosmology and the Laws of Nature: Scientific Perspectives on Divine Action,* eds. Robert John Russell, Nancey Murphy, and C. J. Isham (Vatican Observatory, 1993), 236.

73 Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church,* 38–39.

74 Lossky, *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*, 33 (paraphrasing Gregory of Nyssa, *Life of Moses* II.165).

Bible, and some have gone on to suggest that this development has only rarely led to the radical monotheism that it could have become. As I put it in my second book, *The God of Nature*, "the savage tribal god of the earliest phases of […] the Judaeo-Christian] community's development, still evident in parts of the Old Testament, sometimes co-exists rather uneasily in [Christians'] minds with the loving, merciful, and universal God the New Testament" (and also,I might have added, of Second Temple and later Judaism). Indeed, I went on, "even before we take the New Testament into account, we can already recognize the way in which the tribal god of the earliest period was gradually transformed, through prophetic interpretation of historical experience and of the legends that arose from that experience, into the God of the later Judaistic faith: the creator of the cosmos and the redeemer, not only of God's chosen people but, through them, of all humankind."[75] In a historical-critical perspective, I continued, there emerges "a picture of the development of Judaism in which, at each stage, relatively new conceptions co-existed with remnants from earlier periods" so that, just as the evolutionary biologist "can find, in any living creature, features of the way in which that creature's ancestors adapted to an environment that has long since disappeared, so the Biblical historian can find, in documents of any given period, aspects of the religious attitudes of earlier periods."[76]

When we acknowledge this historical development, I suggested, we can go on to recognize that:

> Once the conception of a single God had developed, it retained, in some respects, characteristics that had been appropriate only to the earlier age of polytheism. In particular, just as the gods of the earlier period had been assigned quasi-human attributes that distinguished them from one another, so also the single God of the new perception was still understood as having such attributes—albeit ones that, under prophetic influence, took on an increasingly ethical dimension. Even as these elements changed in detail, however, evolutionary remnants among them tended to remain, and this was reinforced by the high status given to documents and traditions from much earlier periods. The result was the kind of belief in a single God that still bore traces of earlier belief—for example, the

75 Christopher C. Knight, *The God of Nature: Incarnation and Contemporary Science* (Fortress Press, 2007), 16–17.

76 Knight, *The God of Nature*, 16–17.

> concept of God's "jealousy" of other gods (Exodus 34:14). It was not yet radical monotheism but a transitional attitude, sometimes referred to as henotheism.[77]

However, since the word *henotheism* is also used in a difference sense, might be better termed *monopolytheism*: a term which, as already noted, has been coined by David Bentley Hart.[78]

In a way that is in some respects comparable to this historical development of Judaism (and of the other two Abrahamic traditions, which inherited from Judaism the monopolytheism of its later forms), at least some polytheistic traditions, such as those to be found in Hinduism, have developed historically in a way that has led, not to monotheism but to a kind of henotheism that differs from the one common in the monotheistic traditions. In this Hindu kind of henotheism—which involves devotion to a single god while accepting the existence of other gods—there is a way of speaking about *gods* that is significantly different to the way in which radical monotheists speak about God. This means that the questions involved in comparing the two ways of speaking relate to far more than numbers.

As Alain Daniélou has put it, the Hindu conception of the infinity of the divine means that focusing on numbers is potentially misleading since "we may be nearer to a mental representation of divinity when we consider an immense number of different gods than when we stress their unity; for the number one is in a way the number farthest removed from infinity [...]. Though, in its manifest form, divinity is of necessity multiple, in its ultimate essence it cannot be said to be one or many."[79] In a different way, the Christian monk, Bede Griffiths, has focused on the way in which some Hindu traditions have developed ways of speaking about Brahman that are reminiscent of monotheistic perspectives. As a result, he argues, the polytheism of these traditions does not eclipse the monotheist's sense of the

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77 Knight, *The God of Nature*, 17.

78 The term *henotheism* was popularized by Max Müller (d. 1900), though he saw it primarily in terms of the Hindu practice of worshipping a single god while acknowledging the existence of others. The term is still widely used in this general sense but because this henotheism clearly existed in early Yahwism as well as in Hinduism, some have, like me, extended the meaning of the term to cover any "monotheistic" understanding in which, while the reality of other gods is formally denied, one can still discern traces of this earlier belief.

79 Alain Daniélou, *The Myths and Gods of India: The Classic Work on Hindu Polytheism* (Inner Traditions International, 1991), 7.

character of this Reality, so that their polytheism may be seen as constituting an understanding that is, from a monotheistic perspective, not idolatrous.[80]

These considerations point to the way in which, as David Bentley Hart has observed:

> [T]here are two senses in which the word "God" or "god" can properly be used. Most modern languages generally distinguish between the two usages […] by writing only one of them with an upper case first letter, as though it were a proper name—which it is not. Most of us understand that "God" (or its equivalent) means the God who is the source of all things. Whereas "god" (or its equivalent) indicates one or other of a plurality of divine beings who inhabit the cosmos and reign over its various regions. This is not, however, merely a distinction in numbering, between monotheism and polytheism, as though the issue were merely that of determining how many "divine entities" one happens to think there are. It is a distinction, instead, between two entirely disparate conceptual orders. In fact, the very division between monotheism and polytheism is in many cases a confusion of categories. Several of the religious cultures that we sometimes inaccurately characterize as "polytheistic" have traditionally insisted upon an absolute differentiation between the one transcendent Godhead from whom all being flows and various "divine" beings who indwell and govern the heavens and earth.[81]

As an example, he notes that Swami Prabhavananda, "speaking more or less for the whole of developed Vedantic and Bhaktic Hinduism" says that only the one God "is 'the uncreated', while gods, though supernatural, belong […] among the creatures."[82]

In this sense, Hart goes on, many "polytheistic" frameworks are directly comparable, not only to the pagan polytheism of much of the Mediterranean world in which Christianity initially spread, but also to the outlook of those late Hellenistic Jews and early Christians who "recognized a multitude of angelic 'powers' and 'principalities,' some obedient to the

80 See especially the comments on this in Bede Griffiths, *Return to the Centre*, new ed. (Canterbury Press, 2003).

81 Hart, *The Experience of God*, 28–29.

82 Hart, *The Experience of God*, 29.

one transcendent God and some in rebellion, who governed the elements of nature and the peoples of the earth." To any impartial observer at the time, he continues, "coming from some altogether different culture, the theological cosmos of a great deal of pagan 'polytheism' would have seemed all but indistinguishable from that of a great deal of Jewish or Christian 'monotheism.'"[83]

For this and other reasons, Hart speaks a number of times in his book, *The Experience of God* about the way in which much modern monotheism is in fact a kind of monopolytheism—a term which, as already noted, is particularly apt when we take into account the way in which, before that term was coined, I had already observed that the monotheism of the Abrahamic faith traditions may be seen, in a historical-critical perspective, as having evolved only gradually from an earlier polytheism, and that this monotheism has arguably only rarely moved fully beyond aspects of polytheistic thinking except in relation to the number of "divine entities" assumed to exist.

Beyond the Analytic Philosophy of Religion

One of the things that is required for greater interfaith understanding is recognition that, in addition to explicitly monotheistic faith traditions, there are other traditions that are not unusually expressed in monotheistic terms but may nevertheless be less clearly distanced from monotheism than is usually assumed. The implicit monotheism of some of these traditions is precisely what is indicated by the examples outlined in the previous section.

If we ask why the implicit monotheism of these traditions is not always recognized by their adherents, the answer surely lies in the way in which they often accept uncritically the way in which many modern monotheists—including philosophers of religion—interpret their own monotheism in terms comparable to that which I have noted in the work of Richard Swinburne, for whom "the most elementary claim of theism" is that "God is a person, yet one without a body."[84] This statement represents one of the more extreme examples of a widespread assumption that has been criticized by David Bentley Hart, who says that many contemporary philosophers of religion "have effectively broken with classical theistic tradition, adopting a

83 Hart, *The Experience of God*, 29–30.

84 Swinburne, *The Coherence of Theism*, 1n1.

style of thinking that the Dominican philosopher Brian Davies calls theistic personalism."[85]

It is not only analytic philosophers of religion who tend to think in terms of theistic personalism, however, but also, in an inchoate way, the majority of ordinary adherents of the monotheistic faith traditions, for whom reliance on the scriptures of their tradition leads to a reliance on "proof texts" that reflects the "fruit juicer" methodology employed by analytic philosophers. One aspect of the problematical nature of this is, as we have seen, the monopolytheism of much monotheistic belief, which may be partly understood in terms of the historical development of the Abrahamic monotheistic traditions as revealed by historical-critical Biblical study.

These kinds of theological and historical factors are often underestimated or even ignored by those whose prime training has been in analytic philosophy rather than in theology, and this poses a major challenge to much current work in the analytic philosophy of religion. However, to observe the nature of this challenge is not to suggest that philosophical perspectives are to be ignored. Rather, it is to indicate that philosophical perspectives must be informed by theological considerations if they are not to lead us astray. This means that, if philosophers of religion have a role to play in helping overcome the barriers that exist between adherents of different faith traditions, this will require expansion of their horizons beyond the "purely philosophical" kind of "fruit juicer" analysis that at present tends to characterize their discipline.

Such an expansion requires not only a greater awareness of the kind of radical apophaticism that Lossky has advocated but also a sense of the

85 Hart, *The Experience of God*, 127–128. Hart goes on to observe that this theistic personalism seems "to involve a view of God not conspicuously different from the polytheistic picture of the gods as merely very powerful discrete entities who possess a variety of distinct attributes that lesser entities also possess, if in smaller measure […]. It is a way of thinking that suggests that God, since he is only a particular instantiation of various concepts and properties, is logically dependent on some more comprehensive reality embracing both him and other beings. For philosophers who think in this way, practically all the traditional metaphysical attempts to understand God as the source of all reality become impenetrable […]. It is a way of thinking that suggests that God, since he is only a particular instantiation of various concepts and properties, is logically dependent on some more comprehensive reality embracing both him and other beings. For philosophers who think in this way, practically all the traditional metaphysical attempts to understand God as the source of all reality become impenetrable. (This critique reflects in part the kind of critique offered by other philosophers, including ground of being theists such as Paul Tillich.)

potential inherent in all forms of religious pluralism, whether expressed in neo-perennialist terms or otherwise. This will open philosophers up—in a way that is rare at present—to the ways in which philosophical perspectives from other faith traditions might sometimes illuminate those of their own. Once again, it is the Eastern Orthodox scholar, David Bentley Hart, who perhaps points the way forward in terms of methodology, when he comments that the Vedantic thought of Sankara might throw important light on the thinking of one of the most influential Christian authors of the patristic era, Maximus the Confessor, while "the whole rationality of the Christian tradition […] entails and requires a kind of metaphysical monism that has only sporadically manifested itself in the tradition, but that certain schools of Vedanta (not to mention certain schools of Sufism) have explored with unparalleled brilliance."[86]

Conclusion

These comments—on the way in which philosophers of religion need to expand their discipline by taking multi-faith considerations into account in an interdisciplinary or transdisciplinary way—are not, however, the main point that I have sought to articulate in this paper.[87] For monotheists, in particular, I have sought to express the way in which neo-perennialism—when combined with the other factors that I have outlined in relation to the "implicit" monotheism of some non-theistic and polytheistic traditions—provides a way of seeing these traditions in a new light. In this light, there are significant challenges to the way in which these traditions are often assumed by monotheists to deny the reality of the "one, true God" and are therefore to be regarded as invalid. I have also sought, in all that I have said, to challenge the tendency among many—whether monotheists or

86 David Bentley Hart, *Tradition and Apocalypse* (Baker Academic, 2022),183.

87 The meaning of this term "transdisciplinary" has been explored in Basarab Nicolescu, *Manifesto of Transdisciplinarity,* trans. Karen-Claire Voss (State University of New York, 2002). Its general meaning is, however, not tied to Nicolescu's particular approach. The term seems to have been first used in the 1970's to advocate an approach to psychology that is not limited to recognizing the interactions or reciprocities between specialized fields of research. Rather, it locates these links inside a total system without stable boundaries between those fields. This understanding has now been expanded to incorporate the interaction of any two disciplines. Implicit in this approach is a more flexible attitude towards the accepted boundaries and methodology of each discipline than is usual in interdisciplinary work—in many ways the present paper represents a transdisciplinary approach.

otherwise—to interpret monotheistic belief in terms of the kind of theistic personalism that has tended to eclipse what radical monotheism should properly be.[88]

This is not to say that theistic personalism needs to be seen as inappropriate at every stage of monotheists' spiritual lives. In my development of neo-perennialist perspectives in *ERP*, I have stressed that notions of this kind may properly be seen as an aspect of what perennialists have called the exoteric "means" or "methods" that assist people as signposts on their spiritual pathway, especially near its beginning. Indeed, only those who are somewhat advanced on that pathway are likely to recognize the need to re-think what may well have been helpful to them in that pathway's earlier stages. I caution, nevertheless, that what may legitimately be seen as a kind of spiritually helpful, scripturally-oriented "folk theology"—functioning as set of signposts along the pathways associated with the monotheistic traditions, especially near their beginning—is not adequate for anyone who seeks to contribute to theological understanding at a deeper level. In particular—as this paper has indicated in relation to the defects of theistic personalism—trying to combine "folk-theology" with complex philosophical reasoning in the manner of analytic philosophers of religion will only rarely produce real insight. It is more likely, in fact, to lead to the phenomenon of what people in computer programming circles characterize as "garbage in, garbage out."

The main purpose of this paper is not, however, to articulate the requirements of an adequate philosophy of religion, important as that is. At the heart of its purpose has been—as I mentioned in my introduction—to give to those many religious believers, who already quasi-instinctively believe or suspect that there is "one mountain but many paths to the summit," a plausible theoretical justification for accepting that pluralistic analogy.

Even without such a justification, the analogy remains a useful one because we can all clearly understand the way in which, geographically, a mountain may be approached from the surrounding lowlands by many

88 As Paul Tillich once put it in his *The Courage to Be*, monotheists need to re-think the kind of "theological theism" many of them hold and recognize what he calls "the paradoxical character of every prayer, of speaking to somebody to whom you cannot speak because he is not 'somebody', of asking somebody of whom you cannot ask anything because he gives or gives not before you ask, of saying 'thou' to somebody who is nearer to the I than the I is to itself" (Tillich, *The Courage to Be* (Collins-Fontana, 1962), 181). This last comment is reminiscent of the Quranic statement that "We created man—We know that his soul whispers to him: We are closer to him than his jugular vein" (50: 15–18).

paths that start from different locations. These locations will inevitably lie in different directions from the mountain, so that the compass directions of the earlier stages of each path will necessarily be different. This means that someone starting from north of the mountain, for example, and travelling southwards towards it, need not see the northward direction of those starting from a location south of the mountain as misguided because this orientation is different from their own. In much the same way, even when the mountain's slopes have been reached, there may still be different paths to the summit in order to avoid particular difficulties that will be encountered on the mountain's different sides.

