

Rituals in Interreligious Dialogue:

Bridge or Barrier?

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By

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All who worship what is not real knowledge but mere ritual enter
into blind darkness;
those who merely delight in real knowledge enter, as it were, into
greater darkness.

—After *Isa Upanishad* 9

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PREFACE

Rituals are the memory of a religion. Ours is a busy life, and we tend to gloss over important events in our lives. Rituals remind us that our life is a gift between birth and death, to be celebrated in community. This is the wisdom of virtually all religions and has been my guiding thought from the time I started to study theology. The gradual waning of rituals in Western society is no proof of their obsolescence, but may remind us of forgotten values to be explored anew.

Interreligious encounter is one of the happy events of our time and may contribute to tolerance, peace, and understanding, especially when the world at large shows increasing tensions. The holy Scriptures and ethical principles of Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, and Hinduism constitute an important segment of theological studies and contribute to the living encounter between representatives of these religions. The Vatican tirelessly advocates interreligious encounters, as a means to deepen understanding of the other, to give authentic witness of one's faith, and to contribute jointly to solve problems faced by humankind. It is surprising, however, that in contrast to Scriptures and moral guidelines, rituals hardly play a role in interreligious encounters. Should they be considered mere stumbling blocks that prevent a genuine encounter between people of different faiths? Or do rituals belong to the intimacy of one's religion, not apt to be shared or even discussed with "outsiders"?

In this book, I fulfill a long-felt desire to study religious rituals in depth, especially with a view of interreligious encounter. In the meantime, some other scholars of interreligious dialogue have discovered the crucial importance of rituals. I mention here among many other studies the stimulating philosophical reflections by Marianne Moyaert. My approach differs in that it is less a reflection "from the outside" than an attempt to understand rituals from within a religion. Although each religion would require more than a lifetime to get acquainted with, I think that an interreligious perspective may yield surprising results that remain obscured in a monoreligious perspective. This is what I have learned from my teacher Rabbi Yehuda Aschkenasy Z"L, who always emphasized that getting to know Judaism would be an important contribution to deepening one's Christian faith.

I would like to thank the Max Weber Kolleg in Erfurt, especially Dr. Claudia Bergmann, who in 2018 offered me the opportunity to study rituals in depth. My own faculty, the Tilburg School of Theology, was so generous as to allow me to skip part of the education curriculum for two months. With Dr. Thomas Blanton I had lively exchanges about biblical persons and their ritual significance. Thomas also did the job of correcting my English. I highly appreciate his meticulous work, adding that any remaining faults are to be credited to me.

Marcel Poorthuis

ABBREVIATIONS

Technical Abbreviations

cf.	<i>confer</i> , compare
d.	died
diss.	dissertation
ed(s).	editor(s), edited by, edition
et al.	<i>et alii</i> , and others
etc.	<i>et cetera</i> , and so forth, and the rest
i.e.	<i>id est</i> , that is
lit.	literally
n.s.	new series
repr.	reprint
rev.	revised
SJ	Society of Jesus
trans.	translator, translated by
Z"L	<i>zikrono livrakah</i> (“may his memory be a blessing”)

Ancient and Biblical Texts and Versions

1 Cor	1 Corinthians
Acts	Acts
Avod. Zar.	Avodah Zarah
b.	Babylonian Talmud
Ber.	Berakhot
Deut	Deuteronomy
DT	Dutch translation
ESV	English Standard Version
ET	English translation
Exod	Exodus
Gen	Genesis
Gen. Rab.	Genesis Rabbah
Mark	Mark
Matt	Matthew
NIV	New International Version
Rom	Romans

Sanh.	Sanhedrin
t.	Tosefta
Zech	Zechariah

Journals and Monograph Series

<i>AJAJ</i>	<i>American Jewish Archives Journal</i>
<i>AQ</i>	<i>Anthropological Quarterly</i>
<i>BSNC</i>	<i>Bulletin of the Secretariat of Non-Christian Religions</i>
<i>CrossCurr</i>	<i>CrossCurrents</i>
<i>CurEnc</i>	<i>Currents of Encounter: Studies on the Contact between Christianity and Other Religions, Beliefs, and Cultures</i>
<i>DRev</i>	<i>Downside Review</i>
<i>HUCA</i>	<i>Hebrew Union College Annual</i>
<i>ICMR</i>	<i>Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations</i>
<i>Islam</i>	<i>Der Islam: Journal of the History and Culture of the Middle East</i>
<i>JCPS</i>	<i>Jewish and Christian Perspectives Series</i>
<i>JES</i>	<i>Journal of Ecumenical Studies</i>
<i>JET</i>	<i>Journal of Empirical Theology</i>
<i>JGB</i>	<i>Journal of Global Buddhism</i>
<i>JHCS</i>	<i>Journal of Hindu-Christian Studies</i>
<i>JIntS</i>	<i>Journal of Interreligious Studies</i>
<i>JQR</i>	<i>Jewish Quarterly Review</i>
<i>JSAI</i>	<i>Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam</i>
<i>Judaism</i>	<i>Judaism: A Quarterly Journal of Jewish Life and Thought</i>
<i>Lit</i>	<i>Liturgy</i>
<i>LS</i>	<i>Louvain Studies</i>
<i>Numen</i>	<i>Numen: International Review for the History of Religions</i>
<i>OpTh</i>	<i>Open Theology</i>
<i>PhZJ</i>	<i>Philosophen des zwanzigsten Jahrhunderts</i>
<i>PolT</i>	<i>Political Theology</i>
<i>RelEd</i>	<i>Religious Education</i>
<i>Religion</i>	<i>Religion: A Journal of Religion and Religions</i>
<i>SCJR</i>	<i>Studies in Christian-Jewish Relations</i>
<i>SIRD</i>	<i>Studies in Interreligious Dialogue</i>
<i>Spec</i>	<i>Speculum</i>
<i>Trad</i>	<i>Tradition: A Journal of Orthodox Jewish Thought</i>
<i>TS</i>	<i>Theological Studies</i>
<i>WBR</i>	<i>Western Buddhist Review</i>
<i>WI</i>	<i>Die Welt des Islams</i>

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION: RITUALS AND ENCOUNTER BETWEEN WORLD RELIGIONS

Ben Zoma said: "I found a verse that encompasses all of the Torah:
'Listen, Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord is one.'"

