**A Tree with Many Branches: Abrahamic Approaches to Interreligious Dialogue**

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**Abstract**: While dialogue is critically necessary in the modern world, it raises a host of epistemological, theological, and metaphysical problems. If a religious practitioner regards her tradition as absolutely true, must she then regard other traditions as false or derivative, either wholly or in part? Is genuine dialogue actually possible, or is it just a show of conciliation and unity against a backdrop of irreconcilable differences? The first section of this essay surveys four modern models of interreligious dialogue: exclusivism, inclusivism, pluralism, and particularism. None of them will prove satisfactory. The second section sketches out an interreligious approach to truth by spinning together three conceptual threads: truth (ἀλήθεια) in the Gospel of John, love in Hasdai Crescas’s *Or Adonai*, and imagination in the work of Muhyi al-Din Ibn al-‘Arabi. It will be argued that interreligious truth is not a matter of resolving contradictory truth claims; rather, it is a hermeneutical process involving imaginative encounters across traditions.

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At Emory & Henry College, I teach World Religions every semester and Comparative Theology every other year. I hope that the popularity of those courses has something to do with me, but I am also sure that it has to do with my students’ desire to make the world better; they see rips in the fabric of humanity and they want to repair them. Growing up after 9/11, they tend to regard religion both as a source of social justice and as a source of tremendous dehumanization and conflict. So interreligious dialogue has become something of a moral imperative for them.

While my students are keenly aware of the need for dialogue, they are less sure of how to have an interreligious dialogue, precisely because dialogue involves very thorny epistemological, ontological, and metaphysical issues. In nearly all of my classes, some of the following questions come up: How do we make sense of religions that make competing truth claims? If a religious practitioner regards her tradition as absolutely true, must she then regard other traditions as false or derivative, either wholly or in part? Is genuine dialogue actually possible, or is it just a show of conciliation and unity against a backdrop of irreconcilable differences? These sorts of questions point to the central epistemological issue in interreligious dialogue: namely, authentic dialogue requires that we remain committed to the truth of our own tradition while being genuinely open to the truths of other traditions. That possibility is the subject of this essay. In the first section, I will summarize four modern approaches to religious difference—exclusivism, inclusivism, pluralism, and particularism.[[1]](#footnote-1) None of them will prove to be satisfactory. In the second section, I will sketch out an interreligious approach to truth by spinning together three conceptual threads: truth (ἀλήθεια) in the Gospel of John, love in Hasdai Crescas’s *Or Adonai*, and imagination in the work of Muhyi al-Din Ibn al-‘Arabi. I will argue that interreligious truth is not a matter of resolving contradictory truth claims; rather, it is a hermeneutical process involving imaginative encounters across traditions.

*I. Modern Perspectives on Religious Epistemology.*

Modern approaches to religious difference may be sorted into four categories reflecting different epistemological assumptions about religious truth:

1. Exclusivism—The exclusivist claims that there is one ultimate reality and one way of knowing it. If Christianity is true, then Judaism and Islam are not.[[2]](#footnote-2) Certainly, various types of fundamentalism are exclusivist, but we should be careful not to dismiss exclusivism (or fundamentalism, for that matter) as anti-intellectual. Eminent theologians like Karl Barth make exclusivist claims about Christianity: “It alone has the commission and authority to be a missionary religion, i.e., to confront the world of religions as the one true religion, with absolute self-confidence to invite and challenge it to abandon its ways and to start on the Christian way” (Barth 1956: 357). It will come as no surprise that dialogue is not high on the list of priorities for exclusivists. We should, however, keep in mind the effect that exclusivist views can have in debates about interreligious dialogue.

There are a number of problems with exclusivism. I will highlight three: First, the internal diversity of religious traditions makes the exclusivist position incoherent. If, for example, I am a Christian exclusivist, then to which version of Christianity should I commit myself? After all, Roman Catholicism and Orthodox traditions make competing claims about such theologically central matters as the order of procession within the Trinity. Do the conservative social stances of Southern Baptists reflect “the truth,” or are the more liberal social ethics of American Baptists truer? Which biblical version of Jesus’ ministry is true? Must we reject the Gospel of John’s portrayal of Jesus in favor of the Gospel of Mark’s? In other words, the exclusivist’s epistemological commitments ultimately put her at odds with important segments of the tradition she seeks to affirm. Second, exclusivism tends to reduce religions to sets of belief claims, so that truth becomes a function of evaluating belief claims. Yet it is not clear that religious traditions can be reduced to a set of propositions, nor is it clear that truth must be treated as a condition that applies exclusively to propositions.[[3]](#footnote-3) Third**,** exclusivism is ethically problematic inasmuch as it functions as a justification for all sorts of colonial and dehumanizing tendencies. (An exclusivist might not care about this third point, but we are free to do so.)