This analogy, even on its own, can make it plausible that loyalty towards one's own faith tradition, and to the spiritual path that it offers, need not preclude the possibility that eventually, at the end of one's spiritual journey, one will meet others who have journeyed by different paths towards the same destination. Analogies can only, however, take us so far, and on their own can easily be dismissed as wishful thinking. Only the neo-perennialist distinction between the esoteric and exoteric aspects of any faith tradition can, in my judgement, allow us to go beyond wondering whether this might be the case, and to develop a coherent theological understanding of why more than one pathway exists.

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ARTICLE

Reimagining Interfaith Engagement: A Postfoundationalist Comparative Theology Paradigm

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Abstract
This article proposes a postfoundationalist paradigm for comparative theology to reimagine interfaith engagement, addressing the limitations of traditional approaches like exclusivism, inclusivism, pluralism, and postliberalism. These models often fail to adequately balance the particularity of religious traditions with aspirations for universal truth, leading to either exclusion or homogenization. Drawing on critical realism, postfoundationalism offers a mediating epistemology that acknowledges the contextuality of human knowledge while affirming the meaningful pursuit of objective truth. This framework provides a coherent epistemic foundation for comparative theology, enabling deep interreligious learning. It affirms parity among religions, respects each tradition's distinctiveness, and recognizes universal truth claims without diminishing their particularities, fostering more genuine and fruitful dialogue.

Keywords
Comparative Theology, Postfoundationalist Epistemology, Postfoundational Comparative Theology, Interreligious Exchange

Introduction

Engaging in interreligious dialogue is an imperative task for contemporary theologians given the reality of religious plurality and the conflicts that often accompany it. The epistemological foundations upon which such dialogue rests, however, remain hotly debated. Traditional Christian theological approaches to religious diversity—typically categorized as exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism—each have notable limitations. Exclusivist and inclusivist models tend to overemphasize the particularity and universality of a single religion at the expense of others, while pluralist models often disregard the particularity and universality of all religions by assuming a relativistic equivalence. While these theological frameworks can be seen as reflections of broader epistemological commitments, exclusivism and inclusivism align closely with foundationalist confidence in absolute truths, while pluralism corresponds to nonfoundationalist skepticism toward universal claims. Neither strict foundationalism nor radical nonfoundationalism adequately sustains genuine plurality as the former risks excluding or assimilating religious differences, and the latter risks dissolving meaningful distinctives. There is thus a pressing need for a new epistemological perspective that can maintain the diversity, particularity, and universality of each religious tradition in dialogue. This need is especially acute in contexts such as India, where polarized religious identities and power imbalances heighten the stakes of interfaith engagement.

This article proposes that a postfoundationalist paradigm for comparative theology offers such a framework. In contrast to the rigid certainty of classical foundationalism and the relativistic drift of some postmodern nonfoundationalism, postfoundationalism provides a mediating epistemology.[1] Drawing on insights from critical realism, it acknowledges

1 The term "postmodernism" is used in a variety of ways across academic disciplines, often generating confusion due to its shifting meanings. In theology, it refers less to a specific school than to a posture of skepticism toward universalizing metanarratives, foundationalist epistemologies, and the possibility of absolute truth claims. The influence of postmodernism peaked in the late twentieth century, and while theological engagement with the concept persists, contemporary discussions employ it with more nuanced caveats and awareness of its limitations (Graham Ward, *True Religion,* Wiley-Blackwell Manifestos [Blackwell Publishing, 2003], 23–40; James K. A. Smith, *Who's Afraid of Postmodernism? Taking Derrida, Lyotard, and Foucault to Church* [Baker Academic, 2006]. Ward maintains that the "postmodern" moment is already passing, but its exposure of modern illusions (about neutrality, universality, and pure reason) can aid a recovery of thick, traditioned, and embodied forms of Christian piety. Smith argues that key postmodern claims—"there is nothing outside the text," "incredulity toward metanarratives," and

the limits of human knowledge while affirming that an objective truth or reality can be meaningfully sought through interpreted experience. A postfoundationalist approach thus seeks to strike a necessary balance as it rejects the absolutist claim that one religion has a monopoly on universal truth. Yet it also avoids the collapse into relativism that treats all truths as merely local with no cross-contextual validity. Each religious tradition's quest for ultimate truth (for example, the reality of God's self-disclosure) is recognized as a diverse yet valid truth-seeking endeavor. By steering clear of the extremes of exclusion on one hand and homogenization on the other, a postfoundationalist comparative theology can respect the distinct identities and truth-claims of various religions while fostering more genuine and fruitful engagement.

The progression of the paper unfolds in different sections: First, a background overview of major Christian approaches to religious diversity is presented, expanding the typical typology (exclusivism, inclusivism, pluralism) with a fourth paradigm of postliberal particularism. Second, the article examines key epistemological insights underlying these approaches, tracing a trajectory from foundationalism to nonfoundationalism and onward to postfoundationalism, engaging especially with the notion of critical realism and recent critiques of both modern and postmodern epistemologies. The third section develops the postfoundationalist alternative through Critical Realism and Epistemic Holism, consolidating these epistemic moves into a constructive framework for theological reasoning. Fourth, the contemporary practice of comparative theology is explored, highlighting its differences from the theology of religions approach through the contributions of pioneering thinkers like Francis X. Clooney and James L. Fredericks, as well as its developments in incorporating approaches that go beyond text-based comparisons. The fifth section outlines how contemporary comparative theology conducts deep, confessional learning across traditions and exposes the epistemological limits of earlier theology-of-religions models. The sixth section offers a constructive Christological experiment that holds firm Christian commitment together with genuine openness to transformation through comparative engagement. The seventh synthesizes the argument into a coherent model that affirms parity among religions, honors particularities, and sustains universal truth-seeking for future interfaith work.

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the critique of power—can be received as resources for a thicker, confessional, liturgical Christianity rather than as threats to faith. In this essay, my use of "postmodernism" specifically points to the critique of grand theory and the affirmation of particularity and difference that have shaped recent theological approaches.

Extant Approaches to Religious Diversity

Christian theologians have developed various models to understand and engage the reality of religious diversity. Classic typologies typically enumerate three primary approaches—exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism—while a fourth paradigm, termed postliberalism or particularism, has been explored in recent years. Each approach carries distinct assumptions about truth and salvation in relation to the other religions, as well as particular socio-historical presuppositions. This section will briefly characterize these four approaches, noting their strengths and weaknesses. The next section will explore their epistemological underpinnings.

The differing approaches to religious diversity within Christian theology have historically been organized using Alan Race's influential threefold schema: exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism.[2] This typological framework provided the basis for much of the late twentieth-century debate, serving to categorize theological responses to the presence of other faiths. Subsequent developments, notably the proposal by Dennis Okholm and Timothy Phillips, introduced a fourth category—particularism—further enriching the conversation.[3] In recent scholarship, Paul Hedges has offered a substantial rethinking of this typology, rigorously theorizing particularism and synthesizing the fourfold model within his own work.[4] Hedges' framework now stands as a widely-acknowledged point of reference, including among figures such as Paul Knitter, whose own reflections have increasingly aligned with Hedges' expanded paradigm.[5] By foregrounding the dynamic interplay between particularist and pluralist/universalist perspectives, the revised typology moves beyond earlier exclusivist-inclusivist debates and encourages deeper engagement in contemporary comparative theology and interfaith discourse. Crucially, more nuanced treatments of pluralism—prominently advanced by scholars like Perry Schmidt-Leukel and Abraham Velez de Cea—are attempting to move away from the relativistic tendencies, while

2 See Alan Race, *Christians and Religious Pluralism*: *Patterns in the Christian Theology of Religions* (SCM Press, 1983), 1–15.

3 Dennis L. Okholm and Timothy R. Phillips, eds., *More Than One Way?: Four Views on Salvation in a Pluralistic World* (Zondervan Publishing House, 1996), 5–28.

4 Paul Hedges, "The Theology of Religions Typology Redefined: Openness and Tendencies," in *Twenty-First Century Theologies of Religions: Retrospection and Future Prospects*, ed. Elizabeth J. Harris, Paul Hedges, and Shanthikumar Hettiarachchi (Brill, 2016), 76–92.

5 See Paul F. Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religions* (Orbis, 2002), 35–45 and Paul Hedges, *Controversies in Interreligious Dialogue and the Theology and the Theology of Religions,* Controversies in Contextual Theology Series (SCM Press, 2010), 55–70.

fostering openness to broader understanding and meaningful interreligious relationships.[6]

Exclusivism, Inclusivism, Pluralism

Exclusivism argues that one's own religion is the sole source of truth and salvation, exemplified by Christian theology's assertion of Christ's unique saving role and dismissal of other faiths as inadequate or false. Hendrik Kraemer's (*The Christian Message in a Non-Christian World*, 1938) rejection of truth in other religions is a classic example of this approach.[7] Historically, colonialism and the consequent power differential strengthened this approach. While exclusivism offers clarity and a strong religious identity, it faces criticism for theological arrogance, the dismissal of other traditions' wisdom, and marginalization linked to political dominance. Inclusivism holds that while truth and grace exist within other religions, they reach ultimate fulfillment only within one's own tradition. In Christianity, this perspective suggests non-Christians can attain salvation through Christ, even unknowingly. Karl Rahner's concept of "anonymous Christians," identifying non-Christians as implicit recipients of Christian grace, illustrates inclusivism's intent. Yet his approach is criticized as patronizing for undermining other faiths' authenticity.[8] Thus, inclusivism, despite acknowledging spiritual depth elsewhere, maintains a hierarchical view that privileges its own revelation.[9]

Pluralism argues that no single religious tradition has exclusive access to truth or salvation, affirming instead that diverse religions offer valid responses to Ultimate Reality or God. Prominent theologians like John Hick advocated a "Copernican revolution," shifting focus from Christianity to a theocentric model that sees diverse religions as equally sincere paths

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6 Perry Schmidt-Leukel, *Transformation by Integration: How Inter-faith Encounter Changes Christianity* (SCM Press, 2009), 88–104; Abraham Velez de Cea, *The Buddha and Religious Diversity* (Routledge, 2007), 40–65.

7 See H. C. Goerner, "Christianity and Non-Christian Religions," *Review and Expositor* 51, no. 2 (1954): 217–229.

8 See Karl Rahner, "Christianity and Non-Christian Religions" and "Anonymous Christian," in *Theological Investigations,* vol. 5: Later Writings (Helicon Press, 1966), 115–134.

9 Race, *Christians and Religious Pluralism*, 38. Also see Hugh Nicholson, *Comparative Theology and the Problem of Religious Rivalry* (Oxford University Press, 2011), 27.

toward the divine.[10] While promoting religious equality and tolerance, pluralism faces substantial criticism for homogenizing religious diversity. Critics argue that pluralism's idea of an abstract divine "Real" relativizes specific traditions, reducing distinct beliefs about Christ, Krishna, Allah, or Dao to culturally conditioned expressions.[11] However, careful critics have pointed out that pluralism can inadvertently introduce a new kind of intellectual hegemony or "meta-narrative" that undermines the particularity of each religion.[12] By positing that at some abstract level "all religions are saying the same," certain pluralist theories run the risk of essentializing and homogenizing religious differences.[13] Thus, pluralism risks imposing a universal, often Western, intellectual framework onto diverse religions.

Postliberalism/Particularism

Beyond the familiar typology of exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism, a fourth significant paradigm has emerged: the postliberal or particularist approach. Associated especially with the Yale school of postliberal theology (notably George Lindbeck and Hans Frei) and influenced by Wittgensteinian philosophy of language, this approach reacts both to the triumphalism of exclusivism and the abstract universalism of pluralism. In the theological arena, postmodernism's challenge to foundationalism has opened space for particularist theories, which emphasize the unique identities and standpoints of religious traditions. By resisting claims to universal religious truth, postmodern thought has encouraged theologians to revisit and value particularity, thereby addressing the limitations of exclusivist and inclusivist paradigms that dominated earlier discourse.[14]

While postmodernism interrogates the possibility of universal foundations, post-liberal theology takes a different route: seeking to reclaim and renew the confessional narratives of specific religious communities. Influenced by critiques of postmodern relativism, post-liberal thinkers such as George Lindbeck promote a "cultural-linguistic" approach that emphasizes tradition, doctrine, and communal practice as the context for

10 John Hick, "The Non-Absoluteness of Christianity," in *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness*, eds. John Hick and Paul F. Knitter, Faith Meets Faith Series (Orbis Books, 1994), 22.

11 See John Hick, "A Pluralist View," in *More Than One Way*, 43.

12 Nicholson, *Comparative Theology and the Problem of Religious Rivalry*, 28.

13 Nicholson, *Comparative Theology and the Problem of Religious Rivalry*, 29.

14 Serene Jones, *Feminist Theory and Christian Theology: Cartographies of Grace,* Guides to Theological Inquiry (Fortress Press, 2007), 54–71.

theological meaning. This distinction is important, as readers may encounter varying uses of these terms within theological literature. Postliberal particularism understands religious traditions as cultural-linguistic systems, each with unique internal grammar, logic, and communal practices.[15] Drawing from Lindbeck, religions resemble languages or cultures, and theological truth is judged by internal coherence rather than external standards.[16] Doctrines function as guidelines shaping community speech and action, validated by their effectiveness in forming faithful lives.[17] Particularists view each religion as distinct, resisting integration into overarching theories and emphasizing their intrinsic uniqueness. Although this approach respects religious particularity and fosters dialogue on traditions' own terms, it risks relativism by treating religions as isolated, self-contained systems.[18] Therefore, meaningful interfaith dialogue and mutual enrichment become challenging, leading potentially to isolated monologues. These extant approaches to interreligious exchanges have specific epistemological underpinnings that shape them, which the next section will explore.

Epistemological Insights: From Foundationalism to Postfoundationalism

Disagreements about religious diversity are often rooted in deeper epistemological viewpoints that offer differing theories about truth and how we know it. The theology of religions models outlined above each draw (sometimes implicitly) on certain epistemological assumptions. Exclusivism and inclusivism typically presume a form of foundationalism, whereas pluralism correlates with a nonfoundationalist or relativist epistemology. The postliberal particularist approach is broadly anti- or non-foundationalist as well, emphasizing the context-dependence of truth. To move beyond the impasses of these approaches, the postfoundationalist epistemology has sought to integrate insights from both sides, viz., affirming that there is an objective truth (resisting pure relativism) while also affirming that all human grasp of truth is conditioned and partial (resisting naïve absolutism). This section will unpack these terms and chart the trajectory from foundationalism to postfoundationalism, engaging especially the concept of critical realism as a mediating lens.