Ben Nanas said: "I found a verse that encompasses all of the Torah:
'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'"

Ben Pazi said: "I found a verse that encompasses all of the Torah:
'In the morning you shall bring a sacrifice and in the evening you shall
bring a sacrifice.'"

Their teacher Rabbi stood up and said:
"The Torah is according to Ben Pazi."¹
(*Ein Jakob*, introduction).

All true life is encounter, the Jewish dialogical philosopher Martin Buber states. Still, present-day reality gives some reason to doubt the efficacy of interreligious dialogue. For some, the expression *interreligious dialogue* contains an idealistic ring, far remote from the events that daily fill our television screen: war, terrorist attacks, ethnic cleansing, hate speeches, intolerance, and aggression, not seldom fueled by religious sentiments. The rise of secularism, simultaneously with religious fundamentalism and possibly in a hybrid connection, seems to render dialogue superfluous and even futile. Some thinkers advocate a less theoretical approach to dialogue and speak of a world ethos (Hans Küng), not meant as an umbrella spirituality transcending actual religions, but as a result of a joined effort by all religions to promote the common good. The word *diapraxis* is another signal that the religious dialogue as such is felt to be insufficient to cope with present-day reality. Only by joining efforts to improve the situation of large segments of the world population and of our planet earth at large will religions and worldviews come to recognize each other as partners on the

¹ Ben Pazi's emphasis upon the ritual encompasses the other two. The translation is the author's.

way. Although technical advancement will be highly important in order to cope with the big problems of our planet earth, on a deeper level a new spirituality is even more needed. The environment is not only an object entrusted to our care, but also the realm of creation in which humankind is entrusted with responsibility for its fellow creatures, the animals, the vegetation, and even future biological diversity. Humankind is itself part of creation. A new way of thinking about time is needed in which the responsibility for future generations, “until the third and fourth generation,” becomes paramount. For the first time in history, our actions will have repercussions for generations to come.² In addition, a new attentiveness to food and drink, constituting core rituals in many religions, has come up in our time, showing a new awareness of the environment, even if in a totally secular setting. In general, issues of human rights, tolerance, human dignity, conflict solving, forgiveness, and renewal, as well as bioethics, are all issues that are not limited to a technical level, but presuppose a spiritual reorientation. Religions may have an important contribution to make, if only they succeed in giving a shared trustworthy testimony, without claiming to offer an exclusive answer by excluding other perspectives.

Religions can be subdivided into religious convictions, ethical obligations, and ritual actions. Whereas the first two have been dealt with frequently in interreligious encounters, the third category, ritual, has been seriously neglected. The reason is perhaps that rituals are often seen as barriers to a genuine encounter rather than as a bridge between religions and between religion and society. One way to cope with the barriers of rituals is to ignore them or to minimize their importance. To enable that, religions are often viewed as consisting of an authentic nucleus of personal convictions, but at the outside accreted to obsolete habits without any practical meaning, jealously guarded by “institutional” regulations. This model is especially widespread in Western Europe and America, under the influence both of an increasing rationalism and of a Protestant rejection of “superstitious rituals.” However, this model, which attaches only marginal significance to rituals, is more and more challenged by ritual scholars and anthropologists. In a way, rituals form the collective memory of a religious community and are especially relevant when individual commemoration falls short by oblivion, haste, and distraction. Although rituals are often devoid of a functional rational meaning, they connect the believer to a community, to a tradition, to foundation stories, and to a different perception of time and space, which may become sanctified and filled with meaning.

² See Hans Jonas, *The Imperative of Responsibility: In Search of Ethics for the Technological Age* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979).

Admittedly, participating in rituals conveys something of a paradox: often a sense of wonder and of gratitude begs to be expressed—gratitude for food, a new day, a festive occasion—but although words seem to fall short to express these emotions, religion prescribes rituals to accompany these emotions in the form of fixed words and prescribed gestures. The obligation of rituals remains even when the emotions seem to be lacking, such as may happen at funerals. In that case, rituals evoke emotions rather than expressing them. It is, however, not difficult to detect the danger of putting rituals in a prominent place. Rituals are intended to keep alive the sense of wonder and amazement, gratitude and sharing; for example, in prayer before a meal. One may get the impression, however, that wonder and amazement seem to be replaced by repetition and fixed words and gestures. Although this paradoxical relationship between spontaneous emotions of wonder, grief, or gratitude and fixed rituals may be the reason for a serious crisis of traditional rituals in our modern, dynamic society, always eager for new experiences, this is no reason to interpret this paradox as an impossibility. The frailty of human memory asks for discipline, for sharing of rituals, and for fixed dates on the calendar.