2. Inclusivism—The second model of religious difference is “inclusivism.” Much like an exclusivist, an inclusivist believes that there is one ultimate reality and one way of knowing it. The inclusivist does, however, recognize the potential for truth in other religious traditions to the extent that those traditions mirror the one true tradition. Karl Rahner is often cited as a proponent of this view. Rahner argues that the general human drive for self-knowledge reflects an openness to Being, which is in fact an unreflective awareness of God (infinite Being). This openness to Being is one of the ways that God lets godself be known by humans; it therefore constitutes a moment of hidden grace. The decisive and most explicit manifestation of grace occurs, for Rahner, in the person of Christ, and there is no salvation apart from Christ. Inclusivist positions, like Rahner’s, try to balance soteriological exclusivism (one can only be saved through Christ) with the universality of divine grace. The result is a hierarchical approach to religious difference: Christianity is the decisive manifestation of grace and the only route to salvation, but inasmuch as grace (as openness to Being) is universally available, other religious traditions can be paths to *Christian* salvation. Rahner speaks of faithful practitioners of other religions as “anonymous Christians”:

Anonymous Christianity means that a person lives in the grace of God and attains salvation outside of explicitly constituted Christianity — Let us say, a Buddhist monk — who, because he follows his conscience, attains salvation and lives in the grace of God; of him I must say that he is an anonymous Christian; if not, I would have to presuppose that there is a genuine path to salvation that really attains that goal, but that simply has nothing to do with Jesus Christ. But I cannot do that (Rahner 1986: 135).

While Rahner sees salvific potential in other religions, his epistemological position is virtually indistinguishable from exclusivism: There is one ultimate reality, and one way of knowing it. Other religions may contain true elements, but only inasmuch as they mirror Christianity. Inclusivism is therefore subject to the same criticisms as exclusivism, and so I won’t dwell on it here.

3. Pluralism—The third approach to religious difference, pluralism, is exemplified in the work of John Hick. Hick argues that phenomenological similarities across religions point to an underlying unity: “we have to ask whether people in church, synagogue, mosque, gurdwara, and temple are worshipping different Gods or are worshipping the same God? Are Adonai and God, Allah and Ekoamkar, Rama and Krishna different gods, or are these different names for the same ultimate Being?” (Hick 1982: 66). There are, Hick claims, three possible answers to this question. First, it is logically possible that there are ontologically many gods and epistemologically many ways of knowing them. This polytheistic view would, however, exclude committed monotheists. Given that many religious people are monotheists, this would not be a good way to make sense of religious diversity. Second, it is possible that there is ontologically one god, and epistemologically one way of knowing it. Hick rules this out because it quickly becomes incoherent. There are many different images of the divine operating within any one tradition. So, even within Christianity, there are many different ways of knowing God. Which Christianity is the true Christianity? Third, it is possible that there is one God and many ways of knowing it. Hick explains this idea in terms of a Kantian distinction between the phenomenal and the noumenal. There are things as we perceive them (*phenomena*), which are limited by our various assumptions about the world, our perceptual structures, and so forth; and then there are things as they exist in themselves (*noumena*), which we cannot know. Similarly, for Hick, religions know God within the limitations of human perception and experience, which are culturally determined (Hick 1982: 105). So, we might say that Islam is an Arabic way of knowing God, and Hinduism is an Indian way of knowing God, and Christianity is a Greco-Roman way of knowing God. (In his later work, Hick trades the term “God” for “the Real.”) Yet no religion has complete or exclusive access to God.

Hick’s pluralism is certainly laudable for getting past the “I’m right and you’re wrong” approach to religious difference, but it has a two main problems. First, Hick claims that whenever religions make exclusive claims about God, we are obliged to take those claims metaphorically. Hick argues, for example, that “Son of God” and “God incarnate” language in Christianity cannot be taken literally, for that would amount to exclusive knowledge of God. Such language should be regarded metaphorically: “Thus reality is being expressed mythologically when we say that Jesus is the Son of God, God incarnate, the Logos made flesh” (Hick 1982: 75). This is a rather high price for admission, as the reality of the incarnation is a core Christian belief! And herein lies the main problem with pluralism: It asks religious adherents to give up core tenets of their tradition in order to acknowledge the truth of other traditions. In the end, pluralism does not treat all religious traditions as “true,” but as “partially true.” So Christianity may be 80% true (excluding theological tenets related to the incarnation) and Judaism may be 80% true (excluding tenets related to the covenant) and Islam may be 80% true (excluding claims about Allah being the only God). As Gavin D’Costa notes, “Agnosticism is the inevitable trajectory of Hick’s flight from particularity” (D’Costa 2009: 11). This makes pluralism a poor model for understanding religious difference. A second, related criticism of pluralism is that it ultimately collapses into exclusivism. While Hick denies epistemic priority to any particular religious tradition, he grants it to Kantian philosophy. Kant becomes the *exclusive* way to make sense of religious diversity!

4. Particularism—the fourth model of religious difference is particularism, which is comprised of a group of methods developed over the last 30 years, largely in reaction to exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism. Particularists tend to reject grand theories of religion: “they assert that each religion is a distinctive, finely spun web of texts, traditions and teachers, and its internal coherence, structure and integrity must not be violated by encompassing it as one more instance of Religion” (Barua 2014: 216). Comparative Theology, which is the predominant particularist approach, focuses on close readings of particular texts, beliefs, and practices rather than “religion” as a general category. The goal of comparative theology is not detached academic understanding, but engaged interreligious contact, through which participants gain a better understanding of their own tradition. As Francis Clooney describes it,

Comparative theology—comparative and theological beginning to end—marks acts of faith seeking understanding which are rooted in a particular faith tradition but which, from that foundation, venture into learning from one or more other faith traditions. This learning is sought for the sake of fresh theological insights that are indebted to the newly encountered tradition/s as well as the home tradition (Clooney 2010: 10).

