

THEME ARTICLE

Neighbors, relatives, and friends: Finding constructive approaches to religious others

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Abstract

The way we approach, describe and interpret the faiths of others impact significantly on the relationship between different religious traditions. This article develops resources from Christian theology to show how it provides important elements for the development of constructive relationships. It also offers some comments on the present proposals put forward by the ELCA. By emphasizing how religious traditions orient and transform believers, it points to how practices can appear as meaningful across traditional borders. To develop constructive relationships with religious others is, fundamentally, a way to practice belief in God as love.

KEYWORDS

Christian practice, God as love, interreligious engagement, religious others

1 | THE OTHER AS NEIGHBOR: A WAY FORWARD

In the recent proposal, “*A Declaration of Inter-Religious Commitment: A policy statement of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America*” the predominant way of describing the religious other is “neighbor.” This is an apt description, insofar as it maintains difference, whereas simultaneously also manifests proximity and commonalities. A further advantage with this description is that it allows the neighbor to be acknowledged as a subject and not only an object of Christian concern. He or she is not someone you can distance yourself from or pretend is not there. He or she will meet you in the street or when you shop, and you may have kids on the same soccer team. Thus, you partake in the same world, although you may see and experience it differently, given your differences in religious semiotic practice. Moreover, you want to have good relations with a neighbor, because that is a condition for a thriving community. Such good relations also contribute to less suspicion and problems with communications. Thus, when applied to the religious other, the notion of neighbor may open up to new ways of relating to him/her, because you share a common world. To think of the neighbor as someone with whom you need to be on a

good foot is far better for both you and him/her, than mere neglect of the neighbor’s presence.

There is, moreover, a distinct self-critical note in the document that takes into consideration the troublesome tradition that (Lutheran) Christians have been part of in relation to the Jews and a recognition of the need to learn more about other traditions. All this is indeed significant steps forward and could be a model for other churches than the Lutheran, as well.

When reading the proposed Declaration, one nevertheless has to ask if “neighbor” suffices as a category for the religious other. One could, at least, add other categories as well, which could open up for a more dynamic approach to religious others, and also provide imaginaries that expand what can be contained in the category of neighbor. In the following, I will propose a few other ways to describe him/her, and start out with a reflection about what we may have in common, across religious boundaries:

The sharing of experiences and the variety of everyday practices in which people partake constitute the actual relationship between neighbors. As Lissi Rasmussen writes: “Christians and Muslims meet for celebrations such as weddings, birthdays, naming ceremonies, or even religious celebrations. They also may meet at stressful moments of their

lives such as funerals, epidemics, famines, floods, and terrorist attacks. All these encounters may not be religious per se, but they are important to building a human relationship.”¹ Accordingly, the religious other is always a concrete other, with whom one stands in relation in a given context and under specific social, cultural and historical circumstances. Such relationships are developed in a wide variety of ways. Given these contexts, the religious other is therefore far more than a representative of a given religious tradition. Hence, instead, we may discuss the relation to the other in terms of concrete descriptions provide chances for identifying how the religious other may appear to us in given circumstances and under specific conditions. Furthermore, one may shift from one of the below-suggested categories to another in the course of acquaintance.

When someone appears to me as “stranger” “other,” “neighbor,” “relative,” “foreigner,” “enemy,” these ways of appearance are not only dependent on his or her religious stance. More than our religious allegiances constitute our identities. Moreover, there is a dynamic interplay between my own identity and the identity of the other, which means that “our sense of self and identity is continually reconstructed in the multiplicity of our interactions. Identity—even religious identity—is not given once and for all with a collective label of our ‘religion.’ Rather, the process of identity development takes place throughout one’s life.”²

We can exemplify how the relationship with the religious other is constituted by more than his or her religious affiliation. I am more than a Christian: I am a spouse, father, son, husband, teacher, scholar, heterosexual, left-oriented, middle-aged and middle-class, Norwegian, and so forth. All of these elements shape part of my identity and belong to the larger canvas of the life-story that has shaped my identity. Moreover, all of these components most likely shape the ways in which I live as a Christian, and perhaps also the fact that I am a Christian have some bearings on my political views or the way I have been a father to my children. Influences go in all directions. Moreover, they do so not only for Christians but for all human beings. These features condition how I relate to others, as well.