Theologian Marianne Moyaert has drawn attention to the neglect of rituals in interreligious encounter, in contrast with religious texts, which seem to belong somewhat more to “public property.” “Entering the sacred space of another religious community and being shaped by their rituals creates the possibility of deeper interreligious understanding rooted in real religious life.”³ Still, even religious texts cannot be understood apart from their communal ritual contexts, such as the aesthetic and religious experience of the recitation of the Qur’an, the solemn reading of the Bible in the liturgy, or the cantillation of Torah in the synagogue. In a way, texts become alienated from their religious contexts when studied in interreligious settings. It may well be that it is the rituals that constitute the dimension of religious “ownership” more than texts that can be studied in an academic context, and also more than actions in which religions may unite or may join society at large. Moreover, texts themselves should be understood in their ritual setting as well. Even if one is completely conversant in the language and texts of a given religion, that does not by itself make one a member of a community. Texts are not just carriers of information, but are reenacted and connected with one’s life by celebration and ritual performances.⁴

³ Marianne Moyaert, “Comparative Theology: Between Text and Ritual,” in *The Past, Present, and Future of Interreligious Dialogue*, ed. Terence Merrigan and John Friday (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 194.

⁴ See Jeannine Hill Fletcher, “‘As Long as We Wonder’: Possibilities and Impossibilities of Interreligious Dialogue,” *TS* 68 (2007): 531–54.

A classic example of the renewal of a relationship with the best intentions, but with a one-sided focus upon spirituality, is the Jewish-Christian dialogue. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the Jewish philosopher Martin Buber acquainted Western Europe, not only the Christians but also the Jews, with unexpected treasures from the Hasidic world in Eastern Europe. In Buber's presentation, one might get the impression, however, that telling stories had been the main activity of the Rebbes. The halakhic world of the commandments in Hasidism remained unexplored.⁵ Christians have greeted the Hasidic stories as the "essence of Judaism," not realizing that by doing so they have tailored Judaism according to Christian categories. Religions such as Judaism and Islam do not attach central significance to theology, as Christianity does (especially in its Protestant form), but prefer a ritual and even juridical approach.

Another function of rituals is even less popular in modern times: rituals demarcate human relations as to gender, age, and religious affiliation or hierarchy; both internally in the religious community and externally in relation to the outside world. This creates a double focus: on the one hand, rituals connect people and contribute to a symbolic approach to the world and its enjoyments; for example, by expressing gratitude to the Dispenser of all goods. On the other hand, rituals may alienate human beings from one another, especially for those belonging to a different religious affiliation. Rituals create distinctions within a given religion as well, distinctions that are often connected to cultic regulations and gender division. Often the access to certain sacred areas is limited, such as the sacred realm behind the iconostasis in the Orthodox churches, and the Holy of Holies in the Jewish temple. For a genuine interreligious encounter, it is vital to recognize this dual character of rituals, both uniting and dividing people. It is equally vital to realize that rituals cannot be adopted or changed at random, resisting as they do individual initiatives. Their obligatory character is part of their specific impact.

Still, rituals are also subject to change and are dynamic in their ability to adapt to new circumstances. For example, the concept of idolatry, with its many ritual prohibitions, shows a remarkable dynamism and cannot

⁵ From the Jewish side, Buber's presentation of Hasidism has been criticized by Gershom Gerhard Scholem, "Martin Bubers Deutung des Chassidismus," in *Judaica* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1968), 165–206; and by Rivka Schatz-Uffenheimer, "Die Stellung des Menschen zu Gott und Welt in Bubers Darstellung des Chassidismus," in *Martin Buber*, ed. Paul Arthur Schilpp and Maurice S. Friedman, PhZJ (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1963), 275–304. Buber's aversion to laws as contrary to dialogue becomes clear as well in his debate with the Jewish philosopher Franz Rosenzweig.

be considered as a mere static and unchanging condemnation of all people who believe otherwise. The relationship between monotheistic religions and Eastern religions such as Buddhism and Hinduism cannot be understood without a thorough analysis of the concept of idolatry, including the surprising possibilities of self-criticism and of genuine encounter that it embodies. The concept of idolatry is no less important for the internal relations between monotheistic religions themselves. Rituals reflect both the alienation between religions during their history and the possibility of new encounters in present-day reality. We will discuss this paradoxical character of rituals in more detail (chapter 5). Before that, we will have to delve into interreligious relations as such. If we abandon the simple equation of all other beliefs with heresy, deviance, and idolatry, what models of interreligious encounters may contribute to a new understanding of the other(s) (chapter 2)?

I will argue that a more or less philosophical approach from an outsider's perspective (as advocated by John Hick and Alan Race) fails to do justice to the specific relationships between religions.⁶ Instead, I advocate a model "from the inside," in which the questions take priority over the answers. This method allows for an overview of the interreligious relation between Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, but also between these religions and Hinduism and Buddhism (chapter 3).

On a ritual level, the cultic realm of a temple, church, synagogue, or mosque may offer unexpected barriers, often ignored in interreligious dialogue (chapter 4). I do not plead for the acceptance of these barriers without further ado, but it is obvious that these barriers serve as foundations of a ritual life in which believers are reconnected to their past, and this cannot simply be ignored. A proper understanding of these barriers may serve as a memory of past events and may contribute to a more genuine encounter in the present.