So Clooney, who is a Jesuit scholar of Hinduism, compares an account of the life of Antal, a ninth century South Indian saint, to Ignatius’s *Spiritual Exercises*. Clooney uses a particular text cited by Antal (verse 44 of Mutal Tiruvantati) as a jumping off point to enter into a discussion about how God can be known. Antal, who is on her way to marry a god (Lord Narayana), confronts those who doubt that a god would approach a human in such a way. She tells them,

Whichever form pleases his people, that is his form;

Whichever name pleases his people, that is his name;

Whichever way pleases his people who meditate without ceasing,

That is his way, the one who holds the discus.

As we love God, God adjusts and comes to us accordingly; if someone loves like a bride, God comes as a groom (Clooney 2010: 129).

For Clooney, Antal’s statement ultimately provides insight into Ignatius’ method in the *Spiritual Exercises*:

The meditative process is concrete and imaginative. God operates in accord with the very acts of imagining undertaken by the persons who meditate. There is a delicate and important balance between the insistence that pre-established or traditional, even scriptural images, decisively limit and focus meditation, and the insistence that we can imagine God—in all the ways one can imagine—and know, in humble awareness that God will find us there (Clooney 2010: 144).

Interreligious contact with Hinduism ultimately makes Clooney a better Jesuit.

There is much to like about particularism, especially its insistence that interreligious dialogue ought to reflect the lived-experience of faith communities. Yet it remains an underdetermined model. Particularists are nearly unanimous in their rejection of theories of religion. As Jim Fredericks claims, “Comparative theology… is a process or practice, not a theory. Before Christians can fully understand themselves and the role of their religion in the history of the world’s many religions, we must first learn *about* non-Christians” (Fredericks 1999: 9). It is certainly true that grand theories of religion can be procrustean; they constrain interreligious dialogue or otherwise determine its outcome before it ever begins. In that sense, I agree that theory is methodologically suspect. Yet it is important to distinguish between *a priori* theorizing—theorizing that is done before dialogue begins—and theorizing that is done *within* the process of interreligious dialogue. After all, religious traditions themselves theorize about other religious traditions. Religions can be interreligious! Moreover, every intellectual endeavor has to confront theoretical questions about its scope and purpose. Why, for example, is Comparative Theology something we should want to do in the first place? What are its goals and methods? If we take insights from other religions and apply them to our own, is that a form of intellectual colonialism or another manifestation of inclusivism? Most importantly, Comparative Theology does not address the underlying question about conflicting truth claims: If Clooney learns something about his own tradition from Hinduism, what does that imply about the “truth” of Hinduism? In rejecting “theory,” comparative theology risks losing the ability to answer critically important theoretical questions.

The four models of religious difference that I have surveyed—exclusivism, inclusivism, pluralism, and particularism—are all insufficient ways of framing inter-religious dialogue, but their failures serve as useful guidelines. If interreligious dialogue is possible at all, we now know something about its formal characteristics. First, pluralism is a questionable model because it requires agnosticism as the price of admission. Correcting this error will mean that we have to figure out a way for participants in interreligious dialogue to maintain a commitment to their own tradition. Second—contrary to inclusivist and exclusivist models—we have to figure out a way for genuine religious commitment to exist alongside genuine openness to other traditions. In essence, we have to rethink how truth works, which will mean some heavy theoretical work (*contra* particularism). Third, our theoretical work must be rooted in religious traditions themselves. That is to say, our model for interreligious dialogue must be drawn from the religions participating in dialogue rather than, say, Kantian philosophy. With these “guidelines” in mind, I want to look briefly at three sources from the Abrahamic religions that can help us to generate a better model of interreligious dialog.

*II. The Gospel of John among Rabbis and Sufis*.

In the Christian tradition, the issue of “truth” (what counts as truth? How do we know the truth?) is raised explicitly in the Gospel of John.[[4]](#footnote-4) John is clear about what truth is and how we know it. In chapter 14, for example, in a discussion about how Jesus’ followers might gain knowledge of God, Jesus says, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me. If you had known me, you would have known my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him” (14:6-7). This passage confirms what the Gospel announces over and over again: Jesus is the *Logos* incarnate. To know the truth is to know Jesus. This is not a propositional sort of knowledge, but knowledge based on relationship and prior acquaintance. This ought to give us pause. What does it mean to say that a person is the truth? We can intuitively understand the “truth” of a claim like “George Washington was the first president of the United States”; it says something about reality. It is much more difficult to understand a claim like, “Jesus is the truth.” Moreover, if truth hinges on encountering a particular person, how are we supposed to know the truth 2,000 years after that person dies? Fortunately, the Gospel of John does not leave us hanging: the entire text can be read as a meditation on how truth is manifest in the world and how it can be recognized. John’s treatment of “signs” (σημεῖα) and “recognition” (ἀναγνώρισις) is particularly instructive.[[5]](#footnote-5)

John repeatedly employs recognition scenes—as a sort of “micro-genre”—wherein various characters progress from ignorance to knowledge of Jesus’ true identity.[[6]](#footnote-6) Many of these scenes are clustered around miraculous events called “signs,” of which we can identify eight:

1. The wedding at Cana (2:1-11)
2. The healing of the official’s son (4:46-54)
3. The healing of the man at the pool of Bethesda (5:1-18)
4. The feeding of the five thousand (6:1-15)
5. Jesus walking on water (6:16-21)
6. The healing of the blind man (9:1-12)
7. The raising of Lazarus (11:28-44)
8. The miraculous catch of fish (21:1-14)

It is important to note the shifting relationship between signs and recognition over the course of the narrative. The first sign, where Jesus turns water to wine (2:1-11), ends with a summary statement about the role of signs in the process of recognition: “Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory (δόξα); and his disciples believed in him.” This suggests that the signs serve as “tokens” meant to reveal Jesus’ glory (Culpepper 2008: 253). In this case, the “token” confirms what the reader knows from the prologue (1:1-18): Jesus is the divine *Logos*, active in the event of creation, and therefore has authority (ἐξουσίᾳ) over the elements of creation—water, in this instance. It also leads to recognition on the part of the disciples, though the reader is not told what the disciples recognize about Jesus. More broadly, the “sign” functions here as we might expect; it serves as a “representation” of what truly *is*. This seems fairly straightforward. Truth functions as an agreement between the representation in thought (or speech) and the thing itself—“*Veritas est adaequatio intellectus et rei*” (Aquinas, *Quaestiones disputatae de veritate*, QI, A1). In other words, the “sign” is true because it accurately represents what “is.”

Yet over the course of the narrative, the role of “signs” becomes more ambiguous. Signs can be misread, after all. The seventh “sign,” the raising of Lazarus (11:28-44), seems to indicate that signs are not necessary to recognize the truth. The “sign” in this scene (i.e., Lazarus’ resurrection) plays an insignificant role in Martha’s recognition of Jesus, which is effectively resolved before Lazarus is ever raised (11:17-27). Martha, who originally misunderstands resurrection as a future event (11:24), is challenged by Jesus: “I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?” (11:25-26). Martha’s response is an authentic (and exemplary) recognition of the truth: “Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world” (11:27). Like the sheep in Chapter 10, Martha heard the voice of the “good shepherd” and responded accordingly. No “sign” was necessary for Martha to know the truth.[[7]](#footnote-7) That is to say, Martha recognizes truth in a way that does not require her to evaluate whether certain representations of reality (signs) actually match reality.

If the first seven signs constitute a narrative trajectory that calls into question the necessity of signs, the final “sign” points to a notion of truth based on encounter rather than representation. John 21:1-7 has all the structural elements of a classic recognition scene. Jesus appears to a group of disciples fishing in the Sea of Tiberias (the meeting). The narrator confirms the disciples’ ignorance (cognitive resistance): “Jesus stood on the beach, but the disciples did not know that it was Jesus.” Jesus gives a sign (displaying the token) by arranging the miraculous catch of fish, which inspires the Beloved Disciple, and then Peter, to recognize Jesus (the moment of recognition). Finally, Peter leaps overboard, swimming to Jesus ahead of the others (attendant reaction and physical reunion) (Larsen 2008: 212). Yet the scene does not stop there. The remaining disciples do not recognize Jesus until a new token is given: “Jesus said to them, ‘Come and have breakfast’” (21:12). This in turn inspires the Gospel’s ultimate moment of recognition: “Now none of the disciples dared to ask him, ‘Who are you?’ because they knew it was the Lord” (21:12). This second moment of recognition is not explained in the narrative; rather, the climax of the scene is the communal meal, which is a clear reference to the Eucharist: “Jesus came and took the bread and gave it to them, and did the same with the fish” (21:13).[[8]](#footnote-8) As Alan Culpepper puts it,

The recognition of Jesus by the Beloved Disciple and the other disciples (21:7, 12) no longer stands as the climax of the scene. Instead the climactic act is the invitation to the meal and the giving of bread and fish, which has both Christological and Eucharistic significance. The final move of the signs as recognition scenes in John, therefore… is to pose for the reader the challenge of recognizing Jesus in the Eucharistic meal (Culpepper 2008: 258).

Christ is present in the most decisive way in the Eucharistic meal and in the community that shares it; the Eucharist is both a sign (a representation of the particular historical events of Christ’s death and resurrection) and true divine presence.[[9]](#footnote-9) Truth, for John, is not a function of evaluating particular propositions or bodies of evidence as potential representations of reality; rather, “truth” is generated out of a divine encounter that becomes the generative source of both what we perceive as real (Aquinas’s “*res*”) and our mental representations of the real (Aquinas’s “*intellectus*”). The encounter with God in the Eucharist (which is performed communally and which symbolically re-enacts the events of Easter) becomes the key—the general recipe—for how reality is both constituted and known.

There is much more to say here, but it is sufficient to note that the Gospel of John suggests a notion of truth based on encounter rather than representation. Jesus is “ἀ-λήθεια”—the unconcealing or disclosure of God. To encounter Christ is to know God. If I may put on my continental philosophy hat for a moment, I would say that the Gospel of John treats truth as a hermeneutic of encounter. [[10]](#footnote-10) The encounter with God in the Eucharist is the event (indefinitely repeated in liturgy) through which the Johannine community, and successive Christian communities, perceive and understand the world around them.