So, when I meet the person who has moved into the house next to me, I relate to her not only in terms of her religious faith, just as I am not only relating to her from the point of view of my own religious commitments. What the primary category is for how I understand her depends on various conditions. Many elements constitute the actual relationship and the possible interplay between us. All of these contribute to the identity dynamic that develops in our relationship. As Jeannine Hill Fletcher writes,

Embracing the idea that multiple stories shape people, the cultural-linguistic framework expands to include the intertextuality of

*stories woven together to provide distinctive and dynamic ways of understanding existence. People are shaped not only by the story of their religion but also by the stories that adhere to culture, nation or ethnicity. People are shaped by the stories told that form gender and racial identity. Each of these stories is also impacted by science, economics, philosophy, and the story of history. Because each member of a religious community is not “religious” only, he or she has learned the stories of these other communities. The stories intersect so that the understanding of the sacred story is impacted by a multiplicity of factors including race, gender, culture, social location, economic status, age, ethnicity, national identity, social position and so forth.*³

This multi-layered understanding of how identities are shaped can be used as a criticism against ways of relating to the religious other that downplays the variety and the composite character of any religious identity. Because religious elements are interwoven with so many other aspects of human life, it is a grave reduction to try to pin someone’s identity down to only one, or a few, elements. Hill Fletcher points to feminist theorist Iris Marion Young’s identification of the problems such reduction may lead to: “Any move to define an identity, a closed totality, always depends on excluding some elements, separating the pure from the impure. Bringing particular things under a universal essence, for example, depends on determining some attribute of particulars as accidental, lying outside the essence. Any definition or category creates an inside/outside distinction, and the logic of identity seeks to keep those borders firmly drawn.”⁴

Now, consider the category “stranger”: A stranger is someone I do not know. She needs not to remain a stranger, but she could be an acquaintance, depending on what kind of relationship I am willing to enter into with her. To call someone a “religious stranger” means not only that one acknowledges a lack of knowledge. If one is willing to enter a relationship and get to know the other, more, “stranger” can be a transitory description of the other that may pass once one get to know each other more.

The category “stranger” may thus be overcome by other categories that tell us about the development of the relationship: the other can remain a *foreigner* only if we have nothing in common and his or her way of acting and living remains alien and mostly hard for me to understand. However, it is important to note that this is a conclusion that may be established *a posteriori* and that it is never warranted to consider the religious other a stranger or a foreigner before one has any knowledge of him or her.

Another description of the other that lies along similar lines is the one that maintains the other as exactly that—that is, an *Other*. This is a way of maintaining and recognizing the difference, but need not be so in terms that also mark distance and lack of relation. Recognition of otherness can be a profound gateway to engaging in learning processes, and the outcome of such processes may still be that this notion is upheld, even if one has gotten significantly more understanding for why this is different. Otherness can be enriching, complementary and supply what oneself lacks. Thus, the category of otherness allows for openness toward growth, understanding, and recognition of possible commonalities.

Presently, the most problematic category that is employed for the religious other is that of the other as the *enemy*. This notion draws on imagery that sees the religious difference as causing not only competition but antagonism, agonism, and hostility. Then, the religious other is considered a threat—be it in terms of challenging existing or perceived hegemony, oppression, or in terms of eradicating the chances for my own religion. The enemy is not only someone who has nothing in common with me, but someone who is not willing to share any of the resources/privileges/riches, and so forth . with someone who does not belong to the same tradition.

In present-day Europe, the discourses about such descriptions are not mere academic exercises. Imagery that describes Muslims as enemies heavily influences perceptions of Islam in parts of Western secular culture. Assumed religious otherness is described in fixed and not very dynamic ways that contribute to sustaining differences and separation. What falls under the table is, among other things, how Muslims may also appreciate the more secular and differentiated way of regulating the role of religions in society, or the more relaxed ways of living that are possible here, compared to some of the more traditional cultures where Islam is the predominant religion.⁵

Like the notion of the neighbor, the notion of the *relative* may take on both concrete and metaphorical associations. To be related means that you have something in common in terms of origin. There are family relations between Christianity, Islam, and Judaism, just as there are some common background sources for Hinduism and Buddhism. This does not mean that relations do not imply differences and conflicts—sometimes, they do. Nevertheless, there is something *shared* that should make it possible to explore common elements in history and in the present, in order to develop a better understanding of who one is in relation to the other. The metaphor *relative* is at play also when scholars describe religions in their difference as “objects” that have family resemblances. However, there is no reason to overemphasize what bearings such a description of the religious other may have on understanding differences and commonalities: sometimes relatives try to distance themselves as far as possible from others in the family. That may also be the case for religious traditions that are

occupied with maintaining their identity in ways that mostly emphasizes differences to others. However, for someone who is interested in engaging the religious other, it may sometimes be a useful metaphor or a good default position on which to establish a relationship.