The rise of rituals in modernity may sometimes create new bonds between people, but as often may isolate traditional religions from modernity. One should, however, not forget that so-called civil rituals offer important opportunities for traditional religions to bring forward their deeply spiritual message, such as in commemorating the Second World War, or disasters of national dimensions, or a joint celebration of the harvest. Although a *multiple religious belonging* (MRB) is not a prerequisite for this kind of public ritual, it is clear that this phenomenon

⁶ See Alan Race, *Christians and Religious Pluralism: Patterns in the Christian Theology of Religions* (Maryknoll: New York 1983). See also John Hick, ed., *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness: Towards a Pluralistic Theology of Religions* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2004).

betrays a deep longing for spirituality, although it dramatically changes “traditional” interreligious dialogue. A sympathetic but critical evaluation of MRB, including the role of rituals in it, is mandatory (chapter 6).

The engagement of the Vatican with interreligious dialogue is clear from the declaration of *Nostra Aetate* (1965) onward. The Day of World Prayer in Assisi, inaugurated by Pope John Paul II, has created a turmoil among Catholic authorities: Is the ritual of prayer really apt to be shared among the faithful of different beliefs? An extensive theological evaluation shows how important the ritual dimension of religious encounter is, leading as it sometimes does to a deep connection, while transcending denominational boundaries. On other occasions, rituals may lead to a painful alienation between religions (chapter 7).

Music is a means par excellence to bring people together. As with rituals, music is often considered as a mere by-product of verbal exchange, but it is far more than that. In our phenomenological approach, it becomes clear that different musical practices betray a different perspective on the truth that may unite people of different faiths (chapter 8).

Likewise departing from a phenomenological perspective, I analyze the *guest* as an appropriate description of interreligious encounter, accompanied by equally appropriate rituals. The old model of dialogue as a gradual fusion between different people gives way to the recognition of genuine differences that can be a source of joy and of mutual respect (chapter 9).

Focusing on the ritual aspect of religious encounter enables a critical analysis of a variety of rituals, both traditional and modern, including the morning celebrations at the International Council of Christians and Jews; sharing the pulpit in the city of Rotterdam; the dialogue Seder of the Liberal Jewish Community in Amsterdam; a completely new ritual of remembering slavery, the *Keti Koti* tables; a communal iftar meal; the Christian agape celebration, and visiting each other’s “houses of God” (chapter 10). In the conclusion, I summarize the results of our exploration and offer some recommendations for the future of interreligious encounters.

Obviously, my personal experiences as well as geographical limitations, that is, the Netherlands, and my denominational affiliation both contribute to and limit the validity of what follows. I am a Roman Catholic theologian who has been involved in interreligious dialogue for some forty years, studied for a few decades with a rabbi, later learned Arabic, and wrote on the reception of Buddhism in the Netherlands. All this influences the perspective of this book. From a methodological point of view, my approach is qualitative rather than quantitative. Obviously, collecting empirical data by quantitative research, statistics, interviews, and surveys may be a welcome addition to many of the ritual practices I describe in this book.

Still, that research cannot dispense with a thorough theological reflection in which the historical and interreligious dimensions of actual practices become understandable. I would heartily welcome such additional quantitative research.

To conclude this introduction, I return to a well-known story that is so familiar to many of us that we nearly forget to ponder over it. I refer to the story of the three rings. The sources of this story are fascinating enough.⁷ Both tolerant and highly exclusive versions abound, but its most challenging version has been told in Lessing's play *Nathan der Weise* (1779). Clearly, Lessing derived the story from Boccaccio's *Decamerone* (1353), and even there an earlier source may have been used, for the story tells about three rings, whereas only two religions, Islam and Judaism, are really involved.⁸ I want to tell the story because it is often misunderstood, especially by theologians. They regard the story as a plea for relativism, which I think it is not. In my interpretation, the story can be understood as a profound challenge to the religions to contribute to a better world, which even affects their truth claims. The story will accompany us during the book to resurface at the end.

Sultan Saladin needs money for warfare, and he plans to confiscate it from Nathan the Jew by posing a tricky question to him: "What is the true religion?" If Nathan answers "Judaism," the sultan can feign anger and confiscate Nathan's money. If Nathan says "Islam," the Sultan may compel him to convert.⁹

SALADIN.

To gain instruction quite on other points,
Since you are a man so wise, tell me which law,
Which faith appears to you the better?

NATHAN.

Sultan,
I am a Jew.

SALADIN.

And I a Mussulman:
The Christian stands between us. Of these three

⁷ See Marcel Poorthuis, "The Three Rings: Between Exclusiveness and Tolerance," in *The Three Rings: Textual Studies in the Trialogue between Judaism, Christianity, and Islam*, ed. Barbara Roggema, Marcel Poorthuis, and Pim Valkenberg (Leuven: Peeters, 2005), 257–86.

⁸ The *Cento Novelle Antiche* and especially the *Avventuroso Siciliano* (1311) belong to Boccaccio's more immediate sources.

⁹ I quote from the famous translation by William Taylor: Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *Nathan the Wise: A Dramatic Poem*, trans. William Taylor (London: Philips, 1803).

Religions only one can be the true.
 A man, like you, remains not just where birth
 Has chanced to cast him, or, if he remains there,
 Does it from insight, choice, from grounds of preference.¹⁰
 Share then with me your insight—let me hear
 The grounds of preference, which I have wanted
 The leisure to examine—learn the choice,
 These grounds have motived, that it may be mine.
 In confidence I ask it. (...)

NATHAN.