On the one hand, the Johannine idea of truth as a function of divine encounter is immensely helpful in thinking about religious difference. Too often, religions are treated as sets of propositions that must be defended against competing sets of propositions—exclusivism, for example, is borne out this anxiety. Yet, if truth were an encounter with the divine, then much of the agonism generated by propositional logic would be ameliorated. On the other hand, it is difficult to generate a fully formed model of interreligious dialogue based on the Gospel of John, which is perhaps the most exclusive of all the Gospels. Only in John does Jesus says, “No one comes to the Father except through me” (14:6). There are good historical reasons for the Gospel of John to make such a claim. The Johannine community was a sectarian community existing in tension with its parent tradition (Judaism).[[11]](#footnote-11) The exclusive rhetoric was probably meant to comfort the suffering community—as if to say, “You may be suffering now, but don’t worry because you know the truth and your oppressors don’t.” If we see John’s exclusivism as the result of historical circumstances rather than an enduring theological injunction, then it may be possible to expand John’s insight into a more effective model for interreligious dialogue. Two expansions will be helpful. First, a Rabbinical expansion of divine love: the Eucharist is a hermeneutical key for John because it re-presents the events of Easter, which are, for Christians, the paradigmatic expression of God’s love. The Rabbis teach us that creation itself is an act of divine love, and so God may be encountered throughout creation. Second, a Sufi expansion of religious imagination: if we are to find God’s love in traditions other than our own *without abandoning our own*, we need to develop the capacity to imaginatively engage other traditions.

Divine love is common theme in Rabbinic literature, but I want to focus on one particular thinker—Hasdai Crescas (1340-1410), who was the leader of the Jewish community in Aragon (Spain) and one of the foremost Rabbinic authorities of his time. He is well known for his objections to the creeping influence of Aristotelianism in Jewish thought. His major philosophical work, *Or Adonai*, is a thoroughgoing critique of Maimonides, peppered with scriptural interpretation and Talmudic references. Among his many novel philosophical and theological insights, Crescas claims that the paradigmatic expression of God’s love is the act of creation.

Crescas develops his concept of divine love in opposition to the Socratic idea of *Eros*. In the Socratic tradition, love stems from privation: one loves what one does not have. Thus, in the *Symposium*, Socrates asks Agathon, “Has he [i.e., the one who loves] or has he not the object of his desire and love when he desires and loves it?” To which Agathon responds, “He does not have it, most likely.” Socrates replies that the connection between love and privation is not only likely but necessary: “consider if the desiring subject must have desire for something it lacks, and again, no desire if it has no lack. I at least, Agathon, am perfectly sure it is a necessity.” Love, for Socrates, is ultimately based on imperfection: “in general all who feel desire, feel it for what is not provided or present; for something they have not or are not or lack” (Plato, *Symposium*, 200a-e).

For Aristotle, the Socratic notion of love implies an *erotic* hierarchy. One who is less perfect has need of one who is more perfect, but not vice versa: “the better of the two parties, for instance, or the more useful or otherwise superior as the case may be, should receive more affection than he bestows” (Aristotle, *Nichomachean Ethics*, 1158b). Warren Zev Harvey notes the implication: “This rule means, for Aristotle, that children should love parents more than parents love children, subjects should love rulers more than rulers love subjects, and wives should love husbands more than husbands love wives. It also means that the Unmoved Mover is loved, not loving” (Zev Harvey 1998: 109). God, for Aristotle, is the perfect being, lacking nothing. As such, God cannot love; the Unmoved Mover can be the object of love, but never the subject.

In *Or Adonai*, Crescas develops a notion of divine love that effectively brackets Aristotelian *Eros*. Aristotle argues that God, as the perfect being, and as the ultimate object of love, lacks nothing and therefore cannot love. Crescas agrees that God is the ultimate object of love, but rejects the notion that love stems from lack. Love, for Crescas, stems not from need or imperfection, but from power and perfection: “the love is in proportion to the perfection of the *lover*” (Zev Harvey 1998: 110). Crescas supports his anti-Aristotelian notion of love by appealing to God’s perfection:

Inasmuch as it is known that God, may He be blessed, is the source and fountain of all perfections, and in virtue of His perfection, which is His essence, He loves the good, as may be seen from His actions in bringing into existence the entire universe, sustaining it perpetually, and continuously creating it anew, and all by means of his simple will, it must necessarily be that the love of the good is an essential property of perfection. It follows from this that the greater the perfection [of the lover], the greater will be the love and the pleasure in desire (Crescas, *Or Adonai*, II, 6, 1).

Accordingly God, for Crescas, is both the ultimate object of love and the ultimate lover. God’s perfection implies an infinitely abundant love, which is ultimately manifest in creation. In opposition to Aristotle’s claim that love only flows up the hierarchy of perfection (the more perfect party always receives more love than is given), Crescas argues that love, originating in God, flows down the hierarchy of perfection (the more perfect party *gives* *more* love than is received). As Zev Harvey puts it, “God’s love for the world is greater than the world’s love for Him” (1998: 111). Crescas demonstrates this by examining the love between the Patriarchs and God in scripture:

when it mentions the love of the Patriarchs for God, it uses the term *ahabah* [love], saying “Abraham my loving friend” [Isaiah 41:8], and in the commandments it also uses *ahabah* [e.g., Deuteronomy 6:5], but when it mentions the love of God for the Patriarchs, it uses the term *hesheq* [passionate love], which indicates the strength of the love, saying “Yet the Lord did passionately love [*hashaq*] the fathers” [Deuteronomy 10:15] (Crescas, *Or Adonai*, II, 6, 1).