15 George A. Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine: Religion and Theology in a Postliberal Age*, 25th Anniversary ed. (Westminster John Knox Press, 2009), 21.

16 Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, 40.

17 Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, 47.

18 Lindbeck, *The Nature of Doctrine*, 55.

Foundationalist Epistemology of Exclusivism and Inclusivism

Foundationalism is an epistemological model (with roots in the Enlightenment) that holds that knowledge must be built upon secure, indubitable foundations, i.e., certain basic truths or "givens" which can be known with certainty and upon which other beliefs are justified. In religious terms, a foundationalist approach often treats a particular revelation or set of doctrines as non-negotiable foundations. Within the exclusivist and inclusivist positions, the truth of one's own faith is taken as the unquestionable starting point, the criterion against which other claims are evaluated.[19] Foundationalism's appeal is its clarity and firmness, as it gives believers a confident ground for truth. However, it also tends toward epistemic inflexibility and can downplay the role of interpretation, cultural context, and the development of understanding.

In philosophical critiques (from thinkers such as W.V.O. Quine and Ludwig Wittgenstein, inter alia), classical foundationalism has been largely discredited for failing to account for how knowledge actually works, namely, that our beliefs form a holistic network ("web of belief") rather than a simple linear structure descending from infallible foundations.[20] In theology, foundationalism often coincided with claims of absolute certainty in one's doctrines and a dismissal of others' viewpoints, which are observed in exclusivist paradigms. The limits of foundationalism became evident as theologians encountered genuine insights from other faiths and from modern science and philosophy, challenging the idea that any one human system could possess the entire and inerrant truth.[21]

Nonfoundationalist Epistemology: Pluralism and Postliberal/Particularism

Reacting against the excesses of foundationalism, many 20th-century philosophers and theologians turned to nonfoundationalism (or antifoundationalism), which denies the existence of universal, context-independent foundations for knowledge. Instead, all knowledge is seen as situated, shaped by language, culture, history, and communal belonging. Within the theology of religions, pluralist and postliberal approaches reflect this epistemology. They reject any single, "objective" standpoint,

19 Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religions,* 26.

20 See Willard Van Orman Quine and Joseph S. Ullian, *The Web of Belief* (Random House, 1970).

21 Knitter, *Introducing Theologies of Religions*, 63.

emphasizing instead the plurality of perspectives. Pluralism, in particular, aligns with nonfoundationalist thought by asserting that each religion offers a valid interpretation of ultimate reality, without privileging one tradition's claims as normative. From this view arises the idea of a "subjective multiplicity of knowledge," viz., that truth is always mediated through the interpretive lens of individuals and communities.[22]

Nonfoundationalism emphasizes the fallibility of human knowing and hence implicitly promotes epistemic humility. Our beliefs, shaped by historical and cultural narratives, are neither absolute nor universally binding. This humility is essential to interreligious dialogue, as it facilitates listening and learning rather than judgment rooted in presumed universal truths. For instance, postliberalism's insistence that truth is intrasystemic exemplifies a nonfoundationalist caution toward universalizing truth claims.

Yet, nonfoundationalism in its stronger forms presents challenges. Carried to its extreme, it risks relativism, viz., the view that truth is confined to context, and there is no meaningful reality beyond local interpretations. In religious pluralism, this manifests as the belief that doctrinal differences are merely cultural variations, effectively trivializing the distinct and sometimes conflicting truth-claims of traditions. Dialogue, under such conditions, becomes an exchange of expressions without the possibility of genuine agreement or disagreement. This results in a superficial engagement that avoids grappling with the deeper claims of truth.

Thus, foundationalism and nonfoundationalism—taken in isolation—both pose limits for theology of religions. The former cannot accommodate plurality; the latter struggles to account for the objectivity of truth. Nicholson persuasively argues that genuine interreligious engagement must grapple with the ineluctable dimension of differences and conflicts within religious identity, rather than concealing these dynamics under aspirations toward pure, unconflicted dialogue.[23] The postfoundationalist paradigm endeavors a mediating epistemological trajectory that affirms context and particularity while preserving a meaningful notion of universality and truth.

22 F. LeRon Shults, *The Postfoundationalist Task of Theology: Wolfhart Pannenberg and the New Theological Rationality* (William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1999), 43.

23 Hugh Nicholson, *The Spirit of Contradiction in Christianity and Buddhism* (Oxford University Press, 2016), 61–95. Also see Nicholson, *Comparative Theology and the Problem of Religious Rivalry*, 50–82.

The Postfoundationalist Alternative: Critical Realism and Epistemic Holism

Postfoundationalism, a term popularized in theology by J. Wentzel van Huyssteen, refers to an approach that moves beyond the foundationalism-vs.-nonfoundationalism dichotomy by incorporating the valid concerns of each into a more nuanced framework. The idea is not to return to naïve absolutism, but to critically recover the idea of truth and rational discourse, while fully embracing the contextuality and interpretive nature of all understanding.

The Metaphorical Nature of Foundations

While defining the postfoundationalist alternative, F. LeRon Shults emphasizes the "metaphorical nature" of the term "foundation."[24] He states that we all possess "noetic and hermeneutic foundations" in a general sense on which we "base" our beliefs.[25] Even nonfoundationalists require a "basis," e.g., the belief that "narrative shapes our experience" provides the basis and serves as a "foundation" for them.[26] Furthermore, both foundationalist and nonfoundationalist models contain claims about epistemology and hermeneutics. Foundationalists tend to overprivilege epistemology and downplay interpretation, while nonfoundationalists focus on the hermeneutic side and emphasize the unsustainable nature of the modernist approach, which relies on absolute theory or sensory justification.[27]

Linking Epistemology and Hermeneutics

The postfoundationalist model seeks to integrate epistemology and hermeneutics in a relational unity. As Shults notes, van Huyssteen makes the following observations about postfoundationalism:

> First, it fully acknowledges contextuality, the epistemically crucial role of interpreted experience, and the way that tradition shapes the epistemic and nonepistemic values that inform our reflection about God and what some of

24 Shults, *The Postfoundationalist Task of Theology*, 30.
25 Shults, *The Postfoundationalist Task of Theology*, 30.
26 Shults, *The Postfoundationalist Task of Theology*, 30.
27 Shults, *The Postfoundationalist Task of Theology*, 28.

> us believe to be God's presence in this world. At the same time, however, a postfoundationalist notion of rationality in theological reflection claims to point creatively beyond the confines of the local community, group, or culture towards a form of interdisciplinary conversation.[28]

While taking into account factors such as contextuality, the interpreted nature of human experiences, and traditionally shaped knowledge, the postfoundationalist approach seeks to transcend the limitations of a relativistic conception. It fully acknowledges that all our knowing is contextually embedded ("interpreted experience" is central, as Shults notes[29]) and that our communities and traditions shape our interpretations. At the same time, it is maintained that it is possible to reach beyond the confines of one local community's perspective toward a broader conversation and hence toward truth through rational dialogue and cross-contextual inquiry. Van Huyssteen, for instance, speaks of "transversal" rationality, a kind of interdisciplinary, cross-contextual reasoning that allows different fields (or religions) to collaborate without requiring an absolute universal standpoint, yet also without remaining incommensurable silos.

Critical Realism

A key tool in postfoundationalist theology is critical realism. It was originally developed in the philosophy of science by thinkers like Michael Polanyi and Roy Bhaskar and was later employed by theologians.[30] Critical realism asserts that there is a reality independent of our knowledge (hence realism), but our knowledge of it is always indirect, mediated, and subject to revision (hence critical). Van Huyssteen adopts this view in theological epistemology, suggesting that we can speak of an actual truth (for example, God's reality) while admitting that all our doctrines and models are approximations mediated by human language and experience. He writes: "A critical-realist stand is realistic because [...] it enables us to recognize the referential nature of analogical language as a form of indirect speech. It is also critical, however, because the role of metaphoric language in theology teaches us that models should never be absolutized or ideologized, but should remain

28 J. Wentzel van Huyssteen, *Essays in Postfoundationalist Theology* (Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1997), 4, quoted in Shults, *The Postfoundationalist Task of Theology*, 26.

29 Shults, *The Postfoundationalist Task of Theology*, 44.

30 Roy Bhaskar, *A Realist Theory of Science* (Verso, 1975); Michael Polanyi, *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy* (University of Chicago Press, 1974).

open and provisional."[31] In other words, theology can refer to something real—God, ultimate truth—but it does so using analogies, metaphors, and models drawn from our finite experience. These models genuinely refer (they are not merely self-referential games as extreme postmodernism might imply), yet they never capture the full reality and must be held humbly and conditionally.

John Thatamanil's *Circling the Elephant* positions comparative theology as a transformative engagement across religious boundaries, emphasizing ongoing dialogue and openness to learning from multiple traditions. Thatamanil highlights the value of critical realism, arguing that theological claims must remain provisional and open to revision through interreligious encounter.[32] Paul Hedges, in *Comparative Theology: Critical and Methodological Perspectives and Understanding Religion*, systematically explores the interdependence between comparative theology and theology of religions. Hedges demonstrates that comparative theology enriches and deepens prior frameworks, balancing particularity with constructive pluralism.[33] He also engages with critical realism, advocating for a reflexive, postfoundational approach that is attentive to both theological and methodological debates.

Critique and Recent Developments

While my discussion draws from seminal works by van Huyssteen and Shults, it is crucial to acknowledge recent debates critiquing the appropriation of critical realism in theology. For instance, Fabio Gironi offers a stringent critique of what he terms the "theological hijacking of realism."[34] According to Gironi, the adaptation of critical realism by leading figures in science and religion (e.g., Ian G. Barbour, Arthur R. Peacocke, and John C. Polkinghorne[35]) re-maps a philosophy of science tool intended for

31 J. Wentzel van Huyssteen, *Theology and the Justification of Faith: Constructing Theories in Systematic Theology*, trans. H.F. Snijders (William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1989), 142.

32 John Thatamanil, *Circling the Elephants: A Comparative Theology of Religious Diversity* (Fordham University Press, 2020).

33 Paul Hedges, *Comparative Theology: A Critical and Methodological Perspective* (Brill, 2017), 12–36; Paul Hedges, *Understanding Religion: Theories and Methods for Studying Religiously Diverse Societies* (University of California Press, 2021), 77–101.

34 Fabio Gironi, "The Theological Hijacking of Realism: Critical Realism in 'Science and Religion,'" *Journal of Critical Realism* 11, no. 1 (2012): 40–75.

35 Ian G. Barbour, *Issues in Science and Religion* (Harper & Row, 1966); Arthur R. Peacocke, *Theology for a Scientific Age: Being and Becoming—Natural, Divine, and Human*,

epistemic humility and fallibilism into a defense of theology's ontological and methodological primacy. He argues this often occurs "by reinterpreting the stratification of reality in hierarchical terms, in implicit accord with the trope of a *scala naturae* [...] taking as an *a priori* assumption the existence of a God as the reality which is the object of theological enquiry."[36]

Gironi further cautions that such moves risk instrumentalizing philosophical realism to serve apologetic ends: "This theology-oriented appropriation of critical realism produces a stance that betrays the aims of scientific critical realism," resulting in a "confusion between the epistemic project of the natural sciences and the discipline of theology."[37] He specifically notes that these appropriations often assume, rather than critically examine, the ontological priority of a divine reality—potentially undermining genuine interdisciplinary dialogue.[38]

Gironi's critical perspective raises significant questions about the apologetic appropriation of critical realism within theology, highlighting the risk of presupposing the centrality or priority of a Creator God. However, it is important to recognize that the presence of presuppositional commitments is not unique to theology; scientific inquiry itself is fundamentally shaped by foundational beliefs. Science operates with the tacit assumption of a deterministic and intelligible universe—a belief in the world's orderliness and discoverability—which forms the "faith" context for any empirical investigation or theoretical breakthrough. These philosophical commitments are seldom derived from empirical observation alone and act as the enabling conditions for science's pursuit of knowledge. Thus, while theological discourse may foreground its metaphysical presuppositions, the epistemic foundations of science rest on similarly deep-seated, guiding convictions. This shared reliance on faith-like assumptions in both disciplines invites a more nuanced dialogue between science and theology, as explored in the following section.

rev. ed. (Fortress Press, 1993); John C. Polkinghorne, *Reason and Reality: The Relationship Between Science and Theology* (Trinity Press International, 1991).

36 Gironi, "The Theological Hijacking of Realism," 41.

37 Gironi, "The Theological Hijacking of Realism," 41.

38 Gironi, "The Theological Hijacking of Realism," 55–57.

The Epistemic "Faith" Presupposition of Science, Universal Intent, and Provisionality

Contemporary discussions in the philosophy of science recognize that even the empirical enterprise is undergirded by foundational "faith" assumptions. Albert Einstein, for instance, famously insisted upon the necessity to "believe" in a purposeful, unified world—deterministic enough to render scientific discovery possible. Einstein noted, "First, you must have faith in an eternal world independent of you, then you must have faith in your ability to perceive it, and finally, you must try to explain it utilizing concepts or mathematical constructions."[39] He further regarded humanity's "highest and most sacred duty" as the unification of physical laws, guided by the principle of simplicity. Max Planck similarly affirmed that "the assumption of an absolute determinism is the essential foundation of every scientific inquiry."[40] Such statements reveal the implicit "faith" required to pursue science before empiricism can proceed.

The conception of "universal intent" by Michael Polanyi adds further nuance to this epistemological dynamic. Polanyi, himself a scientist-philosopher, argued that scientists claim universal validity for their discoveries—not on the certainty of truth but as an act of "universal intent," always subject to future falsification.[41] Polanyi observes that "to claim validity for a statement merely declares that it ought to be accepted by all," though its acceptance and truth remain provisional, continuously open to testing and critique. This provisionality is foundational to the scientific method, closely tied to Popper's criterion of falsifiability. Thus, while scientific knowledge is ambitious—seeking universal assent—it is also inherently fallible and tentative, shaped by human finitude.

Both scientific and theological epistemologies, therefore, operate with universal intent and foundational "faith" assumptions. Yet, as Polanyi notes, the grounds differ: Scientific universal intent is rooted in empirical validation and the falsifiability principle, whereas theological universal intent rests upon faith convictions, doctrinal interpretation, and revelatory claims. Recognizing these parallels and distinctions invites humility in both science and theology regarding claims to universal truth and openness to critical reflection and ongoing dialogue.

39 William Hermanns, *Einstein and the Poet: In Search of the Cosmic Man* (Branden Press, 1983), 139.

40 Max Planck quoted in L. Heilbron, *The Dilemmas of an Upright Man: Max Planck and the Fortunes of German Science, With a New Afterword* (Harvard University Press, 2000), 66.