Strange! How is this? What wills the sultan of me?
 I came prepared with cash—he asks truth. Truth?
 (...) Allow me to relate a tale.
 In days of yore, there dwelt in east a man
 Who from a valued hand received a ring
 Of endless worth: the stone of it an opal,
 That shot an ever-changing tint: moreover,
 It had the hidden virtue him to render
 Of God and man beloved, who in this view,
 And this persuasion, wore it. Was it strange
 The eastern man ne'er drew it off his finger,
 And studiously provided to secure it
 For ever to his house. Thus—he bequeathed it;
 First, to the MOST BELOVED of his sons,
 Ordained that he again should leave the ring
 To the MOST DEAR among his children—and
 That without heeding birth, the FAVOURITE son,
 In virtue of the ring alone, should always
 Remain the lord of the house—You hear me, Sultan?

SALADIN.

I understand thee—go on.

NATHAN.

From son to son,
 At length this ring descended to a father,
 Who had three sons, alike obedient to him;
 Whom therefore he could not but love alike.
 At times seemed this, now that, at times the third,
 (Accordingly as each apart received
 The overflowings of his heart) most worthy
 To heir the ring, which with good-natured weakness
 He privately to each in turn had promised.
 This went on for a while. But death approached,

¹⁰ The coincidence of birth cannot be a criterion for the true religion, a well-known “enlightened” argument, against which Jewish thinkers bring forward the reliability of tradition.

And the good father grew embarrassed. So
 To disappoint two sons, who trust his promise,
 He could not bear. What's to be done? He sends
 In secret to a jeweller, of whom,
 Upon the model of the real ring,
 He might bespeak two others, and commanded
 To spare nor cost nor pains to make them like,
 Quite like the true one. This the artist managed.
 The rings were brought, and e'en the father's eye
 Could not distinguish which had been the model.
 Quite overjoyed he summons all his sons,
 Takes leave of each apart, on each bestows
 His blessing and his ring, and dies—Thou hearest me?

SALADIN.

I hear, I hear, come finish with thy tale;
 Is it soon ended?

NATHAN.

It is ended, Sultan,
 For all that follows may be guessed of course.
 Scarce is the father dead, each with his ring
 Appears, and claims to be the lord of the house.
 Comes question, strife, complaint—all to no end;
 For the true ring could no more be distinguished
 Than now can—the true faith.

SALADIN.

How, how, is that
 To be the answer to my query?

NATHAN.

No,
 But it may serve as my apology;
 If I can't venture to decide between
 Rings, which the father got expressly made,
 That they might not be known from one another.

SALADIN.

The rings—don't trifle with me; I must think
 That the religions which I named can be
 Distinguished, even to raiment, drink, and food.

NATHAN.

And only not as to their grounds of proof.
 Are not all built alike on history,
 Traditional, or written. History
 Must be received on trust—is it not so?
 In whom now are we likeliest to put trust?
 In our own people surely, in those men
 Whose blood we are, in them, who from our childhood
 Have given us proofs of love, who ne'er deceived us,

Unless 'twere wholesomer to be deceived.
 How can I less believe in my forefathers
 Than thou in thine. How can I ask of thee
 To own that thy forefathers falsified
 In order to yield mine the praise of truth.
 The like of Christians.

SALADIN.

By the living God,
 The man is in the right, I must be silent.

NATHAN.

The judge said, If ye summon not the father
 Before my seat, I cannot give a sentence.
 Am I to guess enigmas? Or expect ye
 That the true ring should here unseal its lips?
 But hold—you tell me that the real ring
 Enjoys the hidden power to make the wearer
 Of God and man beloved; let that decide.
 Which of you do two brothers love the best?
 You're silent. Do these love-exciting rings
 Act inward only, not without? Does each
 Love but himself? Ye're all deceived deceivers,
 None of your rings is true. The real ring
 Perhaps is gone. To hide or to supply
 Its loss, your father ordered three for one.

SALADIN.

O charming, charming!

NATHAN.

And (the judge continued)
 If you will take advice in lieu of sentence,
 This is my counsel to you, to take up
 The matter where it stands. If each of you
 Has had a ring presented by his father,
 Let each believe his own the real ring.
 And if the virtues of the ring continue
 To show themselves among your children's children,
 After a thousand thousand years, appear
 Before this judgment-seat—a greater one
 Than I shall sit upon it, and decide.
 So spake the modest judge.

SALADIN.

God!

NATHAN.

Saladin,
 Feel'st thou thyself this wiser, promised man?

SALADIN.

I dust, I nothing, God!

[Precipitates himself upon Nathan, and takes hold of his hand, which

he does not quit for the remainder of the scene.]

NATHAN.

What moves thee, Sultan?

SALADIN.

Nathan, my dearest Nathan, 'tis not yet

The judge's thousand thousand years are past,

His judgment-seat's not mine. Go, go, but love me.

The magic of the true ring is that the bearer is beloved by God and mankind. The brothers (read: the religions) however, quarrel. Was the true ring altogether lost? In other words: Is the violence produced by religions a sign that they have forfeited their vocation altogether? Only by showing benevolence and love to the others can one demonstrate the working of the true ring. In a sense, the criterion of truth shifts from the owner to the others, and from possession to acting.

Questions abound: What if there have been three true rings? Or none at all? It is not so easy to dispense with this story with the argument of a sloppy relativism; this would perhaps be possible in the case of three true rings. The easy way out is to decide that religions are responsible for all the evil on earth and that peace will reign from the moment the religions have disappeared. This coincides with the case of no true ring at all. We will notice under way how central this story remains for reflections about interreligious dialogue.