On the Aristotelian paradigm, one would expect the Patriarchs’ love for God to be of greater intensity than God’s love for the Patriarchs, but the opposite is true: “*ahabah*,” the everyday word for love, describes the Patriarchs’ love for God, while “*hesheq*,” denoting an exceedingly great love, describes God’s love for the Patriarchs. The logic of Crescas’s claim is the exact opposite of Aristotle’s: God is perfect, so God loves perfectly.

By linking God’s power with love, Crescas develops a concept of creation as an act of “overflowing love.” God, who finds joy in his own will, rejoices in causing his goodness and love to “overflow” onto creation. Crescas is worth quoting at length here:

[Since] it has been demonstrated true beyond doubt that God is the true Agent of all existing things intentionally and voluntarily, and sustains their existence through the overflowing of His goodness perpetually, and thus the Rabbis fixed the benediction, “He creates in His goodness each day continuously the Work of Creation”… it follows that in His intentionally and voluntarily causing His goodness and perfection to overflow, He necessarily loves the increasing of goodness and the causing of his goodness to overflow. And love is nothing other than pleasure in his will, and this is the true joy, as it is said, “Let the Lord rejoice in his works” [Psalm 104:31]. This states explicitly the joy is in His works, that is, it is in His causing His goodness to overflow unto them by His sustaining their existence continuously in the most perfect of ways. In this regard, our Rabbis of blessed memory said in several places that the Holy One, blessed be He, “lusts for the prayers of righteous individuals” (Crescas, *Or Adonai*, I, 3, 5).

God loves causing His goodness to “overflow” onto creation, and thus “rejoices” in *creating*, which, as a supreme act of power, is also a supreme act of love. In God’s great love for creation, Crescas situates the rabbinical claim that God “lusts for the prayers of righteous individuals”—a claim that makes absolutely no sense on an Aristotelian notion of love. For Crescas, all of creation is suffused with divine love: “We may now envision Crescas’ infinite spatiotemporal universe as pulsing with love. Its infinite worlds are generated in love, sustained in love, and perfected in love” (Zev Harvey 1998: 113).

Crescas’s insights on love are useful in expanding the Gospel of John’s hermeneutic of encounter. We should always be cognizant of the historical distance separating the Johannine community from Crescas; nonetheless, Crescas helps us to see some of the implications of John’s Gospel. More specifically, Crescas’s notion of “an infinite spatiotemporal universe… generated in love, sustained in love, and perfected in love” allows for a connection between the Eucharist, which is the paradigmatic expression of love in John, and creation, which is the paradigmatic expression of love for Crescas. This would not displace the Eucharist but intertwine it with creation—two events, indefinitely repeated, both consequences of God’s love.[[12]](#footnote-12) It also raises the possibility that the God of love may be encountered authentically outside of a single religious tradition, for the entire universe is an act of love. Yet one wonders how such encounters occur. How could I, as a Christian, authentically encounter God in Islam without effectively abandoning my commitment to Christianity?

Of the three Abrahamic faiths, Islam is most explicit about the necessity of navigating religious differences. The Quran is clear that Islam, Christianity, and Judaism contain the same essential “truth”:

Say “We believe in God, and in that which was sent down unto us, and in that which was sent down unto Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob, and the Tribes, and in what Moses and Jesus were given, and in what the prophets were given from their Lord. We make no distinction among any of them, and unto Him we submit” (2:136).

More broadly, religious diversity is regarded as an intrinsic feature of God’s creation:

For each among you We have appointed a law and a way. And had God willed, He would have made you one community, but [He willed otherwise], that He might try you in that which he has given you. So vie with one another in good deeds. Unto God shall be your return all together, and He will inform you of that wherein you differ (5:48).

Although the Abrahamic religions are united in their submission to the one God, the Quran does not negate the particularity of the People of the Book. Christians will be judged according to the standard of Christian revelation (*Injil*), Jews according to the standard of Torah.[[13]](#footnote-13)

The Quranic affirmation of Judaism and Christianity generated fascinating interactions between the Abrahamic religions, especially during the medieval period. The early centuries of Islam saw extended polemical engagements between Muslim thinkers and Christian theologians in the East—e.g., John of Damascus, Theodore Abu Qurrah, Abu Ra‘itah, Abu ‘Isa al-Waraq, Ibn Hazm, and many others.[[14]](#footnote-14) While we might expect polemical interaction to cause disengagement, the opposite was true. Jewish, Christian, and Muslim philosophy and theology developed in close proximity during the medieval period. Muslim thinkers were especially creative in navigating the Quran’s affirmations of Christianity and Judaism alongside its rejection of particular Jewish and Christian doctrines, such as the Trinity (See 4:171). Consequently, medieval Muslim theology contains rich resources for thinking about religious difference.