41 Michael Polanyi, *The Tacit Dimension* (University of Chicago Press, 2009), 90–92.

Conceptual Pairs in Postfoundationalism

Shults identifies four conceptual pairs that denote a dialectic relationship between foundationalist and nonfoundationalist priorities:[42]

- Experience and Beliefs
- Truth and Knowledge
- Individual and Community
- Explanation and Understanding

These pairs represent the privileging of specific aspects within the foundationalist and nonfoundationalist paradigms, respectively. The foundationalist paradigm tends to emphasize the priority of belief, singular truth, the individual, and universal understanding. In contrast, the nonfoundationalist approach privileges the significance of experience, contextual knowledge, community, and contextual explanation. Postfoundationalism seeks to reengage them in their dynamic relational unity. It recognizes the relational unity and interdependence between these seemingly opposing priorities, engaging them in a dialectic relationship. By overcoming the limitations of both foundationalist and nonfoundationalist extremes, while harnessing their strengths, postfoundationalism attempts to foster a more comprehensive and inclusive understanding of knowledge, truth, and the complex interplay between the individual and the community. This is particularly relevant within the realm of religious diversity and interreligious dialogue, promoting a balanced and dynamic engagement with different faith traditions.

Shults expounds on the link between these couplets by formulating four postfoundationalist statements. The first, Experience and Beliefs, is defined as: "Interpreted experience engenders and nourishes all beliefs, and a network of beliefs informs the interpretation of experience."[43] While a nonfoundationalist construal of rationality would argue that experiences are "embedded in networks of belief and that this linguistically shaped 'web' limits and mediates all experience,"[44] foundationalists, on the other hand, tend to "justify beliefs by appealing to their groundedness in experience (whether conceptual or sensual)."[45] How are we to understand the relation between our beliefs and our experience? Is there a balance

42 Shults, *The Postfoundationalist Task of Theology*, 43–70.

43 Shults, *The Postfoundationalist Task of Theology*, 44.

44 Shults, *The Postfoundationalist Task of Theology*, 45.

45 Shults, *The Postfoundationalist Task of Theology*, 44.

between the foundationalist stress on the "basis of experience" and the nonfoundationalist emphasis on the "web of belief"? Shults, citing van Huysteen, contends that because our relation to the world is only through the "mediation of interpreted experience," we are "always limited in perspective, in focus, and in experiential scope."[46] Van Huyssteen further notes: "[B]eliefs are both brought to experience and derived from it, and our interpreted experience thus becomes the matrix within which meaning and knowledge arise."[47]

Postfoundationalism attempts to locate our epistemic quest in reciprocity between beliefs that are generated within historically and culturally conditioned human experiences and the interpretation of such experiences that is, in turn, informed by the beliefs we hold. This reciprocal relationship between beliefs and experience is at the heart of the postfoundationalist approach, which seeks to navigate the tensions between the foundationalist emphasis on the primacy of experience and the nonfoundationalist emphasis on the influence of our pre-existing beliefs and conceptual frameworks.

Schulz's second conceptual pair, Truth and Knowledge, is defined as: "The objective unity of truth is a necessary condition for the intelligible search for knowledge, and the subjective multiplicity of knowledge indicates the fallibility of truth claims."[48] The classical foundationalist emphasized the need for certain and objective knowledge of the truth, while the nonfoundationalist perspective highlighted the apparent plurality of knowledge claims that are subjective and contextually bound, seemingly repudiating the possibility of truth independent of the subject.

The postfoundationalist model seeks to hold these tensions in a more nuanced way, recognizing that the objective unity of truth is a necessary condition for the meaningful and coherent pursuit of knowledge, even as all human knowledge remains provisional and fallible.[49] The intelligibility and fallibility of knowledge are explicated in light of "critical realism." Van Huyssteen articulates the postfoundationalist perspective within the matrix of critical realism, saying:

> A critical-realist stand is realistic because, in the process of theological theorizing, this concept enables us to recognize

46 van Huyssteen, *Essays in Postfoundationalist Theology*, 20, quoted in Shults, *The Postfoundationalist Task of Theology*, 44–45.

47 van Huyssteen, *Essays in Postfoundationalist Theology*, 20, quoted in Shults, *The Postfoundationalist Task of Theology*, 45.

48 Shults, *The Postfoundationalist Task of Theology*, 50.

49 Shults, *The Postfoundationalist Task of Theology*, 50–2.

> the cognitive and referential nature of analogical language as a form of indirect speech. It is also critical, however, because the role of metaphoric language in theology would teach us those models should never be absolutized or ideologized, but should retain their openness and provisionality throughout the process of theorizing.[50]

The postfoundationalist model rightfully acknowledges the provisionality of all human knowledge through the critical realist conception. However, it emphasizes "intelligibility" in order to accommodate the foundationalist intuitions about truth as an ideal, without which any pursuit of knowledge is possible.[51] The postfoundationalist paradigm seeks to navigate the complex relationship between truth and knowledge, recognizing both the objective unity of truth as a necessary condition for the intelligible pursuit of knowledge and the subjective multiplicity of knowledge claims that reflect the fallibility of human understanding. This approach embraces a critical realist stance, which acknowledges the objective reality of God's self-disclosure, affirming that God's self-disclosure corresponds to an objective reality, while also recognizing that human knowledge of this reality is inevitably mediated—through language, culture, and context—and thus remains fallible.

The third conceptual pair that Shulz names, Individual and Community, is defined as follows: "[R]ational judgment is an activity of socially situated individuals, and the cultural community indeterminately mediates the criteria of rationality."[52] Foundationalism tends to privilege individuals as the sole source of "Reason," while nonfoundationalism overemphasizes the postmodern critique of individualism and the communal nature of rationality.[53] However, the postfoundationalist approach seeks to maintain a balance between these two extremes. It acknowledges that rational judgment is indeed an activity of socially situated individuals, but also affirms that the cultural community indeterminately mediates the criteria of rationality.[54] As articulated by van Huyssteen, rationality involves a dynamic interplay between the individual agent who makes the actual rational judgments and the cultural-historical community that shapes the interpretative frameworks and standards of rationality. The individual is not completely autonomous

50 van Huyssteen, *Theology and the Justification of Faith*, 142, quoted in Shults, *The Postfoundationalist Task of Theology*, 51.

51 Shults, *The Postfoundationalist Task of Theology*, 50, 56–57.

52 Shults, *The Postfoundationalist Task of Theology*, 60.

53 Shults, *The Postfoundationalist Task of Theology*, 59.

54 Shults, *The Postfoundationalist Task of Theology*, 60.

or independent, as their rationality is influenced by the communal context. At the same time, the individual is not just a passive product of their community, as they can engage in self-differentiation and critically evaluate the norms and criteria of their group.[55]

Thus, the nonfoundationalist stress on community-inspired interpretation and the foundationalist intuition that it is the individual who really makes a rational judgment are maintained in balance.[56] This view avoids the absolutism of classical foundationalism, which overstates the role of the individual, as well as the radical relativism of nonfoundationalism, which downplays the importance of the individual rational agent. Instead, the postfoundationalist paradigm sees the individual and the community as mutually conditioning components in the shaping of one's rationality.[57] The individual's personal voice and agency are recognized and affirmed, even as they are situated within and shaped by the cultural-historical context. This balanced approach allows for a more comprehensive and inclusive understanding of the complex relationship between the individual and the community in the realm of knowledge, truth, and religious diversity.

Explanation and Understanding, Shulz's fourth conceptual pair, is explained in the following manner: "Explanation aims for universal, transcontextual understanding, and understanding derives from particular contextualized explanations."[58] The philosopher Wilhelm Dilthey initially proposed a clear demarcation between *Erklärung* (explanation) and *Verstehen* (understanding) as distinct modes of inquiry.[59] The foundationalist approach, following the model of the natural sciences, attempts to offer absolute, universal explanations that are believed to emerge by following definite, context-independent rules. In contrast, the nonfoundationalist perspective holds on to the primacy of *Verstehen* and confines the scope of theology to just understanding, rooted in particular traditions with their own criteria of coherence.[60] This nonfoundationalist approach conceives understanding as being rooted in particular traditions (contexts) with their own criteria of

55 J. Wentzel van Huyssteen, *The Shaping of Rationality: Toward Interdisciplinarity in Theology and Science* (William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1999), 150, quoted in Shults, *The Postfoundationalist Task of Theology*, 60.

56 Shults, *The Postfoundationalist Task of Theology*, 60–61.

57 Shults, *The Postfoundationalist Task of Theology*, 61.

58 Shults, *The Postfoundationalist Task of Theology*, 69.

59 Shults, *The Postfoundationalist Task of Theology*, 67.

60 Shults, *The Postfoundationalist Task of Theology*, 67–68.

coherence and thus denies the possibility of an all-encompassing explanation that defies any such tradition-specific context.[61]

In response, the postfoundationalist paradigm rejects the rigid methodological opposition between "human" and "natural" sciences and instead stresses the mutual conditioning and interplay between the two movements of explanation and understanding in human rationality.[62] By bringing theology and the natural sciences into a constructive dialogue, the postfoundationalist model sees significant overlaps and resemblances between them. As van Huyssteen observes, in all sciences, including theology, "the subjectivity of interpreting belongs right in the heart of the explanatory task."[63] However, this need not lead to an anxious relativism but rather signals the "ongoing rational reconstruction" of our understanding.[64]

Following van Huysteen's lead, Shults elaborates further that theological explanations are an attempt to establish "a link between the inherited beliefs and practices of a specific religious tradition and the contemporary experience of its adherents."[65] Thus, the task of theology is both to understand the particular contextual horizon and to offer explanations that resonate with and illuminate that horizon. As Calvin Schrag conceives it, Shults asserts that "understanding" and "explanation" are "twin tasks in a discursive event, understanding as we explain and explaining as we understand."[66] The postfoundationalist paradigm thus avoids the absolutism of foundationalism and the radical relativism of nonfoundationalism, offering a more comprehensive and inclusive understanding of the relationship between the individual and the community in the realm of knowledge, truth, and religious diversity.

Thus, postfoundationalist epistemology acknowledges the full contextuality of human knowledge, our perspectives being limited by culture, language, and history, while refusing to abandon the transcontextual pursuit of truth. It is an approach of critical openness—open to new information

61 Shults, *The Postfoundationalist Task of Theology*, 68.

62 Shults, *The Postfoundationalist Task of Theology*, 68.

63 van Huyssteen, "Theology and Science: The Quest for a New Apologetics," in *Essays in Postfoundationalist Theology*, 232, quoted in Shults, *The Postfoundationalist Task of Theology*, 69.

64 Shults, *The Postfoundationalist Task of Theology*, 69.

65 van Huyssteen, "Theology and Science," in *Essays in Postfoundationalist Theology*, 234, quoted in Shults, *The Postfoundationalist Task of Theology*, 69.

66 Shults, *The Postfoundationalist Task of Theology*, 70, in reference to Calvin O. Schrag, *The Resources of Rationality: A Response to the Postmodern Challenge* (Indiana University Press, 1992), 86

and other viewpoints, yet critical in assessing claims against experience and reason. This epistemological stance is especially promising for interreligious dialogue. It provides a framework where one can be committed to a belief in universal truth (realism) without the presumption that an individual alone or one particular community alone possesses it fully (critical humility). Such an attitude is a prerequisite for fruitful comparative theology.

Having explored the epistemological landscape underlying existing models of interreligious engagement—ranging from the absolutist tendencies of foundationalism in exclusivist and inclusivist approaches to the relativistic implications of nonfoundationalism in pluralist and postliberal paradigms—it is clear that each model struggles to adequately balance the particularity of religious traditions with their aspirations for universal truth. The preceding section has introduced postfoundationalism as an epistemic framework capable of navigating these tensions, recognizing both the contextual nature of religious knowledge and the possibility of meaningfully seeking a shared truth. With this groundwork in place, it is fitting now to turn to comparative theology, a contemporary practice that emerges precisely in response to limitations inherent in earlier models. Comparative theology is committed to deep interreligious learning through careful engagement with the particularities of distinct traditions. Yet it has faced challenges due to its ambiguous epistemological foundations. The following section will introduce the methodological developments in comparative theology and argue that integrating a postfoundationalist epistemology offers a coherent framework necessary to address these limitations, thereby proposing a robust new paradigm for interfaith dialogue through postfoundationalist comparative theology.

Comparative Theology in Contemporary Practice

Comparative theology, as a mode of interreligious dialogue, seeks to balance commitment to one's home tradition while celebrating differences and particularities in other religious traditions.[67] The emergence of comparative theology reflects discontent with the *a priori* judgments common in older models of theology of religions. As James L. Fredericks critiques, exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism each function as ways of maintaining theological distance: They construct frameworks about other religions without engaging

67 Francis X. Clooney, *Comparative Theology: Deep Learning Across Religious Borders* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 3.

them deeply.[68] These frameworks often allowed Christians to bypass the hard work of real encounter, reducing other faiths to simplified objects of theological classification. Also, unlike the theology of religions, which aims for general comparisons, comparative theology focuses on specific topics and texts. As Hugh Nicholson observes, it challenges the impulse to formulate theories about religious others prior to genuine engagement with their sources.[69] It demands that theologians execute a detailed comparison first, and only then reflect theologically. This shift foregrounds actual interreligious learning rather than abstract posturing.

Scholars continue to debate the precise relationship between comparative theology and the theology of religions. While early proponents of comparative theology, such as Francis X. Clooney, sometimes argued that their field transcends established typologies, more recent critiques have highlighted the polemical and strategic dimensions of these claims.[70] While Paul Hedges suggests that Clooney's tendency to identify as an inclusivist may partly reflect the institutional context of Catholic theology, even as much of his comparative work points toward pluralist or dialogical approaches.[71] It is now widely recognized that comparative theology builds upon insights and frameworks established in the theology of religions, contributing both methodological depth and conceptual richness.[72] For example, Schmidt-Leukel and Hedges have demonstrated that comparative theology's inquiry is grounded in prior theological reflection on religious diversity.[73] Recent scholarship continues to integrate these fields and explore their fruitful intersection.

Faith Seeking Understanding

Clooney defines comparative theology as "faith seeking understanding across religious boundaries."[74] It affirms that meaningful interfaith engagement requires immersion in the concrete and complex realities of another tradition. The theologian remains firmly rooted in her confessional identity but enters into learning relationships with other religious texts

68 James Lee Fredericks, *Faith Among Faiths: Christian Theology and Non-Christian Religions* (Paulist Press, 1999), 115.