A most useful category for approaching the religious other is “*Friend*.” To say, “I want to become friends with you” is an open invitation that shows interest and benevolence, no matter how different the other is from you. The outcome of such an invitation is never given, and in a dynamic relationship between friends, there is no pre-established pattern of development. However, if one wants to use time and resources with a friend, it is a good way of developing something that will be perceived as worthwhile by all parties. Friends visit each other, learn about each other, criticize each other, encourage, and support each other. Furthermore, friendships come in many forms. Such variety is itself a testimony to the possible richness and variety of engaging in friendship with the religious other. A good friendship with someone who has a different story than yourself offers almost endless chances of exploring the world of the other. Friendship contributes to the resources necessary for human growth.⁶

To explore these different categories show us how inadequate it is to relate to the religious other simply by fixed or static categories that ignore the many variables that determine who the other is as a *religious* other. To avoid fixed categories is possible if we see religious traditions as processes and clusters of practices. Such traditions are about what we do and how we act and relate, and include the self-understanding implied in such practices. But not only religions are processes—so are the identities that they contribute to developing, as well. In this sense, there is no such thing as an isolated religious identity: A religious identity is only one aspect of one’s more extensive, composite and always developing an identity in relation to others and the world. Accordingly, how you develop religious practices is dependent on, but may also condition, to what extent you consider yourself a friend, relative, neighbor, or enemy.

There are two important implications of these considerations. The first is that the above suggests *that interaction and engagement with the religious other implies practices that may be shaped by religious affiliations, as these are expressed in concrete historical and contextual circumstances that involve more than religion, but also religion*. It requires an understanding of, and a commitment to, your own tradition as the influences that have shaped your identity and your practices. Furthermore, it requires *work*. Openness toward the other implies the possibility of exposing your own tradition and faith to transformations that may follow from the other’s contribution to the expansion of your world. Concomitant to this openness is nevertheless still the different dimensions of resistance: The openness does not exclude the actual presence of resistance you face in yourself when you are challenged

to transform something in your own (previous) commitments, just as it does not make redundant critical resistance to negative elements in the traditions of the other. Furthermore, you still have to resist making the other's position too similar to your own.

Moreover, the rejection of the reification of religions and of a static notion of religious identity implies that no one can be understood or categorized only with regard to his or her religious faith. This point is not only of academic interest: All too often, we see how people are expected to behave, think, believe, or feel only based on what others are convinced that their religious faith implies. This grave reduction of identity, in general, contributes to the de-humanizing of the religious other. For this reason, it is important to underscore that in recognition of the religious other, he or she must be recognized as more than a representative of a religion that appears as reified in the understanding of the subject. Religions always come in concrete, personal, and processual forms. Therefore, the very acceptance of religions as clusters of practices depending on historical, social, and cultural variables implies another way of organizing and understanding religions than the one that approaches religions from a simplified and reified point of view.

2 | RELIGIONS AS MAKING SENSE OF THE HUMAN EXPERIENCE OF GOD'S WORLD

Can engagement with the other be a *religious or even a Christian practice*? A Christian theology based in the incarnation of Jesus Christ provides good reasons for the position that what we believe in, is that the historical appearance of Jesus revealed God in a distinct way, that was not for the privileged few, but open for everyone to experience. He appeared on our common world, and as such, people in different contexts and rooted in various traditions can relate to him through their religious practices.