CHAPTER 2

THEOLOGICAL MODELS OF RELIGIOUS ENCOUNTER

All true life is encounter.
—Martin Buber

Doing justice to the major religions, both monotheistic and non-monotheistic, is impossible. We will skip the long history of religions and deal only with those models that have an actual relevance because they play a role in interreligious dialogue. We will start with a triadic model: exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism; which was first proposed by Alan Race and has been adopted by John Hick, receiving much support.¹ We will show, however, that its use is far more limited than it seems at first glance (section 1 below). After that, we will deal with one of the oldest models in Christianity: the Logos model, adopted nowadays not only by Western theologians, but also by theologians from India like Raimon Panikkar, but frowned upon by the Vatican (section 2).²

The Abrahamic model has become famous due to the remarkable Islamic scholar and mystic Louis Massignon.³ We will see that its relativistic interpretation currently in vogue fails to do justice to Massignon's intentions (section 3).

¹ See Race, *Christians and Religious Pluralism*.

² Raimon Panikkar, *The Unknown Christ of Hinduism: Towards an Ecumenical Christophany*, rev. ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1981); Panikkar, *The Intrareligious Dialogue* (New York: Paulist, 1999).

³ For a first introduction to Massignon, see Sidney Griffith, "Sharing the Faith of Abraham: the 'Credo' of Louis Massignon," *ICMR* 8, no. 2 (1997): 193–210. More elaborate: Mary Louise Gude, *Louis Massignon: The Crucible of Compassion* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1996); about his colorful life: Patrick Laude, *Louis Massignon: The Vow and the Oath* (London: Matheson Trust, 2011). With pleasure I refer to the study by a former teacher of mine, Jacques Waardenburg, "Louis Massignon (1883–1962) as a Student of Islam," *WI*, n.s., 45, no. 3 (2005): 312–42.

In chapter 3, we will offer a new way of describing interreligious relations: by tracing the specific questions a religion poses to another religion just by being there. This solves the problem of hierarchical relations and excluded parties. One may think of the recurring problem of the Far Eastern religions not sharing the Abrahamic faith. Relegating them to lesser importance is unjust and often betrays mere ignorance.

We will illustrate this by dealing in a bird's-eye view with the reception of Buddhism and Hinduism in Europe, meant to unearth the vital questions these two religions pose to the Abrahamic religions.

1. The Triad of Exclusivism, Inclusivism, and Pluralism

John Hick was raised in the conviction that only his (evangelical) form of Christianity constituted the true religion. After he seriously began to doubt that, he gradually adhered to a pluralistic conception, convinced that God would not shut out the majority of humankind from salvation: all religions are equally true and are under way. These religions cherish absolute claims that have a bearing upon their *perceptions* of transcendence, but not upon transcendence itself. Hence no religion possesses the truth. Hick adopted a triad of attitudes that he found in religions: (1) exclusivism; (2) inclusivism; and (3) pluralism, sometimes distinguished into hard and soft pluralism, or, quite normatively, described as relativism.⁴ He strongly pleaded for Christianity as a pluralistic religion, which should not claim to possess in Christ the only or even the best way to salvation.⁵

Exclusivists can be found among evangelicals, but also with the theologian Karl Barth, with his Christocentric theology and his distinction between *religion* as mere human effort (to be found in all religions, including Christianity) and *faith* as revelation from above (in Christianity only).⁶

⁴ Alan Race has been the first to bring this model forward. See Race, *Christians and Religious Pluralism*.

⁵ Hick, ed., *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness*.

⁶ Karl Barth's courageous protest before World War II against the Nazi propaganda of German culture and blood as sacrosanct explains his strong emphasis upon revelation as antagonistic to human experience. His theology allows for a strong criticism of Christianity as "religion," but fails to acknowledge other religions as more than just human efforts. For Protestant theologians who cover the whole range of exclusive, inclusive, and pluralistic stances towards Islam, see Jane I. Smith, "Some Contemporary Protestant Theological Reflections on Pluralism: Implications for Christian-Muslim Understanding," *ICMR* 8, no. 1 (1997): 67–83.

Inclusivistic is the declaration *Nostra Aetate*. In it the other monotheistic religions are viewed in the perspective of Abraham, and the Far Eastern religions are said to contain sparks of divine truth.

Pluralistic is the view that all religions are on the way to the truth, but that no one (or all) can claim to possess the ultimate truth. This model, although widely used, has its flaws. First, one seems to take an outsider's perspective in which one professes to be able to judge the different religions. From which perspective is that possible? This question is especially urgent when combined with a preference for pluralism. One may compare Hick's theology to the well-known story of the three blind men who come across an elephant. One describes the huge mystery as a tree, feeling the leg; the other as a sail, touching the ear; the third feels something curved and hard, caressing the ivory tusk. They may start to quarrel because each blind man is convinced of his truth. The fundamental question, however, is: Who is the one seeing the whole elephant? Is that John Hick?⁷

The triad also leads to inner contradictions: What if the pluralist should meet an exclusivist who wants to persuade him to join his religion? He or she would have no argument to refuse that invitation, other than this: "I am tolerant, so I reject your exclusivistic religion!" In addition, the model should not be equated with the Christian triad that includes theocentric, Christocentric, and ecclesiocentric perspectives. All these three can be conceived in an exclusive, inclusive, and pluralistic way, so that in theory nine options are feasible.⁸ A bold joint attempt has been undertaken by two authors, a Muslim and a Christian, to prove that exclusivism is a man-made

⁷ See the justified criticism by Marianne Moyaert, "A Critique of the Pluralist Model of Interreligious Dialogue," in *Fragile Identities: Towards a Theology of Interreligious Hospitality*, CurEnc 39 (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2011), 88–92. Of course, the story is too beautiful to do it away just like that: one may ponder over the possibility that the blind people stop quarreling and inquire with the other about his perspective. The story can be understood as a confession of humility and as a plea for dialogue. Blindness as a metaphor for human perception of the divine is a well-known mystical image. Even Saint Paul speaks about seeing in a mirror in obscurity (1 Cor 13:12).