69 Nicholson, *Comparative Theology and the Problem of Religious Rivalry*, 29.

70 See Clooney, *Comparative Theology*.

71 See Paul Hedges, *Controversies in Interreligious Dialogue*.

72 See Paul Hedges, *Comparative Theology*.

73 Perry Schmidt-Leukel, *Transformation by Integration*.

74 Clooney, *Comparative Theology*, 10.

and experiences in ways that may enrich, challenge, or even transform her understanding of faith. As a theological approach, comparative theology seeks to understand one's own faith tradition in dialogue with other religious traditions, and it involves focused engagement with specific elements of other traditions—texts, doctrines, rituals, or ethical practices—with the aim of gaining theological insight both from and for one's own tradition. Comparative theology emphasizes the locatedness of the theologian and avoids abstract theorizing about religious truth. It acknowledges the provisionality of all theological conceptions and the particularity of individual perspectives within broader religious communities.

The Task of Comparative Theology

Comparative theology often begins with close textual study. Clooney's comparative reading of Christian and Hindu theological texts—especially in the Śrīvaiṣṇava tradition—is a model of the method. He reads, for instance, a Hindu commentary on the Bhagavad Gītā alongside Christian theological writings, seeking both thematic resonances and dissonances.[75] The purpose is not to create a harmonized synthesis, but to allow one tradition's insight to illuminate or question the other. Yet the method extends beyond texts. Comparative theology has increasingly included ritual, aesthetics, embodiment, ethics, and lived religious experiences as sites of theological reflection. Michelle Voss Roberts, for example, explores how Hindu and Christian aesthetics and embodied devotional practices can inform one another.[76] This broadening of method reflects an underlying theological conviction: that truth is not confined to doctrine but is mediated through experience, practice, and beauty. Thus, comparative theology becomes a multisensory and dialogical pursuit. Methodologically, Nicholson highlights the importance of self-reflexivity and ethical accountability in comparative theological work, insisting that practitioners attend to their own normative positions and the risk of unacknowledged pluralism or exclusion.[77] Whether through scriptural study, contemplative engagement with ritual, or participation in interfaith relationships and discourse, the comparative theologian seeks to discern God's self-disclosure amid religious difference.

75 See Francis X. Clooney, *Beyond Compare: St. Francis de Sales and Śrī Vedānta Deśika on Loving Surrender to God* (Georgetown University Press, 2008).

76 Michelle Voss Roberts, *Tastes of the Divine: Hindu and Christian Theologies of Emotion*, Comparative Theology: Thinking Across Traditions (Fordham University Press, 2014).

77 See Nicholson, *Comparative Theology and the Problem of Religious Rivalry*, 50–82.

Commitments: Confession and Openness

Comparative theology is grounded in a commitment to one's own faith tradition while also respecting and affirming the truths and values of other traditions. It responds to the needs of the contemporary world and involves a willingness to engage with the truth claims of the "Other."[78] It represents an act of "faith seeking understanding" that ventures into learning from multiple faith traditions.[79] Nicholson describes this confessional openness as one of the hallmarks of comparative theology.[80] It is a posture of integrity and vulnerability as the theologian brings her full faith commitments into the dialogue, but while being open to surprise, correction, and transformation. The fruit of this learning is theological enrichment. For instance, Christian reflection on divine kenosis might deepen when placed in dialogue with Buddhist teachings on emptiness. Or, encountering Islamic insistence on *tawḥīd* may provoke more robust articulations of Christian monotheism and the Trinitarian mystery. The insights gained are not extraneous add-ons but internal developments within the theologian's own confessional framework. As John Thatamanil emphasizes, comparative theology entails learning not just about, but with and from, other religious traditions.[81]

Limitations

While comparative theology significantly advances interfaith dialogue by prioritizing deep engagement with the particularities of religious traditions, it has not entirely escaped critique. One major limitation lies in its epistemological ambiguity, risking reduction to anecdotal exchanges without clear criteria for cross-contextual learning or truth evaluation. Critics highlight comparative theology's potential drift toward subtle forms of inclusivism, wherein religious traditions may unintentionally be interpreted primarily through the theologian's own confessional lens, subordinating distinct voices of other faiths. Furthermore, comparative theologians such as Catherine Cornille, Clooney, and others propose "multiple religious belonging," a notion that implicitly conveys a pluralistic

78 Fredericks, *Faith Among Faiths*, 52-53.

79 Clooney, Comparative Theology, 10.

80 Nicholson, "The New Comparative Theology," 64.

81 John J. Thatamanil, *The Immanent Divine: God, Creation and the Human Predicament* (Fortress Press, 2006), 3.

conception of religions.[82] This pluralistic inclination introduces structural risks to the particular claims of the theologian's home tradition, especially when attempting to synthesize inassimilable claims from other traditions. Comparative theology's struggle to maintain equilibrium between the particularity and universality of individual faith assertions evolves from the fact that it attempts to synthesize religious differences through such pluralistic tendencies.

Adopting a postfoundationalist epistemology effectively addresses these concerns. By explicitly recognizing the contextual yet universal intent of religious knowledge, postfoundationalism provides comparative theology with necessary epistemic clarity and coherence. It safeguards against both relativism and subtle inclusivism by respecting the autonomy and integrity of each tradition's particular claims, while still affirming the meaningful possibility of truth emerging through comparative reflection. Thus, postfoundationalism significantly strengthens comparative theology's capacity to genuinely honor differences while engaging in transformative, truth-seeking dialogue.

Toward a Theologically Grounded Method

The comparative theology approach emphasizes the importance of recognizing parity among different religious belief systems, valuing the particularity of each tradition and acknowledging the universal claims within each tradition. It recognizes that each religious tradition has unique perspectives, practices, and understandings that should be respected and affirmed rather than subsumed under a single, universal framework. These priorities of comparative theology are grounded in a coherent epistemic framework that sustains the plurality, particularity, and universality of religions. As mentioned earlier, comparative theology lacks a clear epistemological grounding to eschew ambiguities in its engagement. While the method emphasizes humility, contextuality, and openness, it has not always provided a coherent account of how knowledge is possible across traditions. Without such a framework, comparative theology risks being reckoned as anecdotal or uncritical. Also, the balance between the particularities and universalities of religious traditions ought to be maintained within the comparative exchanges.

82 Catherine Cornille, ed. *Many Mansions?: Multiple Religious Belonging and Christian Identity* (Orbis, 2002).

The postfoundationalist epistemological framework underscores the significance of comparative theology as a means of deepening one's understanding of different religious perspectives. As explored in earlier sections, postfoundationalism integrates the insights of both foundationalist and nonfoundationalist models. It affirms the contextual, fallible, and tradition-bound nature of human knowing, yet affirms the objectivity of truth, even if only partially grasped. This framework seeks to establish parity, particularity, and universality in interreligious dialogues. It respects the distinctiveness of each religious tradition, allowing for a more genuine and respectful engagement with their unique truth claims. Through a postfoundationalist lens, comparative theology can engage with the similarities, dissimilarities, and inassimilable differences between religions without attempting to synthesize these differences into a forced unity.

A comparative theological learning across religious boundaries, rooted within a postfoundationalist epistemology, recognizes that each tradition offers valuable insights and perspectives that contribute to the broader understanding of religious truth. By acknowledging both the particularity of individual faiths and their universal aspirations, the postfoundationalist framework fosters a more inclusive and dynamic dialogue. Whereas pluralist models often collapse particularities into abstract commonality and postliberal approaches risk incommensurability, the postfoundationalist approach affirms both particularity and trans-contextual learning. It provides a rational warrant for the comparative theologian's confidence that truth can emerge in the space between traditions, not by erasing difference, but by cultivating a hospitable space for mutual interpretation.

Thus, comparative theology, grounded in postfoundationalist epistemology, becomes a theologically rigorous and dialogically fruitful paradigm for interfaith engagement. It upholds difference without division, embraces learning without domination, and seeks truth without totalizing claims. In the next section, the postfoundationalist insights previously developed will be employed to formulate a postfoundationalist comparative Christology. This theological approach will explore how the central Christian claim of Christ's particularity may be held in dialogue with other religious truth claims, without collapsing into relativism or exclusion. In doing so, it will exemplify the kind of robust, humble, and dialogical theology made possible by the convergence of comparative and postfoundationalist methods.

Postfoundationalist Comparative Christology: The Creative Dialectic Relationship

In my book, *A Postfoundationalist Comparative Christology*, I develop Shults's four conceptual pairs (discussed above) and reorder them (individual-community, experiences-beliefs, explanation-understanding, and knowledge-truth) in order to propose a postfoundationalist comparative theology.[83] Against the backdrop of late-modern challenges—relativism, pluralism, and the erosion of traditional epistemic certainties—I propose a framework that neither succumbs to rigid foundationalism nor drifts into uncritical relativism. By emphasizing the interplay between tradition-constituted belief and critical reflection, I offer a model of dialogue that remains faithful to each faith's internal coherence while opening avenues for genuine cross-tradition learning.

Central to my approach is the conviction that theological inquiry must acknowledge its own mediated, fallible character without abandoning the quest for insight and transformation. Drawing on the critical realist epistemology of thinkers like Michael Polanyi, I contend that our claims about ultimate reality are always provisional and context-bound, yet they carry an "universal intent" grounded in communal practices of reasoned debate, historical memory, and embodied worship.[84] This perspective allows comparative theologians to hold in tension the particularity of their home traditions and the aspiration toward shared human flourishing. Shults's four postfoundationalist couplets give this model structure and depth.

Step One on the Postfoundationalist Epistemic Journey: Individual Rational Agent and the Faith Community

The progression begins with the dynamic interplay between the individual and the community. In an individual's quest for truth, the locatedness of an individual within a specific faith community signals the particularity of a theologian as she attempts interreligious interaction. The postfoundationalist paradigm recognizes that one's sense of self, agency, and rationality is shaped by the socio-cultural-historical context of the community one belongs to, even as the individual's personal voice and agency are affirmed

83 David Muthukumar Sivasubramanian, *A Postfoundationalist Comparative Christology: Parity, Particularity, and Universality in Indian Interreligious Dialogues* (Lexington Books and Fortress Academic, 2022).

84 Polanyi, *The Tacit Dimension*.

in this process. At the core of this paradigm is the acknowledgment that the individual is not an isolated, autonomous entity but is influenced by, and also influences, the environment in which one exists. This lays the groundwork for the next step, which is the relationship between experience and belief.

Step Two on the Postfoundationalist Epistemic Journey: Interpreted Experience and Transcendental Beliefs

The postfoundationalist perspective situates one's epistemic journey within the reciprocal dynamic between individual beliefs shaped by historically and culturally situated human experiences and the interpretations of those experiences informed by the transcendental beliefs and practices embedded within a particular community. This mutually reinforcing relationship between personal beliefs and the interpretative frameworks provided by the immediate social context lies at the core of the postfoundationalist approach. It navigates the tensions between the foundationalist emphasis on the primacy of individual experience and the nonfoundationalist emphasis on the inevitability of our pre-existing conceptual frameworks rooted in communal traditions.

Step Three on the Postfoundationalist Epistemic Journey: Contextual Explanation and Universal Understanding

Building on this, the third pair of explanation and understanding highlights the complementary and mutually conditioning nature of these two modes of inquiry. Theological explanations emerge not from abstract, universal rules but from a hermeneutical engagement with the particular contextual horizon. Theological explanations seek to establish a link between the inherited beliefs and practices of a specific religious tradition and the contemporary experiences of its adherents. In this way, the task of theology is both to understand the particular contextual horizon and to offer explanations that resonate with and illuminate that horizon. At the same time, understanding is enhanced through the process of explanation, as it illuminates and resonates with the lived experience of the tradition's adherents.

Step Four on the Postfoundationalist Epistemic Journey: Objective Unity of Truth and Subjective Multiplicity of Knowledge

Finally, this dynamic interplay culminates in the relationship between knowledge and truth. The postfoundationalist approach avoids the extremes of foundationalist claims to universal, context-transcendent truth, as well as the nonfoundationalist retreat to purely particularistic, tradition-bound knowledge. Instead, it sees knowledge and truth as an ongoing "rational reconstruction" that emerges from the creative tension between the universal and the particular, the individual and the community.

In this framework, truth is not seen as an abstract, immutable entity detached from human experience but rather as something that is continually shaped and reshaped through engagement with diverse perspectives. This dynamic process allows for a richer and more inclusive understanding of truth that respects the particularities of different faith traditions while also seeking common ground. The objective unity of truth provides a foundation for coherence and intelligibility in interreligious dialogues. It affirms that, despite our differing contexts and experiences, there is a shared quest for this objective reality of Truth. Simultaneously, the subjective multiplicity of knowledge acknowledges that our insights are inevitably influenced by our specific cultural, historical, and personal contexts. This multiplicity is not a weakness but a strength, as it brings a diversity of perspectives that enriches each of our individual quests for truth.

Step Five on the Postfoundationalist Epistemic Journey: Application to Comparative Theology

Situated within the broader discipline of comparative theology—where scholars immerse themselves in another faith's texts, practices, and beliefs to enrich their own tradition—the postfoundationalist framework offers both a map and a set of trajectories. Traditional comparative theology rightly emphasizes empathy, accurate portrayal of "the other," and creative reflection back into one's home tradition. But it can at times drift into relativism (treating all claims as equally valid) or syncretism (fusing disparate doctrines without proper distinction).

By framing the four postfoundationalist couplets into four phases of encounter, postfoundationalist comparative theology structures interreligious dialogue under four categories as listed below that neither collapses differences nor erects impermeable barriers. These four phases thus function as signposts that guide participants from initial mutual recognition, through disciplined learning across difference, toward deeper transformation and responsible witness, enabling interfaith dialogue that is both theologically serious and genuinely open to the other. The phases I introduce in *A Postfoundationalist Comparative Christology* are autobiographical, confessional, progressive epistemic quest, and parallel truth quest.[85]

1. *Autobiographical (Individual and Community)*[86]

Comparative theology sometimes treats the theologian as an autonomous "expert" sampling exotic doctrines. The autobiographical phase insists that every theologian is first an individual situated within a community. The meaning-making for the individual arises from shared patterns of worship, doctrine, and practice. Acknowledging this autobiographical locatedness prevents the researcher from "objectifying" other traditions or attempting any universally applicable generalizations.

2. *Confessional (Experience and Beliefs)*[87]

Many comparative projects begin with sacred texts and then infer lived practice. The confessional phase reverses and synthesizes: We enter first into the experience of a tradition—its rituals, narratives, and spiritual practices—and only then articulate the beliefs that make sense of those encounters. This cross-learning into another religious tradition is done through the eyes of an adherent of that faith tradition, and the comparative theologian is expected to authentically maintain such confessional assertions. This honors other religions, recognizing that knowledge is not merely propositional but also embodied, and avoids both a foundationalist appeal to "pure" experience and a nonfoundationalist dismissal of experience as merely "socially constructed."