Accordingly, I can listen to a sermon in the Cathedral on Jesus' parable about the ungrateful servant who did not reciprocate the generosity of his master when he, later on, was meeting with his own debtor. The sermon strengthens my experience of how important it is to be generous, and it might even challenge the pettiness with which I occasionally engage with my peers. Thus, it may contribute to my transformation, and orient me in other ways toward what is important and not. My Muslim neighbor, who joined me to church, may have a similar experience. She can have a similar experience in spite of our different religious traditions and the interpretative context they represent. We may both be able to take the teachings of Jesus to heart, no matter what we believe him to be, and without regard to if we are able to confess what the Nicene Creed says about him or not. The resources of our respective

faiths can relate us to the message in the sermon, and its effect on us may be similar, even though we do not belong to the same religious tradition.

My Muslim neighbor can relate positively to this message because it resonates with elements in her own tradition and her own life. She can do this in spite of the fact that her own tradition does not contain a similar parable and does not identify Jesus in ways that are similar to the Christian tradition. Thus, her faith can be expanded and strengthened by relating to the teachings of Jesus. She can join me in seeing that his teachings matter and can make a difference in the world, and we can agree on what the consequences of this teaching are. Similarly, I can see in the teachings in the Qur'an about caring for the poor resonated in the teachings of Jesus.

Accordingly, the *experience* with another tradition than your own is not something we need to see as contradicting our own tradition. That is only possible if we see religious traditions as enclosed and self-contained systems of thought and belief that cannot be supplied, expanded by, or presented with perspectives from the "outside." The most obvious version of this position is when religions are seen mainly as systems of doctrine, and the claims implied therein. This view makes religions competitors and leads to seeing them as rivals. A more open, experience-based attitude need not even imply the need for comparison between religions. Instead, we can see them as contributors to the need we have for coming to terms with the challenges facing us in different contexts. Thus, different religious traditions can be seen as stewards of wisdom needed in order to lead a good life. Some Christians have positive experiences with Zen practices⁷, and some Christian healers are able to help people although they also interpret their practice in other terms than those articulated by Christian theology. It does not exclude their positive effect on Christian peoples' (and others') lives. Accordingly, a principled, *a priori* established restriction against experiences and interpretations that have their origin in other traditions is problematic. The work of openness and resistance that an open attitude implies requires assessment of the positive effects of practices for orientation and transformation in other traditions.

The above perspective can be elaborated further if we apply the distinction between experience and doctrinal claims to the Christian tradition. There have been perennial discussions in Christian theology about the claims that may result from specific experiences (such as *how* to interpret the crucifixion of Jesus) and about which experiences should be *validated* by Christian theology (as in the discussions about how to relate to and accept charismatic experiences). However, the Christian tradition must *de facto* be understood as porous with regard to the experiences, practices, and claims about validity that it should comprise. Part of its own tradition consists of the negotiating discourses about such topics. Such negotiations are primarily based on pragmatic considerations—albeit of different kinds; for example,

sometimes because of the positive or negative effects that practices can have on the community of believers, and sometimes based on interests for upholding stability, discipline, privileges, or power in the hierarchy. In principle, there is no difference between these internal discussions about the content of the Christian tradition with regard to orientation, transformative practices and their legitimation; and those that involve consideration of elements that may have their origin in other traditions.

Such an approach is only possible if we overcome the binary way of thinking that sees the truth of the Christian tradition as something that excludes the possibility for truth in any other tradition. If we consider as truthful that on which life is worth living, and that which provides humans with good resources for living a good life in a community that also allows thriving, flourishing and care, there is no reason for the claim that everything in other traditions is false if they contribute to similar consequences. Moreover, generic statements about the truth or falsity of a religious tradition should be avoided for the simple reason that it is likely that all religious traditions have their black spots or problematic practices. For example, the emphasis on the need for conversion in some of the strands of the Christian traditions seems to overlook the fact that conversion presupposes mental abilities to adopt the message and take it to heart. However, this capacity is simply not something that all humans possess. Furthermore, the ways the Christian traditions have discriminated gays and lesbians, mistreated mothers who had children out of wedlock, kept women out of leading positions, and covered up sexual abuse, can at best be regarded as grave errors with sometimes devastating consequences for those involved. Discussions about the justification of the practices in the Christian tradition will, therefore, require that one deals with these elements as well. It is similar with regard to any other religious tradition.⁸