⁸ The "anonymous Christian" of Karl Rahner is an example of a pluralist, but Christocentric approach. The denial of the validity of all baptisms except that of a "reborn Christian" is an example of exclusivistic ecclesiocentrism. The same holds good for the (erroneous) exclusivistic interpretation of the notorious clause *extra ecclesiam nulla salus* ("no salvation outside the church") as a damnation of all non-Catholics. The latter clause was originally used by Cyprian to convince *Christians* not to leave the church. Hence the clause is originally directed to fellow-Christians, not to non-Christians! See Francis A. Sullivan, *No Salvation outside the Church? Tracing the History of Catholic Response* (London: Chapman, 1992).

construct that cannot be traced back to either the Qur'an or the Gospels. They argue that the Qur'an emphasizes doing justice, regardless of from which religion the inspiration comes.⁹

A more serious objection to this triadic model of inclusivism, exclusivism, and pluralism is that it is not sufficiently dialogical, for it refrains from specifying which relationship is dealt with. It tries to impose a philosophical model upon the religions, while refraining from what religions themselves have to offer.¹⁰ Obviously, the attitude of one Abrahamic religion to another will differ from the relationship of the same Abrahamic religion to, say, Hinduism. As known, the two religions mentioned in the Qur'an, that is, Judaism and Christianity, have the status of "permitted religions" (*dhimmī* status, a protected status in combination with paying a special tax), which from an Islamic perspective cannot automatically be affirmed about all other religions. In addition, the Qur'an includes the Sabians, probably a reference to the baptismal sect of the Mandaeans.

"Indeed, those who believe and the Jews and Christians and Sabians—whoever believes in Allah and the last day and does righteousness—will have their reward with their Lord and they will have nothing to fear, nor will they grieve" (Qur'an 2:62, cf. 5:69, my translation). This statement is highly inclusive of Christians, Jews, and Sabians, so inclusive that later Qur'an commentaries have attempted to limit the application to the time before Muhammad, by reading the verse in the past tense: "those who have believed (before Muhammad)."¹¹ Simultaneously, this text does not refer to still other religions; and there is no reason to assume that, for example, Hinduism would be included by the Qur'an. However, precisely because of the unclear identity of the Sabians, in later Islam other religions came to be identified with the Sabians, in order to lend them a permitted status.¹² The actual relevance of this protected status for religions is doubted by progressive Muslims, however.

⁹ Sane M. Yagi and A. R. Rasheed, "Exclusivism in the Gospels and in the Qur'an: A Discourse Analysis," *SIRD* 7, no. 1 (1997): 5–27.

¹⁰ See the many models brought together in James Kellenberger, ed., *Inter-Religious Models and Criteria* (New York: St. Martin's, 1993).

¹¹ See the commentator Jalalayn and the tendentious translation of this passage in *The Noble Qur'an* (<https://quran.com/2>). For other examples, see Mahmoud Ayoub, "Nearest in Amity: Christians in the Qur'an and Contemporary Exegetical Tradition," *ICMR* 8, no. 2 (1997): 148 (Sayyid Qutb).

¹² For example, the *Ahmadiyya* refers to the Sabians to create space for the Vedic religion. The Qur'anic idea that every people gets its own prophet has also been

To complicate matters further, Judaism knows the model of the Noahide commandments, to which all non-Jews should adhere.¹³ The prohibition of idolatry is one of those seven Noahide commandments. Here are all seven:

1. Not to worship idols.
2. Not to curse God.
3. To establish courts of justice.
4. Not to commit murder.
5. Not to commit adultery or sexual immorality.
6. Not to steal.
7. Not to eat flesh torn from a living animal.

We can leave undecided whether Noah was the first to receive these commandments, or whether Adam had already received some of them. Noah may have been the first to be allowed to eat meat, due to the level of depravity of the generation of the flood. In any case, this model implies that Judaism refrains from further meddling in other religions, at least in theory. Of course, the prohibition of idolatry may well be interpreted as a wholesale condemnation of all other religions. This does not need to be the case, however, as we shall see. This Noahide model can be explained as highly tolerant, but also as hardly dialogical.

Now in terms of our triad, should we classify this attitude as exclusive, inclusive, or pluralistic? That is hard to tell. As to Christianity, it could be argued—as especially Protestants like to do—that for this religion the relationship with Judaism is incomparable to any other relationship with a religion, as a unique bond between the church and Judaism (which is not felt in the same way vice versa, incidentally).¹⁴ Hence again this triad does

developed further in order to enable a pluralistic attitude towards other religions. However, the Ahmadiyya is not recognized by mainstream Islam. See for earlier identifications of Sabians with Indian sects, the Muslim writer Sharastani (1086–1153) in his *Kitab al-Milal wan-Niḥal*, ‘*Ara al-Hind*, translated in Bruce B. Lawrence, *Shahrastani on the Indian Religions* (The Hague: Mouton, 1976), 38 and 63.

¹³ See t. Avod. Zar. 9.4; b. Sanh. 56a. Some scholars see a connection with the regulations for non-Jewish Christians at the Apostolic Council in Acts 15.