85 Sivasubramanian, *A Postfoundationalist Comparative Christology*, 72
86 Sivasubramanian, *A Postfoundationalist Comparative Christology*, 72.
87 Sivasubramanian, *A Postfoundationalist Comparative Christology*, 72.

3. *Progressive Epistemic Quest (Explanation and Understanding)*[88]

Where standard comparative work can veer toward detached analysis or anecdotal empathy, the Progressive Epistemic Quest holds explanation and understanding in dynamic tension. Explanation deploys critical tools—historical, linguistic, systematic—to clarify how a truth claims functions. Understanding emerges when that explanation resonates with both the other tradition and our own, judged by whether it illuminates lived realities. This interplay prevents shallow analogies and fosters genuine dialogical appropriation.

4. *Parallel Truth Quest (Truth and Knowledge)*[89]

Finally, rather than claiming either universal, context-free truth or retreating into isolated, tradition-bound knowledge, the parallel truth quest sees both as mutually conditioning. Each tradition's truth claims press us toward an objective unity—a coherent ground of reality beyond our symbols—while our situated knowledge remains finite, inflected by culture, history, and personal vocation. This creative tension fuels ongoing "rational reconstructions," where mutual critique and reciprocal learning generate thicker, more robust accounts of ultimate reality without dissolving particularities.

Postfoundationalist Comparative Theology: A New Paradigm for Interfaith Dialogue

Postfoundationalist comparative theology proposes a new paradigm for interfaith dialogue by articulating a coherent epistemological framework that overcomes the limitations of exclusivism, inclusivism, pluralism, and strict particularism. Grounded in postfoundationalist epistemology, this paradigm is constituted by three interlocking tenets—epistemic parity, theological particularity, and intentional universality (drawing on Polanyi's notion of "universal intent")—which together aim to secure both the integrity of each religious tradition and the pursuit of truth that is accountable to all interlocutors in transformative interreligious encounter.[90]

88 Sivasubramanian, *A Postfoundationalist Comparative Christology*, 74.
89 Sivasubramanian, *A Postfoundationalist Comparative Christology*, 76.
90 Polanyi, *The Tacit Dimension*.

Epistemic Parity

Epistemic parity insists that every religious tradition is approached respectfully as an autonomous, internally coherent epistemic ecosystem. Traditions are studied according to their internal logic, practices, and contexts, rather than measured against external normative standards. Such parity does not devolve into relativism, however, as dialogue remains critically reflective, including honest evaluations both within and between traditions. Comparative theologians thus maintain openness to discovering genuine insights within other traditions while remaining critically engaged from within their own.

Theological Particularity

The second pillar emphasizes preserving the integrity and distinctiveness of religious truth claims. Comparative theology does not seek artificial syntheses but rather encourages respectful engagement with deeply held differences. Scholars fully inhabit the conceptual frameworks of other traditions, such as Hindu Vedanta's non-dual metaphysics or Islamic conceptions of divine revelation, without diminishing or trivializing them. Recognizing irreconcilable doctrines, like Christian Trinitarianism and Islamic *tawḥīd*, comparative theology explores the productive tensions between traditions, using these tensions to foster deeper theological reflection and mutual understanding.

Universality and the Shared Quest for Truth

A carefully articulated universality acknowledges that, despite profound doctrinal differences, all religions orient themselves toward the same ultimate reality. Each tradition's claims carry a universal intent, aspiring to articulate truth that transcends particular cultural or historical contexts. This universality emerges not as a simplistic homogenization but as a shared pursuit of deeper truths. Clooney's concept of "holy envy" illustrates how insights from another tradition can powerfully resonate within one's own, triggering fresh theological insights. Through continuous dialogue characterized by humility and openness, postfoundationalist comparative theology promotes an ongoing mutual quest toward universal truths without collapsing distinct religious particularities.

A Paradigm for Transformative Engagement

ostfoundationalist comparative theology reframes interfaith dialogue as a rigorous and transformative journey, rather than merely an intellectual exchange or debate. By holding epistemic parity, theological particularity, and intentional universality together, this paradigm cultivates genuine transformation. Scholars remain deeply anchored in their home traditions while openly engaging with insights from others, embracing mutual enrichment and growth. In doing so, postfoundationalist comparative theology creates an epistemologically robust space that respects diversity, deepens understanding, and invites theologians toward richer, more holistic apprehensions of ultimate reality.

Conceptualizing Faith Traditions as Epistemic Ecosystems

The postfoundationalist paradigm conceptualizes each faith tradition as a self-contained epistemic ecosystem. This approach upholds epistemic parity by respecting the autonomy and integrity of every tradition, thereby fostering genuine learning across religious boundaries.

Sustaining Epistemic Parity

The individual's quest for truth takes place within the distinct epistemic ecosystem of a particular religious tradition, each with its unique beliefs, universal truth claims, and internal criteria for evaluating these claims. The postfoundationalist paradigm conceptualizes religious traditions as internally coherent systems, each sustained by core doctrinal grammars—for instance, Christianity's doctrines of incarnation and resurrection, Islam's principles of *tawḥīd* and prophecy, or Buddhism's teachings on suffering and liberation. By affirming the autonomy and internal coherence of each tradition, this approach maintains epistemic parity among religions, resisting both the privileging and relativization of any single tradition.

Respecting Autonomy and Integrity

Respecting the autonomy and integrity of each tradition, the postfoundationalist perspective refrains from reducing religious particularities to a single universal schema or relativizing distinct truth claims. Instead, it emphasizes maintaining both the uniqueness and universal aspirations within each tradition. By affirming this dual dimension—acknowledging both situated particularity and universal intent—it offers a balanced framework that avoids extremes of exclusivism or relativism, facilitating genuine interfaith dialogue rooted in mutual respect and critical appreciation.

Learning from Another Religion

For the comparative theologian, genuine learning requires empathetically entering another tradition's epistemic ecosystem through the eyes of its adherents, preserving the integrity of its faith claims. Understanding a religious tradition involves engaging its entire conceptual spectrum rather than isolated doctrines, as seen in Christianity's full narrative arc from incarnation to ascension. By authentically inhabiting these epistemic worlds, theologians gain deeper appreciation and nuanced insight without artificially synthesizing distinct beliefs, thus cultivating a more robust, respectful, and transformative dialogue across religious boundaries.

Conclusion

This essay has advanced a postfoundationalist comparative theology that critically engages the diverse landscape of theology of religions while remaining attentive to recent critiques and methodological developments. By reflecting on the epistemic presuppositions of both science and theology, the nuanced evolution of typological frameworks, and the complex interplay between particularist and pluralist perspectives, I have sought to contribute a dialogically robust and theologically self-critical paradigm for contemporary interreligious engagement.

Going forward, comparative theologians are called to remain reflexive about the tensions and possibilities within their field, drawing upon critical realism and methodological humility to promote genuine dialogue. Only through vigilant attention to irreconcilable differences, potential conflicts, and constructive relationality can comparative theology realize its promise at the forefront of theological reflection in a pluralistic world.

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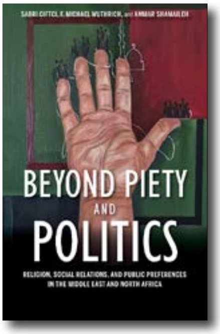
BOOK REVIEW

Beyond Piety and Politics: Religion, Social Relations, and Public Preferences in the Middle East and North Africa.

By Sabri Ciftci, F. Michael Wuthrich, and Ammar Shamaileh. Bloomington. Indiana University Press, 2022. xv + 251 pp. ISBN 978-0-253-06275-8 (hardcover); 978-0-253-06276-5 (paperback); 978-0-253-06274-1 (e-book). $70.00 (hardcover); $28.00 (paperback); $27.99 (e-book).



The book's central argument is that simplistic, monolithic measures of religiosity can fundamentally obscure the internal pluralism existing among devout Muslims. This oversight, often rooted in Orientalist and essentialist scholarship, can lead to partial analyses and problematic policy decisions. The book offers a response to these assumptions, arguing that understanding the diverse religious outlooks of individuals is crucial for comprehending the complex interplay between Islam and politics.

The authors illustrate this basic problem using examples from Turkey and Egypt. They introduce figures like Adnan Oktar, a televangelist blending conservative Islamic rhetoric with sexually provocative imagery, in sharp contrast to the traditionalist Cübbeli Ahmet Hoca. Similarly, the "leftist Islamist" Ahsan Eliaçık, an opponent of the ruling AK Party, stands alongside these figures. In Egypt, Amr Khaled's tolerant preaching differs from his Salafi counterparts and the militant Hisham Ashmawi. As the authors highlight, despite vastly different social, economic, and political preferences, all these individuals and their followers identify as deeply pious. This raises the book's core question: how can such significant nuances in the religious identity of these individuals be captured using conventional measures, and what significance do these distinctions hold for understanding their attitudes and behavior (27)?

The book's structure systematically unpacks its central argument across eight chapters, following an insightful Introduction and preceding a concise Conclusion. Chapter 1, "Religious Communities, the State, and

Religious Outlooks," lays the theoretical groundwork by arguing that religion influences preferences relationally through dynamics between religious communities and broader society. Chapter Two, "Attitudes of the Devout: The Nature of the Substance or the Nurture of Relationship?," delves into the nuanced interplay between individual piety and communal relationships. The book then moves to its empirical core: Chapter Three, "Empirical Foundations of Religious Outlooks," details the methodology for empirically measuring religious outlooks using public opinion surveys. Chapter Four, "The Individual and Contextual Determinants of Muslim Religious Outlooks in MENA," investigates the factors shaping these outlooks in the MENA region. The subsequent chapters apply this framework to specific political outcomes: Chapter Five, "Islam and Support for Democracy," examines the relationship between religious outlooks and democratic preferences. Chapter Six, "Temporal Change in Religious Outlooks and Political Preferences," explores how these outlooks and their political implications evolve over time. Chapter Seven, "Islam and Distributive Preferences," analyzes the role of religious outlooks in shaping economic preferences. Finally, the Conclusion summarizes the findings and discusses the applicability of the theoretical framework to broader contexts.

The book's main contribution lies in its development of a multi-dimensional conceptualization of "religious outlooks." Moving beyond linear assessments of piety, it proposes that religious outlooks function as cognitive frameworks that shape one's understanding of religion's role in social and political orders. This framework identifies four key categories based on individuals' valuing of social pluralism versus conformity, and their preference for religion's public versus private role: Religious Individualists, Post-Islamists, Social Communitarians, and Religious Communitarians. This typology provides researchers with an analytical tool for analyzing interfaith differences, offering a much deeper lens than broad religious categories.

The methodology employed in this study is a robust mixed-methods design, integrating both qualitative and quantitative approaches. The authors conduct qualitative case explorations, such as their detailed study of Naqshbandi communities in Turkey (Chapter Two), which reveal the dynamic variation within a single religious group. This qualitative depth is complemented by rigorous quantitative analysis of extensive survey data, primarily from the Arab Barometer surveys. They utilize advanced statistical techniques like latent class analysis and regression models to empirically measure and predict the distribution of these religious outlooks, demonstrating the influence of individual and contextual factors (e.g., state-religion relations) on their formation. This dual approach not only validates their conceptual model but also provides a practical research methodology for future studies seeking to unpack complex variations in belief and practice.

The book critiques the influence of simplistic assumptions, showing how political actors themselves often misinterpret the diversity among the devout. It highlights the unintended consequences of such miscalculations in the Iranian Revolution and the AK Party's strategies during the Gezi protests in Turkey, where diverse Islamist groups acted contrary to monolithic expectations. Furthermore, the rise of anti-Muslim sentiment in the West and the failures of multicultural policies are also attributed to the faulty assumption of a singular "Muslim outlook." The book argues that recognizing the relational and dynamic nature of religious outlooks, shaped by social context and communal associations, offers an alternative to these partial understandings.

While the book makes a significant scholarly contribution, a few areas might invite further exploration. Its focus on MENA societies provides rich empirical grounding, yet a more explicit and extensive application of its framework to a wider array of global Muslim contexts, or to diverse religious communities beyond Islam, could further strengthen the universal applicability of its proposed typology. Additionally, given the complexity of the analytical categories, some readers might seek deeper qualitative narratives to fully illuminate the lived experiences underpinning each "religious outlook," though the book offers a suitable balance between breadth and analytical depth.

This book offers a valuable resource for professional specialists in political science, sociology of religion, and Middle Eastern studies, equipping them with a nuanced conceptual framework and a rigorous methodological blueprint. Graduate students will find it particularly beneficial for developing advanced research questions and applying sophisticated analytical techniques. Moreover, its clear exposition of complex concepts makes it accessible to advanced undergraduates interested in the interplay of religion and politics. Politicians, media professionals, and policymakers with an interest in the Islamic world will find this book highly relevant, as it provides essential tools for moving beyond stereotypical perceptions and making more informed decisions.

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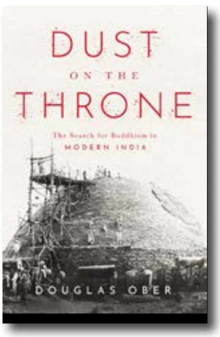
BOOK REVIEW

Dust on the Throne: The Search for Buddhism in Modern India.
By Douglas Ober. Stanford University Press, 2023. 394 pp. ISBN 9781503635036 (hardcover); 9781503635036 (paperback); 9781503635777 (e-book). $95.00 (hardcover); $32.00 (paperback and e-book).



In a historical context marked by social tensions and the increasing political instrumentalization of religion, *Dust on the Throne* offers a timely and illuminating perspective on the place of Buddhism in India's modern history. The book's significance becomes especially clear when read against the backdrop of violence directed at minorities and the deliberate reshaping of national narratives. Rather than offering a neutral chronicle of events, Douglas Ober engages directly with the dynamics through which religious traditions are erased, remembered, and strategically mobilized under shifting regimes of power. A professor at the University of British Columbia, Ober brings together rigorous archival work and a critical historiographical lens to reassess the revitalization of Buddhism in India, challenging widely accepted simplifications in the field.

The metaphor embedded in the book's title encapsulates, in my view, both the symbolic erasure and the layered processes of retrieval that characterize Buddhism's trajectory in South Asia. "Dust," here, evokes not only historical neglect but the ideological sediment that veils alternative narratives—narratives Ober brings into focus through a rich array of multilingual sources and an interdisciplinary methodology. What I find particularly compelling is Ober's insistence that the Buddhist revival in India cannot be reduced to a colonial artifact. Instead, he situates it within longer continuities and tensions, showing how it emerges as a response to both colonial oppression and deeply entrenched social hierarchies. His reading emphasizes that Buddhist revitalization drew as much from local aspirations and contested moral debates as from external stimuli such as European Orientalism.