If there is truth, that is, reliable means (values, practices) for living a good life, in different religious traditions, from a pragmatic point of view, it is a likely *theological* inference to see this truth as something that originates from God. Therefore, they need not stand in direct contradiction to other resources of a similar kind. However, a positive assessment of what is true in other traditions does not mean that we can ignore the deep differences that sometimes exist and cause tensions between these traditions. Nevertheless, these tensions and differences need not be immediately interpreted as the result of completely different religious sources, or as idolatry. Such immediate religious interpretations and inferences easily overlook that the means for orientation and transformation may be linked to contextual conditions that can account for them, and “must have to do either with differences in the scope and range of the relation with God and other creatures [...] or with differing expectations about how the variety of such relations are to be integrated.”⁹ Religions are the result of the wide variation in responses to the reality we are

confronted with, and it makes no sense to restrict it to only one such response since this is both a-historical and implies ignorance about the shifting character of the religion in question.

3 | THEOLOGICAL RESOURCES FOR AN APPROACH TO RELIGIOUS PLURALISM

Christian theology has to recognize that all religious traditions—no matter what kind of notion they have of God or not—have to find resources in their own tradition for encountering the religious others in different and constructive modes. So also for Christian theology, which represents the perspective I write from here. The increasing realization of the presence of religious others has contributed to the change in how Christian theology articulates its main concerns and approaches to a religiously pluralist reality. Together with the Christian interpretations of the experiences of God by means of the Trinitarian doctrine, it can be affirmed that God is constantly revealing himself through history as Creator and in the Holy Spirit.¹⁰ Trinitarian theology, therefore, needs to make visible how God as trinity relates to and desires a community with *all* of God’s creation. S. Mark Heim’s articulation of several of the main elements in this understanding is a good way of starting the following elaborations. In the following quote, I have emphasized the most important concerns for this theology:

Christians believe that the understanding of God as Trinity, the understanding whose catalyst is the incarnation of Christ, allows us to grasp key features of God’s character and God’s relation with us. If relationship itself is an impossible, unnecessary, or counterproductive religious aim, then this belief is in error. But if relation is truly an irreducible component of the religious end, then characterizations of God are not only passing tools. They are in some measure constitutive of that end. Salvation is shaped by a particular vision of the God with whom we are in relation. Here we glimpse the way in which Christ is integral to salvation, both embodying the relation with God that constitutes salvation and distinctively representing to us the nature of the God with whom we have communion in salvation. Distinctions of some sort are a necessary feature of salvation, as a condition for the fullness of relation. Communion involves awareness of the others with whom we participate and of their particular identities.¹¹

As the key feature of God's character is love, it is only possible to understand God on the basis of God's loving relation to the world. Moreover, when Heim underscores communion as conditioned by difference, he points indirectly to how the realization of Christian identity cannot be understood in isolation from other communities of faith. This does not mean that differences are dissolved. Differences are, from a theological point of view, an expression of the multitude of ways in which creation express itself—and it is a sign that the Creator can see plurality as something that mirrors Godself.

This last point suggests that the world can be seen as a sign that points to how God is. All religions engage in interpretative processes that, to some degree, build on the premise that the world is a sign of God. God and the world interact. This interaction can be explicated by adopting a sacramental understanding of the world that entails that God mediates Godself by the world. In classical theology, this point is articulated in how God gives Godself in, with and under the created means—in, with an under something that is distinguishable from Godself but nevertheless intrinsically related to God and conditioned by God.

In many religious traditions, the realization of this fact leads to the recognition of how humans exist within a wider relational context than the one we can control, determine, and condition ourselves. To experience this fact is to experience that human life is conditioned by relations. Thus, in the encounter with the religious other in concrete experiences, one has to be open to the fact that this meeting represents a possibility to experience more of the divine conditions of reality—a point theological anthropology articulates when the other is identified as a being created in the image of God. The other is my chance for experiencing God. This is so also for the religious other.