¹⁴ Quite a few Protestant theologians see no special relationship to Islam at all; this in contrast with the relationship to Judaism. Still they have to admit that Islam has a deep respect for Jesus, who features in Qur’anic and especially in lesser known post-Qur’anic sources. See the beautiful book by Tarif Khalidi, *The Muslim Jesus: Sayings and Stories in Islamic Literature* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001). Striking is the portrayal of Jesus as a wandering saint, a portrait undoubtedly

not sufficiently distinguish the different relationships of each religion. Viewing the question from the inner perspective of a given religion (Judaism and Noahide commandments, Islam and *dhimmi* religions, Christianity and other biblically oriented religions, as well as the recognition of divine wisdom in Far Eastern religions), yields a far more nuanced picture.

I want to conclude this treatment of the triad with a suggestion: perhaps all religions have exclusive, inclusive, and pluralistic elements. The exclusivism may have to do with a sense of uniqueness and even of being chosen. In no way can that exclusivism be the result of comparing different religions and deciding for the best. In that respect, this exclusivism does not allow for any judgments of other religions. Although other religions are often condemned or denigrated in order to corroborate one's own point of view, in reality one's own point of view is merely weakened by doing so. This exclusivism does allow one to testify concerning one's own grandiose religion. It is the language of love and uniqueness, and even of election, but not of comparing and downplaying. It is perhaps the major sin of religions to transform the sense of uniqueness into a judgment over other religions, as if they really have an intimate knowledge of the others!

Pluralism can be upheld, not as a judgment about all other religions from a neutral perspective, but as an inner space of one's own religion; as an emphasis upon righteous deeds, to be judged not by man but by God at the end; and as an admonition to be modest, when one realizes that people who do not belong to one's own religion are outstanding for doing justice.¹⁵ The confrontation with the Son of Man at the end of times reveals that dressing the naked and feeding the hungry are as if we do good to the Son of Man himself (Matt 25:34–45). However, even the righteous did not know that they had met the Son of Man when they acted charitably! The lesson

influenced by the desert fathers. Some Islamic sources portray a Jesus as a thaumaturge, while other sources emphasize Jesus as a fallible human being to counter Christian deification of Jesus. Compare how a Talmudic story about an astrologer who errs vis-à-vis a rabbi is transformed into a story about a fallible Jesus; see Marcel Poorthuis, "The Infallibility of the Prophets and the Fallible Jesus in Islam: On the Transformation of a Jewish Story in to an Islamic Anti-Christian Polemic," in *Religious Stories in Transformation: Conflict, Revision and Reception*, ed. Alberdina Houtman, Tamar Kadari, Marcel Poorthuis, and Vered Tohar, JCPS 31 (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 260–74.

¹⁵ For a pluralistic approach to Islam by a Muslim, see Mahmut Aydin, "Is there Only One Way to God? A Muslim View," *SIRD* 10, no. 2 (2000): 148–59. There are many stories that emphasize the noble deeds of an ignorant or "foolish" person but which have not yet been the subjects of theological reflection. See Bernard Heller, "Gott wünscht das Herz: Legenden über einfältige Andacht und über den Gefährten im Paradies," *HUCA* 4 (1927): 365–404.

for Christians might be that they have been privileged to receive an “exclusive” glimpse of that secret of history, which only increases their responsibility. However, only a Christian can state that about him/herself.¹⁶ Good deeds as the criterion of true faith have been compromised somewhat in Protestant theology, but have been rediscovered as a genuine element in Judaism, in the Gospels, and in Paul’s letters. Its significance in interreligious dialogue has been highlighted by my student Willem Jansen, who even prefers the word *diapraxis* to the word dialogue.¹⁷ Incidentally, the declaration *Nostra Aetate* already emphasizes the importance of praxis in interreligious dialogue: “We cannot truly pray to God the Father of all if we treat any people in other than brotherly fashion” (§5).

This eschatological verification of the truth as orthopraxy implies that we may not know about the salvation of others *but even less about our own salvation*.¹⁸ Hence agnosticism only about the salvation of other religions falls short. We can even go further and state (from a Christian perspective) that seeing good deeds performed by people from other religions should exhort us Christians to emulate them: they do good deeds without having received the fullness of “grace and truth!” Perhaps Saint Paul’s hope to make Israel jealous (Rom 11:14) can be understood in this sense as well.¹⁹ Likewise, Hebrews 10:24 has been freely interpreted as emulation in good deeds: “And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds” (NIV).

Qur’an 5:48 is strikingly similar concerning the idea of emulation in good deeds: “Had God willed, he would have made you one nation, but wanted to test you in what he has given to you; so race to [all that is] good. To God is your return all together, and he will [then] inform you concerning

¹⁶ This asymmetrical responsibility betrays affinities with the radically subjective responsibility as detailed in the philosophy of the French-Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas.

¹⁷ See Willem Jansen, *Human Dignity and Diapraxis in “Little Mogadishu”: Human Rights Culture in the Interreligious Context of Kenya* (PhD diss., Tilburg University, 2018).

¹⁸ Catherine Cornille pleads for *soteriological agnosticism*, but she does not include Christianity in that agnosticism. This falls short of the realization that people from other religions are perfectly capable of doing good deeds and may serve as a mirror for the Christian believer. See Catherine Cornille, “Soteriological Agnosticism and the Future of Catholic Theology of Interreligious Dialogue,” in Merrigan and Friday, *The Past, Present, and Future of Interreligious Dialogue*, 201–15.

¹⁹ As is known, a Lutheran frame of reference in influential German Christian exegesis has largely obscured the importance of deeds in Bible exegesis of the New Testament and in rabbinic tradition.