This book engages meaningfully with debates in religious history, postcolonial theory, and subaltern studies, yet it does so without relying on a rigid theoretical agenda. What stands out to me is its ability to unsettle the assumption that Buddhism vanished entirely from India after the medieval period. Ober offers a more layered account, where absence and continuity are not mutually exclusive but closely entangled. While scholars such as Arthur McKeown, Anne M. Blackburn, and Giovanni Verardi have already challenged the extinction narrative, Ober's contribution is distinctive for the breadth of material he mobilizes and the coherence with which he interrelates archival, textual, and social dimensions. His work draws attention to sources and actors often excluded from canonical historiography.

Buddhism, in this account, does not remain confined to archaeology or Ambedkarite movements. One of the most compelling aspects, in my view, is how Ober reconstructs vernacular memory and traces intellectual lineages that have received little scholarly attention. These efforts allow him to show that Buddhism has continued to shape conversations about caste, secularism, and national belonging well into the modern era. His intervention is not simply additive; it also reframes the interpretive lens through which Buddhist history in India has been viewed. The Buddha becomes a contested figure, invoked in competing ideological projects and reimagined within evolving visions of social order. In this sense, the book does more than recover a neglected tradition; it reflects critically on the very conditions that have made such neglect possible.

The structure of the book encourages the reader to attend to the diversity of actors and intentions that shaped the reconfiguration of Buddhism in modern India, while also exposing the fragility of the categories—religion, caste, nation, modernity—through which that process has often been described. What I found particularly effective is how each chapter adds depth through thematic echoes and contradictions, rather than through a linear or accumulative logic. These overlaps challenge many of the assumptions still embedded in mainstream narratives about Buddhism and Indian modernity. What Ober offers, in my view, is not a recovery of a lost tradition, but a critical inquiry into the ways in which that tradition has been claimed, authorized, and contested. The book pushes us to rethink what we consider as evidence of historical continuity and to ask who has the power to define it.

Dust on the Throne examines the ways in which Buddhism has been reinterpreted and adapted to modern contexts, often negotiating tensions between inherited traditions and contemporary social realities. These include meditation practices, collective rituals, and commemorative events that link the past to the demands of the present. The book avoids generalizations and instead focuses on specific turning points and figures. Among them, B. R. Ambedkar receives close and sustained attention. His 1956 mass conversion ceremony, in which hundreds of thousands of Dalits embraced Buddhism as a form of resistance against caste oppression, is treated as a pivotal moment. Ober writes with force: "Ambedkar's conversion cut to the very foundations of this oppression" (282). As I read it, this moment redefined Buddhism not only as a spiritual alternative but as a political project grounded in dignity and dissent.

Ober is careful, however, not to idealize the movement. He notes that "modern Indian Buddhism is often disparaged as having little relevance outside Ambedkar's followers, or among Himalayan Buddhists and exiled Tibetans" (20). This observation struck me as particularly important. It points not just to social marginalization, but to a persistent unwillingness—within both public discourse and academic writing—to acknowledge these communities as full participants in the making of religious modernity. That a movement of such magnitude continues to be framed as peripheral says much about the hierarchies of recognition in postcolonial India. Ober's intervention exposes those hierarchies and calls them into question.

One of the most significant arguments in the book, in my view, is its critique of the narrative that presents Buddhism as a derivative or marginal offshoot of Hinduism. This interpretation, still common in both academic and political discourse, tends to obscure the persecution experienced by Dalit communities and to diminish the social dimensions of Buddhist revivalism. Ober addresses this directly by showing how Buddhism has served as a framework for imagining egalitarian alternatives—visions that stand apart from both caste hierarchies and colonial models of governance. As he writes, movements "from Lucknow and Kanpur to Calicut and Madras promulgated new meanings of human dignity and launched a social project that was as much political and ethical as it was historiographical" (192). This line captures well the book's emphasis on Buddhism as a living language of dissent, grounded in specific struggles and aspirations.

The same sensibility shapes Ober's discussion of ideological intersections, particularly in the chapter "When the Buddha Met Marx." Here, he examines attempts to bring Buddhist ethics into dialogue with Marxist critiques of class and property. The figures of Kosambi and Sankrityayan, among others, are not simply treated as intermediaries but as thinkers who reframed Buddhism as a resource for social transformation. I found this section especially illuminating. It shows how Buddhism, often cast as contemplative or ahistorical, was reimagined in active engagement with economic injustice and state power. Ober is careful to note that "modern Buddhism was shaped as much by Marxist ideas about property, economic organization" (250) as by any return to ancient teachings—an assertion that reinforces the tradition's adaptability to shifting political horizons.

While the book investigates areas often overlooked in academic discourse, such as the vernacular transmission of Buddhist memory, the interplay between Buddhism, Marxism, and anti-caste thought, and the symbolic appropriation of Buddhist imagery by the postcolonial state, it leaves certain questions open. Some of these may well fall outside the scope Ober set for this study; even so, future work could profit from a closer look at the roles women have played in shaping modern Indian Buddhism and at the experiences of communities situated at the intersections of multiple exclusions (for example, lower-caste Catholic Christians or LGBTQ+ Buddhists and sympathizers). Attending to these dimensions would extend the book's insight into how Buddhist ethics and imaginaries adapt within India's intensely plural social and religious landscape.

Ober's conclusion brings together many of the book's insights with a clear and memorable line: "As Indians relived the past to find a better present and future, a classless, casteless, egalitarian society, free as much from the influences of colonial oppression and Western materialism as Brahmanical discrimination and intolerable poverty, they found the Buddha" (292). The sentence distills one of the book's most persistent arguments, viz., that the past is not merely recovered, but actively reimagined in response to the pressures of the present. *Dust on the Throne* is ultimately a study of how religious traditions become tools for critique and reinvention. Even as it acknowledges the limits of India's political landscape, the book ends with a sense of possibility that is grounded not in idealism, but in historical struggle. That, I think, is one of its lasting strengths.

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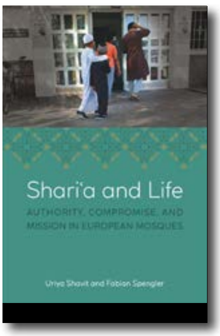
BOOK REVIEW

Shariʿa and Life: Authority, Compromise, and Mission in European Mosques.
By Uriya Shavit and Fabian Spengler. University of Toronto Press, 2023.
xiv + 276 pp. ISBN 978-1-4875-5437-8. $46.95 (paperback and e-book).



In Shariʿa and Life, Uriya Shavit and Fabian Spengler investigate the impact of fatwas issued by Wasati (from Arabic, *wasaṭīya*) and Salafi jurists, associated respectively with the European Council for Fatwa and Research (ECFR) and the Saudi Council of Senior Scholars. The authors describe the Salafi approach as characterized by a literal and rigid interpretation of Islamic law, while the Wasati approach is defined by its flexibility and pragmatism.

Based on five years of fieldwork in European mosques, the authors offer a multi-layered analysis of how Muslims in Europe engage with Islamic legal norms, which they refer to as "shariʿa norms."[1] The study includes interviews with seventy-eight individuals from four mosques in Sweden, Germany, Iceland, and England, along with written surveys conducted in those mosques and four additional ones. Unlike studies focused on the textual analysis of fatwas within the discourse of fiqh al-aqalliyyāt al-Muslima (the religious law of Muslim minorities), this study centers on how these fatwas were received and understood by Muslim minorities—a dimension that has received limited scholarly attention. The book makes a valuable contribution to both the sociology of Islamic law and the empirical study of *fiqh al-aqalliyyāt* by shifting the focus from fatwa texts to their reception.

The book is structured into five main chapters, framed by an introduction and a conclusion. After outlining their methodology and

1 The authors use the term "shariʿa norms" throughout the book to refer to juristic rulings primarily derived from the Qur'an and Sunna, commonly known as *fiqh* (Islamic substantive law). See, for example, pages 9, 10, 11, and 15.

primary aims in the introduction, the authors introduce the ideological and methodological differences between Wasati and Salafi jurists in Chapter One. These distinctions are illustrated through examples of legal issues particularly relevant to Muslims residing in non-Muslim-majority contexts, such as extending Christmas greetings to Christians and serving in non-Muslim military forces. This chapter draws substantially on themes and analyses previously explored in greater detail in Shavit's earlier monograph, Shariʿa and Muslim Minorities.[2]

The second chapter examines the diversity of mosques included in the field research, highlighting their differing orientations within the Wasati-Salafi spectrum. The authors identify five main approaches among imams toward what they describe as the ECFR's ambition to serve as a unifying source of fatwas and to promote "a pragmatic, integrationist wasati approach" (107). These approaches range from full endorsement of the Council's authority to outright rejection.

Chapter Three shifts the focus from imams to mosque attendees, examining how they perceive and engage with the authority of the ECFR and its fatwas. It presents the results of four surveys conducted among attendees at the eight participating mosques. Descriptive statistics from the surveys are presented in four tables within the chapter. The chapter concludes that the ECFR's influence has been limited, with little awareness of its work and minimal impact on religious practice.

The fourth chapter sheds light on the strategies Muslims employ to deal with potential conflicts between "shariʿa norms" and the challenges of life in Europe. It demonstrates that some interviewees engage in practices they believe to be religiously prohibited without seeking fatwas that might legitimize them, even though such practices have been authorized by Wasati jurists within the boundaries of Islamic law.

Chapter Five explores how the notion that Muslim presence in the West is legitimized through proselytizing (*daʿwah*) has been received and interpreted by both imams and mosque attendees. As emphasized in Chapters One and Five, the authors argue that Wasati and Salafi jurists view proselytizing as a condition for the legitimacy of residence in non-Muslim-majority countries. The chapter reveals that the notion has limited resonance among imams and mosque attendees, most of whom either reject it or are unaware of it. This gap between scholarly discourse and lived practice invites

2 Uriya Shavit, *Shariʿa and Muslim Minorities: The Wasati and Salafi Approaches to Fiqh al-Aqalliyyat al-Muslima* (Oxford University Press, 2016).

further scrutiny of the claim that *daʿwah* functions as a necessary condition for permissibility according to not only Salafi jurists but also Wasati ones.

Although the authors compellingly show that *daʿwah* features prominently in the discourse of some Wasati scholars, the assertion that Wasati jurists view *daʿwah* as a condition for the permissibility of residence in the West appears to overstate the evidence. The authors do not cite any explicit fatwas or rulings from the ECFR that designate *daʿwah* as a legal requirement for residence. On the contrary, the ECFR's two fatwas on residing in non-Muslim countries affirm that Muslims may remain in such contexts as long as they enjoy personal safety and the freedom to practice their religion. *Daʿwah* is not presented as a prerequisite for the legitimacy of residence. Similarly, the ECFR's 1999 fatwa on mortgages does not mention *daʿwah* as a condition for residence.[3]

Moreover, the two Shafi'i jurists referenced in the book (40), al-Māwardī and al-Ramlī, do not treat proselytizing as a condition for the legitimacy of residence in non-Muslim societies, even though they promote *daʿwah* and deem it obligatory for Muslims capable of engaging in *daʿwah* to remain in such lands with the hope of advancing Islam.[4] In other words, the absence of *daʿwah* does not render residence impermissible. Indeed, the idea of *daʿwah* as a prerequisite for legitimate residence does not align with the dominant views of pre-modern jurists from the Shafi'i, Hanbali, and Hanafi schools, who based permissibility primarily on personal security and religious freedom.[5]

Additionally, the book does not sufficiently substantiate its claim that the ECFR explicitly aimed from the outset to position itself as the exclusive

3 Majmaʿ al-Fiqh al-Islāmī al-Awrūbī. *al-Qarārāt wa-al-Fatāwá al-ṣādirah ʿan al-Majlis al-Awrūbī lil-Iftāʾ wa-al-Buḥūth: mundhu taʾsīsih 1997 ḥattá al-dawrah al-thāminah wa-al-ʿishrīn 2018*, ed.ʿAbd Allāh ibn Yūsuf al-Judayʿ (Muʾassasat al-Rayyān, 2013), 23–25, 122–123, 221–222.

4 Regarding al-Māwardī, see Abū al-Ḥasan ʿAlī ibn Muḥammad al-Māwardī, *al-Ḥāwī al-kabīr fī fiqh madhhab al-imām al-Shāfiʿī*, ed. ʿAlī Muḥammad Muʿawwaḍ and ʿĀdil Aḥmad ʿAbd al-Mawjūd,19 vols. (Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyyah, 1999), 14:104–5. For al-Ramlī, see Aḥmad b. Ḥamzah b. ʿAlī al-Ramlī, *Fatāwā al-Ramlī*, ed. Shams al-Dīn Muḥammad b. Aḥmad al-Ramlī, 4 vols. (al-Maktabah al-Islāmīyah, n.d.), 4:52–54.

5 Regarding the Shafi'i position, see Aḥmad ibn Muḥammad ibn ʿAlī ibn Ḥajar al-Haytamī, *Tuḥfat al-Muḥtāj bi-Sharḥ al-Minhāj*, ed. Anwar ibn Abī Bakr al-Shaykhī al-Dāghistānī, 1st ed., 10 vols. (Dār al-Ḍiyāʾ, 2020), 9:537–538. Regarding the Hanbali position, see Ibn Qudāma al-Maqdisī, *al-Mughnī*, ed. Ṭaha al-Zaynī et al., 1st ed., 10 vols. (Maktabat al-Qāhira, 1968), 9:294–95. Regarding the Hanafi position, see ʿAlāʾ al-Dīn Abū Bakr ibn Masʿūd al-Kāsānī, *Badāʾiʿ al-Ṣanāʾiʿ fī Tartīb al-Sharāʾiʿ*, 2nd ed., 7 vols. (Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyyah, 1986), 7:131.

or primary legal authority for Muslims in Europe. In his introduction to the ECFR's first collection of fatwas, al-Qaraḍāwī states the following:

> It is important to note that this Council does not seek to become a competitor against the grand Islamic Fiqh councils in the Islamic World, such as the Research Council of Al-Azhar, the Fiqh Council of the Islamic World League or the Islamic Fiqh Council of the Organisation of Islamic Conference. In fact, it aims to become a complementary body of these esteemed organisations, specialising in critical issues related to the "Fiqh of Minorities" and Muslims who live outside the Islamic World. The Council also actively pursues and examines the rulings, resolutions and studies of these respectable organisations, from which it will gain great benefit, no doubt. [6]

As noted in this passage, the ECFR disclaims any intention to replace or compete with established Islamic scholarly bodies. Rather, the ECFR positions itself as a complementary institution focused on addressing the specific needs of Muslim minorities in Europe.

In addition to its primary focus on Muslim minorities, the book offers valuable insights for interreligious studies by drawing comparative references to Jewish traditions, institutions, and diaspora dynamics. These comparisons enrich the analysis and invite broader reflection on how minority religious communities negotiate identity, authority, and integration in secular societies.