I want to focus on one thinker: Muhyi al-Din Ibn al-‘Arabi (1165-1240), whose influence on Islam and Sufism in particular has been enormous, and whose work on religious imagination will be helpful in expanding the Johannine hermeneutic of encounter.[[15]](#footnote-15) Ibn al-‘Arabi argues that God can take many forms, depending on the expectations and capacities of the one perceiving God: “The Self-discloser [i.e., God], in respect of what He is in Himself, is One in Entity, while the self-disclosures—I mean their forms—are diverse in accordance with the diversity of the preparedness of the loci of self-disclosure. The property of the divine gifts is the same” (Chittick 1989: 92). God gives godself to be known according to the “preparedness” of the knower. This “preparedness” or receptivity originates not in the rational faculty, but in the imagination.

For Ibn al-‘Arabi, the role of the imagination derives from the nature of existence itself. On the one hand, there is God, whose existence is necessary (God=Being or “the Real”). On the other hand, there is non-existence. Everything in-between—the existence of the entire cosmos and all knowledge derived from it—exists in a mediated state. Accordingly, Ibn al-‘Arabi refers to the cosmos as an isthmus (*barzakh*) connecting God and nothingness. This ultimately means that everything exists in a paradoxical relationship to God: The cosmos *is* God (inasmuch as creation reflects the creator) and *is not* God (inasmuch as God transcends the world)—existence is “He/not-He.”

To explain the concept of “He/not-He,” Ibn al-‘Arabi often refers to two sources. First, the Quran’s account of God’s action in Muhammad’s victory at the Battle of Badr: “You did not slay them, but God slew them, and thou threwest not when thou threwest, but God threw” (8:17). Second, a hadith about Adam: “While His two hands were closed, God said to Adam, ‘Choose whichever you like.’ Adam replied, ‘I choose the right hand of the Lord, though both hands of my Lord are right and blessed.’ Then God opened it, and within it were Adam and His seed. He said, ‘My Lord, what are these?’ God replied, ‘These are your seed’” (Chittick 1989: 114). Ibn al-‘Arabi comments on these two episodes as follows:

Adam was in the hand while he was also outside of it. Such also is the case in this question: When you consider, you will see that the cosmos is with the Real [i.e., God] in this manner. This is a place of bewilderment: He/not-He. “You did not throw when you threw, but God threw.”… Would that I knew who is the middle, the one who stands between the negation—His words “You did not throw”—and the affirmation—His words “But He threw.” He is saying, “You are not you when you are you, but God is you” (Chittick 1989: 114f).

In other words, everything that exists apart from God contains within itself the paradox of He/not-He—it is both God and not-God. The paradoxical nature of existence (and God’s relation to existence) cannot be grasped by the rational faculty, which understands meaning “through proofs or a priori,” nor can it be grasped by the senses, which understand through sense perception. Rather, such paradoxes can be grasped only as “imaginal things,” for only the imagination is capable of giving concrete form to contradictory meanings. So, for example, I cannot rationally understand the idea of an entity that is both dead and not dead, and I certainly cannot perceive such a thing in the empirical world, but I am perfectly capable of imagining a zombie. Similarly, I cannot understand He/not-He on the basis of reason or sense perception, but I can imagine it. As Ibn al-‘Arabi puts it, “It is impossible for sense perception or the rational faculty to bring together opposites, but it is not impossible for the imagination… Hence nothing has truly gained possession of the [Divine] Form except imagination” (Chittick 1989: 115f). We ultimately encounter God through the imagination.[[16]](#footnote-16)

It is important not to let modern concepts of “imagination” restrict our analysis of Ibn al-‘Arabi. We tend to assume that reason and empirical evidence supersede the imagination, which we regarded as little more than a mental realm of childish fantasy. Ibn al-‘Arabi reminds us of the importance of imagination, for imagination is the human capacity that allows us to hope for a better world (ethics, justice), to desire greater understanding (science, philosophy), and to know God (theology). Imagination is, for Ibn al-‘Arabi, the highest capacity of the human intellect, connecting man to God. Moreover, the imagination is not strictly relegated to the human mind. Ibn al-‘Arabi speaks of existence itself as an “imaginal act” on God’s part; everything apart from God is “imaginal.” Consequently, imagination is both epistemological, in that it allows us to know or encounter divine paradox, and ontological, in that it constitutes the essential connection between factual and counterfactual worlds.

*III. Conclusion.*

Ibn al-Arabi’s concept of imagination is helpful in expanding the Johannine hermeneutic of encounter. Recall that the Gospel of John treats truth as a function of encounter, wherein the Johannine community knows the truth by repeatedly encountering Christ in the Eucharist. Our consideration of Crescas suggests that the “location” of such encounters might be expanded outside of a single tradition by linking the Eucharist to the act of creation—God’s love is manifest everywhere in creation. Ibn al-‘Arabi’s concept of imagination gives us a concrete way to think about encounters in traditions other than our own. If imagination is a *barzakh*—an isthmus between what is and is not, the factual and the counterfactual—then it can also hold together views of God in traditions that *are* and *are not* mine. I can imagine myself in historical circumstances other than my own; I can imagine myself committed to scriptural and theological traditions that are not natively mine; and I can see “He/not-He” manifested in Judaism and Islam just as it is in Christianity. In every case, my tradition is still my tradition, but through imagination I am able to hold together mine/not-mine. I am able to be genuinely committed to my own tradition and genuinely open to others. Additionally, these sorts of imaginative interreligious encounters would not be a diminution of religious commitment, but the highest expression of it.[[17]](#footnote-17) Through a hermeneutic of imaginative encounter we prepare our hearts to receive a God whose presence always exceeds expectation:

My heart is capable of every form: it is a pasture for gazelles and a convent for Christian monks,

And a temple for idols and the pilgrim’s Kaʿba and the tables of the Tora and the book of the Koran.