This insightful and methodologically robust study is particularly suited for scholars and graduate students in Islamic studies and the sociology of Islamic law, as well as for general readers interested in contemporary issues concerning religious minorities and integration.

Okan Dogan, Ph.D.

6 European Council for *Fatwa and Research, Fatwas of European Council for Fatwa and Research*, trans. Anas Osama Altikriti and Shakir Nasif Al-Ubaydi (Islamic Inc. Publishing & Distribution, 2002), iv.

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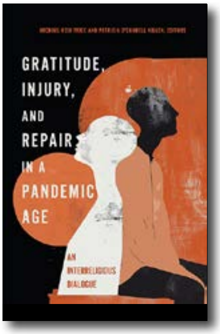
BOOK REVIEW

Gratitude, Injury, and Repair in a Pandemic Age: An Interreligious Dialogue.

By Michael Reid Trice and Patricia O'Connell Killen (eds.). Georgetown University Press, 2025. vi + 195 pp. ISBN 9781647124809 (paperback); ISBN 9781647124793 (hardcover); ISBN 9781647124816 (e-book). $34.95 (paperback); $104.95 (hardcover); $34.95 (e-book).



The COVID-19 pandemic endangered all population ages for more than three years from March 2020 to May 2023. As a worldwide public health crisis, a series of measures were implemented, whether voluntarily or mandatorily, to strengthen prevention outcomes, such as masking, keeping physical distance, reducing social activities, conducting lockdowns, testing for the virus, exercising quarantines, and injecting vaccines. Such abrupt practices combined with a shortage of medical services during the COVID-19 and post-COVID periods produced not only physiological outcomes but also other equally important threats, including fear, anger, guilt, horror, shame, anxiety over uncertainty and death, feelings of loss, helplessness, loneliness, and unease. These have incurred traumatic injuries and post-traumatic stress disorders which invoke persistent adverse emotional states and disrupt "material, psychic, social and spiritual life" (19). The compilation of essays contained in *Gratitude, Injury, and Repair in a Pandemic Age: An Interreligious Dialogue* respond to this predicament. A group of scholars from America, Britain, and Germany explore interreligious contributions related to gratitude, injury, and repair, and interrelationships from their philosophical, theological, sociological, psychological, and ethical perspectives.

This volume encompasses nine chapters with three main foci. The first one displays the comprehensive concepts of gratitude, injury, and repair with different frameworks, and discusses natural, epidemiological, and political issues. Second, the book investigates how gratitude, injury, and repair connected with social justice during the pandemic. Lastly, it gives a fresh interpretation of the pandemic and offers coping ideas. These themes extend a pivotal horizon of dealing with this painful impasse.

The pandemic inevitably amplified the physical and mental vulnerability of human beings, thereby bringing out a "survival society" (88), in which selfish survivability and highly individualistic mentality presented overtly. For instance, political polarization and divides happened in the United States due to Donald Trump's vaccine argument and overwhelming support from his White Evangelical Christian voters (see chapter 4). Such a theo-political cooperation contained various clusters of extremes: entailing right-wing, evangelical fundamentalism, national civil religion, and racism. This resulted in an intensification of racism and xenophobia and a rise of hate and violence. Hate crimes were frequently committed against sexual minorities and queers in the form of Christian homophobic attacks and vaccine hesitancy (see, for example, chapters 4 and 8). Hence, the tendency to find a scapegoat worsened under the background of cisheteropatriarchy and cisheteronormativity, particularly when lacking mental health care resources.

This essay collection reevaluates the meaning of life and suffering and pays attention to moral repair as a process following an injury to a premature ending. For example, in the Hindu tradition, gratitude is a mixture of interdependence, mutual obligation, and sharing. While Jesuit Catholic culture emphasizes the notion of the whole person, implying dynamics of body, mind, and spirit. Both Hindu and Catholic concerns concentrate on psychological fragility, reinforce sympathetic and empathetic care to others who undergo travails, and eventually reimagine who we are and rethink the meaning of our lives with compassion. These effects associate not only with the personal level, but more importantly with social institutions, which comprise family, government, economy, education, and religion. The book reveals a great reset of affliction from disorientation to reorientation of life: an insight gained from the COVID-19 pandemic in religious and interreligious values.

However, there is room for enrichment in the readability of the book. First, the contents incline towards theoretical discourse. As such, it distances itself from its readers who may feel difficulty in applying the arguments to their daily experience. This review suggests qualitative and quantitative studies could have been added to examine challenges that rose during the pandemic, offering the voices of victims or the public.

Second, the compilation coheres mainly to Abrahamic religions, Hinduism, and civil religion, with little from Buddhist and Islamic traditions. Because Buddhism and Islam are also major religions and are growing rapidly in the world, their absence reduces the integrity of the presentation of this book.

Third, the section on the Jewish diaspora was seemingly irrelevant to the book's focus. The author should have made more effort to narrate the linkage between this community and its plight within the pandemic occurrence and post-COVID contexts.

Fourth, the essay collection offered a limited discussion of mandatory practices from religious views, e.g., the opinions of compulsory vaccination and lockdowns on the part of these religions. Their viewpoints may have benefited from rational debate of these topics.

Fifth, the death and loss of beloved ones ambushed billions of people and their families. This suffering could have been studied in more detail. Attention to these experiences would have made this volume more conducive to grief therapy. Additionally, the authors reconstruct the meaning of life particularly in traumatic and post-traumatic contexts. Nevertheless, individuals are facing death and the fear of death, which could have been a substantial topic to be evaluated, and which would probably have guided the readers towards a brilliant notion for bereavement therapy.

Sixth, medical health practitioners and family caregivers encountered tremendous pressure in caring for patients during the pandemic and its aftermath. However, they are neglected in the book. Their perspectives are worthy of being investigated more deeply.

Seventh, the book's offerings are skewed towards American and European perspectives and research. Incorporating the perspectives of Asian researchers could have delivered intelligent insights from Eastern cultures. As a result, the collection could have been more integrative.

Eighth, the uncontrollable spread of COVID-19 was astounding, and many under-developed and low-income countries were unable to afford the vaccination costs. This vaccine inequality induced vaccine disparities. Religious leaders might play a significant role in dissolving these problems. However, these insights were not considered in the volume.

Lastly, the volume considers discrimination on diverse fields such as race, gender, and sexuality. However, it avoids discussion of positive discrimination in specific groups. For instance, positive discrimination of disabled groups is not necessary, since COVID-19 is related to health but not physical capability. If the book could have inspected these difficulties simultaneously, it would have heightened its strengths.

This volume offers expansion of theological, religious, philosophical, psychological, and sociological dimensions of viewing COVID-19 and post-COVID-19 traumas. In doing so, the compilation offers rich information to reassess the misery caused by the pandemic and aftermath. It sheds prudent light on tackling of such sorrow. Thus, it serves as a valuable reference to not only individuals who desire to gain better life quality after adversity, but also to human service professionals who strive to equip themselves with illuminating ideas to take care of their clients.

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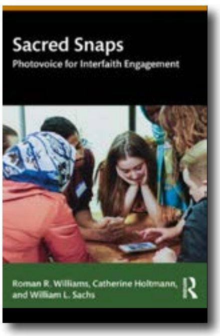
BOOK REVIEW

Sacred Snaps: Photovoice for Interfaith Engagement.
By Roman R. Williams, Catherine Holtmann, and William L. Sachs.
Routledge, 2024. xv + 193 pp. ISBN 978-1-032-85664-3. $49.99
(paperback).



In *Sacred Snaps: Photovoice for Interfaith Engagement*, Roman R. Williams, Catherine Holtmann, and William L. Sachs introduce an innovative model for interreligious engagement by adapting photovoice, a community-based participatory research method, for use in interreligious settings. The case studies in the book focus on their own work in Christian-Muslim dialogue, though they describe the method as transferable to other traditions. They ground their approach in lived religion, visual sociology, and interfaith engagement and show how photography can open new channels of understanding across cultural and religious boundaries. In this approach, participants respond to guiding questions with their own photographs, discuss them in facilitated groups, and often curate them into public exhibits that invite wider awareness and engagement.

The authors point out that, in interfaith work, overcoming misconceptions requires more than the transfer of accurate information; it also demands cultivating empathetic understanding. Yet even adding empathy cannot always surmount deeper obstacles to dialogue. For example, power asymmetries often privilege majority traditions and marginalize minority voices. Without careful facilitation, dialogue can simply mirror these inequities. Theological exclusivism can also present a challenge, for while it is not incompatible with dialogue, it can narrow its scope by presuming one tradition is the sole bearer of truth, and thus limit openness to a genuine and mutual exchange of ideas. Additionally, ongoing geopolitical crises such as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict have only heightened interreligious tensions. These challenges and more underscore the urgency of utilizing creative and participatory practices that engage the affective and relational dimensions of interfaith encounter.

It is within this context that *Sacred Snaps* offers a distinctive and beneficial approach. By prioritizing lived experience over theological/religious doctrine, photovoice circumvents many of the initial barriers to engagement and trust. Misunderstandings are less likely to arise from contested ideological or tradition-specific viewpoints when participants first meet one another through the images they create and where they share the stories and perspectives that give those images meaning. The method is inherently egalitarian: its utilization of widely available smartphone technology democratizes participation and mitigates some of the power imbalances and other challenges that can be present in more formal interfaith settings.

In the introduction and early chapters, the authors explicitly situate their work within the domains of visual sociology (as participatory and image-based research), the study of lived religion (religion in everyday practice), and interfaith engagement (shifting from theological/ideological debate to story-grounded encounters). From visual sociology, the authors draw on the notion that photographs are not merely illustrations but meaning-bearing texts that are capable of revealing aspects of everyday life and shaping the ways participants see and engage one another. From the study of lived religion, they note that religious identity and practice are embedded not solely within institutional frameworks but also in everyday habits, relationships, and tangible expressions of faith. From interfaith engagement, they seek to build constructive relationships across religious differences and shift the dialogue away from abstract theological discourse toward that of personal story.

The volume's methodology could be interpreted through what might be called visual hospitality. Paul Ricoeur introduced the notion of linguistic hospitality in his reflections on translation, a concept that has been taken up by a range of scholars. Marianne Moyaert, in particular, has extended the metaphor in her articulation of ritual hospitality within interreligious encounter.[1] For Moyaert, ritual hospitality is not generic "interfaith prayer"

1 The phrase "visual hospitality" is explored across several bodies of literature that examine how visual practices can mediate ethical, relational, and hospitable forms of encounter, though the term itself is not consistently used. Paul Ricoeur develops the notion of linguistic hospitality in his reflections on translation, particularly in *On Translation* (trans. Eileen Brennan [Routledge, 2006], where translation is understood as an ethical openness to the other. Marianne Moyaert extends this metaphor in the context of interreligious encounter through her concept of "ritual hospitality." See *Ritual Participation and Interreligious Dialogue: Boundaries, Transgressions, and Innovations* (Bloomsbury, 2015), 1–16. For more on how Ricoeur's hermeneutics of translation has been adapted for work in comparative theology by Moyaert, see Peter Ward Youngblood, "Interfaith Chaplaincy as Interpretive Hospitality" *Religions* 10, no. 3 (2019): 1–14.

or a newly invented, neutral ceremony. Rather, it involves hosting or receiving religious others within the ritual space of a living tradition, under that tradition's own rules, symbols, and rhythms. Because ritual is embodied and performative, such hospitality engages participants at an affective and sensory level and carries the potential to shape perception, identity, and relationship through shared participation rather than discursive exchange alone. Photovoice reflects this understanding of hospitality by shifting it into the visual realm where participants disclose their worlds through images, and dialogue unfolds naturally through both what is shown and the trust that is created in their sharing.

Perhaps the book's strongest contributions emerge in its case studies, where participant photographs and the dialogues they sparked bring the method to life: a picture of a bouquet of flowers prompted reflections by a Christian and a Muslim on the divine as reflected in nature (51–52); an image of Muslim prayer evoked "holy envy" in a Christian participant even as it stirred fear for her son's safety in a Muslim mother (76); and a mural of Martin Luther King, Jr., paired with the quote "Our lives begin to end the day we become silent about things that matter," prompted dialogue on social inequality and the collective responsibility for justice (95). Such examples show how photovoice can generate narratives that can be both tradition-specific and resonant across traditions. The process does not erase differences. Participants encounter theological and cultural diversity, sometimes in relation to global conflicts, yet situated in personal narratives that tend to ease defensiveness and foster receptivity. Public exhibitions that typically conclude each cycle extend the dialogue into civic spaces, where they can provide a counter-narrative to media portrayals of engagement that emphasize conflict rather than cooperation.

Notwithstanding its merits, the volume raises questions that warrant further consideration. The authors describe their recruitment process and note that some participants were already active in interfaith networks, others were drawn by the novelty of photography, and that hesitant individuals often excused themselves by saying they were "not photographers." While this candid approach is helpful, it leaves open the question of whether the method can extend beyond such self-selecting groups. As with many interfaith initiatives, those who participate are often already predisposed toward engagement, which raises the challenge of how photovoice might reach more resistant or polarized groups.

Second, while the interpretive process is central to photovoice and the volume offers rich examples of how images invite dialogue across traditions, the analysis could be pushed further. Facilitation, group dynamics, and the cultural-theological frameworks that participants bring all shape interpretation, and those moments when an image carries conflicting ideas across traditions can present particular challenges. The book emphasizes the constructive outcomes of these exchanges, but it offers less sustained reflection on how conflicting readings were (or might be) negotiated in practice. Attending more closely to such tensions would enrich the analysis and point toward a promising area for further research.

Third, the case studies provide rich insight into Christian-Muslim engagement, which forms the primary focus of the projects in the book. The authors gesture toward broader religious diversity in North America and include some secular voices, yet examples involving Jewish, Hindu, Sikh, Buddhist, Indigenous, secular, and other participants are absent. This focus does not diminish the value of the work but does highlight a promising avenue for future application. Expanding photovoice beyond Christian-Muslim dialogue would test the method's adaptability across a wider spectrum of interreligious encounters.

These caveats aside, Sacred Snaps makes a significant contribution to both the scholarship and practice of interreligious dialogue. It models an approach that is accessible, participatory, and attentive to the dynamics of trust-building. In a time of division and polarization, it reminds us that transformative engagement need not begin with formal doctrinal/ideological discussions or debates but can emerge from an image, a story, and the courage to listen and share. For scholars, it opens new avenues of research and new pathways for exploring visual hermeneutics, the dynamics of meaning-making in interreligious contexts, and the contributions of participatory methodologies in the study of religion. For practitioners, it offers an adaptable framework for reimagining dialogue around the sacred dimensions of everyday life. And for communities negotiating religious diversity in fraught times, it provides inspiration, empathy, wisdom, and a practical path toward reconciliation.

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