I follow the religion of Love: whatever way Love’s camels take, that is my religion and my faith (Ibn al-‘Arabi 1911: 67).

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1. The threefold typology of exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism is widely used; it originated in Alan Race’s *Christians and Religious Pluralism: Patterns in the Christian Theology of Religions* (1983). While many see it as a *soteriological* typology, it also functions as an *epistemological* typology inasmuch as *knowing* the truth (in some way) is essential for salvation. My purpose in treating this as an epistemological typology is to move beyond questions about soteriology that have dominated as discussion in the “theology of religions” for much of the 20th century. For a critical appraisal of the threefold typology, see D’Costa 2009: 3-37. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Exclusivism is essentially binary. As Marianne Moyaert puts it, “The antithetical structure of exclusivism is sometimes—although this is certainly not necessarily always the case—reflected in a binary grammar of selfing and othering. This grammar can be understood as a kind of primary anthropological reaction to the other: we are good/they are bad; we serve/they are selfish; we know the truth/they live a lie; we know God/they live turned away from God” (Moyaert 2012: 28f). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. George Lindbeck, for instance, argues that religious doctrines are “non-propositional cultural-linguistic statements” (Lindbeck 1984: 63-72). Michel Henry also argues for a non-propositional notion of truth (Henry 2003). At the very least, Lindbeck and Henry demonstrate that we should not simply assume that truth is a condition that applies only to propositions. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. “Aletheia (ἀλήθεια)”is used 7 times in the three synoptic gospels and 25 times in the Gospel of John, and this is not including metaphors for “truth” like λόγοςandὁδός. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. An earlier version of this analysis of “signs” and “recognition” appears in my essay, “The Semiotic Lifeworld of John’s Gospel: A Phenomenological Reading” (Wells 2016: 377-391). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Recognition scenes are common in ancient literature and drama. On Johannine use of recognitions scenes, see Culpepper 1998: 72-86 and Larsen 2008. My reading of John is indebted to Culpepper’s and Larsen’s detailed analyses of recognition scenes. Both scholars find rhetorical significance in Johannine deviations from typical forms of recognition. My own interpretation focuses on the philosophical implications of those deviations. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Culpepper argues that Martha’s recognition scene serves to emphasize Jesus’ “I am” claim over the sign: “The issue of faith shifts from the sign to the claim… the claim is made first and the sign follows” (Culpepper 2008: 258). The upshot of this “shift” is that future believers, who may not have witnessed signs, “are not disadvantaged because they still have the words of Jesus, which are more effective than signs in eliciting faith” (Culpepper 2008: 259). I would argue that Culpepper’s reading places too much emphasis on propositional statements as a foundation for belief—a possibility that is effectively proscribed by the Gospel’s emphasis on the relational nature of faith. After all, the sheep do not follow Jesus because they assent to his truth claims; rather, they follow because they know his voice. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. 21:13 is reminiscent of 6:11, where the Eucharistic connection is made clear by the use of the participle “εὐχαριστήσας.” [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. On presence in the Eucharist, see Dalferth 2006: 85-93. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Traditionally, the term “hermeneutics” refers to textual interpretation. (The Greek “ἑρμηνεία” means “interpretation.”) In the 20th century, Martin Heidegger, Hans-Georg Gadamer, Paul Ricoeur, and others expanded hermeneutics into a universal feature of epistemology and ontology. “Hermeneutics” is the interpretive strategy through which we perceive and understand our own existence. To speak of a “Johannine hermeneutic of encounter,” is to say that the encounter with Christ is the interpretive strategy through which the Johannine community perceives and understands itself and the surrounding world. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. For general background on the Johannine community, see Brown 1978. For a more in-depth treatment of sectarian formation, see Clark-Soles 2003. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. This emphasis on love is thoroughly Johannine: “I give you a new commandment: Love each other. Just as I have loved you, so you also must love each other. This is how everyone will know that you are my disciples, when you love each other” (John 13:34-35. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. *Injil* is, for Muslims, the divinely authored “kernel” of Christian revelation. See also 22:67-69 and 5:47. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. For an overview on Christian-Muslim dialogue from the 8th-12th centuries, see Siddiqui 2013: 6-96. Unfortunately, contemporary scholarship on Christian-Muslim dialogue tends to neglect the polemics of the medieval period. Siddiqui rightly notes the significance of works from this time period: “Such writings can be used today in the area of interreligious dialogue to show how believers can share a passion about their own beliefs but also be passionate about making these beliefs comprehensible to others. For in fact, similar conversations have the potential to enrich the encounter between Muslims and Christians rather than diminish good relations” (2013: 96). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Michael Wolfe proposes a fascinating reading of the Gospel of John based on the teachings of Ibn al-‘Arabi. (Wolfe 2016). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Like the Gosepl of John, Ibn al-‘Arabi sees truth as hermeneutic of encounter. As Chittick states, “Hermeneutics is not a rational process, but an encounter with the divine self-disclosure, an opening of the heart toward infinite wisdom” (Chittick 1989: 130). [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Unlike pluralism, my model of interreligious dialogue would not require agnosticism. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)