The “Deus Semper Major” of the Christian tradition represents another significant move toward acknowledging the need for many different perspectives on the divine, combined with a critical attitude toward them as able to express the fullness of the reality in question. Accordingly, God cannot, as vulgar atheists seem to think, in any way be likened with anything in this world, or with things that we imagine as part of this world. Writes D.B. Hart:

Beliefs regarding God concern the source and ground and end of all reality, the unity and existence of every particular thing and of the totality of all things, the ground of the possibility of anything at all. Fairies and gods, if they exist, occupy something of the same conceptual space as organic cells, photons, and the force of gravity, and so the sciences might perhaps have something to say about them, if a proper medium for investigating them could be found.¹²

Consider the implication of these remarks for interreligious dialogue: not only do we need to acknowledge the distinction between God and the world, but we also need to avoid talking about the God as something of this world. Thus, the recognition of some positive element in another tradition seems to require some awareness about the need for speaking of God in a way that *is not empirical*. As related to the world, God must be seen as its transcendental condition and as the source and origin of our capacities to grasp it in its multitude of different manifestations. No single human endeavor can fully grasp or explain God. This fact is the theological reason that can explain religious pluralism. God is the condition for the possibility of the world.

Accordingly, when religious traditions try to express God or the divine, they have to recognize the need for avoiding talking about God or the divine as if God is a being among other beings. Only then can interreligious dialogue become meaningful, because it does not relate only to different experiences of the empirical, but to our struggle for articulating and understanding that which conditions our experiences of the world. God makes it possible for us to experience this world as it exhibits complexity, variation and a plurality of interrelated forms. We can develop a Christian understanding of religious plurality against this backdrop.

4 | GOD AS LOVING THE RELIGIOUS OTHER

The proposed ECLA Declaration puts considerable emphasis on love as the shaping power for relationships with peoples of other religious traditions. This is a very important choice of entry. Love overcomes enmity. From an experiential point of view, love shapes engagement and our investment of time, energy, and devotion. To consider love as the source and goal of reality makes it possible to perceive reality critically: We can address the lack of it when love is not realized. We can also see love as deeply meaningful with regard to what we attach value and significance.¹³ Love is interpersonal; love is always someone's. Therefore, Christianity witness to a personal God whose essence is love. The Christian attitude to reality is to realize and manifest this God as reality, to allow for God understood thus to be experienced and revealed. It means to invite people of other faiths to see if they can recognize their own deepest understandings of reality in this God who is love—or not.

The truth (reliability, trustworthiness) of Christianity stands and falls with its ability to practice this belief in God convincingly. The truth of Christianity does not depend on references to authoritative revelation, the inner testimony of the Holy Spirit, or well developed philosophical arguments. Instead, it depends on the ability of this conception of God to make sense of, shape, orient, and transform human life in ways

that are experienced as valuable, meaningful and worth pursuing consistently throughout life. Only then is the claim about its truth justified. Thus, the Christian story can, should and must be read and practiced as a love-story.¹⁴ If it is used for other purposes, it ceases to be a witness about the God who is love. The centrality of love makes it clear to what extent religions contribute to the full realization of the human being, or to alienation: Love is the very condition for the realization of human life. Hence, a critical approach to religious practice finds a criterion in many religious traditions themselves, insofar as they value love as one of their central components. This goes for Christianity as well.¹⁵

Love displays itself in goodness and care for the other. A viable claim about the love, goodness, and care that God displays in the world needs a reference to an experiential dimension. If not, talk about God as love remains empty.¹⁶ In human life, love, care, and goodness mostly take on an embodied character, and this character is the fundamental reason why these can appear in human experience. From a theological point of view, humans and God are so closely related in these experiences that humans are actually participating in the reality of God when they partake in events and circumstances that allow loving phenomena to come to the fore. God works in human love and is experienced in goodness. As God is not the world, and love is not God, the world nevertheless is in God and manifests God in concrete instances of love, care, goodness, and creativity. Love is a sign of God. Love is the theme that relates God and the world most distinctively—also when love manifests itself in struggles for justice and against evil.

The promise of Christian faith is eternal life as participation in God, as God is love. This is the final realization of salvation. Humans experience some of the content of what God is and what this promise might imply when we experience love. God is nevertheless always more than what our experiences contain—God is *Semper major*. The share we have in the eternity of God we have by love and grace, a grace that is also present in the natural conditions we live on, and from, and of which we all partake in the presence of God. These natural conditions are something that God uses in God's sacramental presence in the world. Humans are the hands, the feet, and the bodies through, and by which, God can manifest God's love concretely in this world. Love is something that arises out of relations between beings, but it is not something that we can decide should be there—we can only be open to it—or not. Thus, to be open to God is to be open to love—and vice versa.

Human experience of love is always *embodied*, and accordingly, love is practiced. This basic feature of the experience of love means that God's love must necessarily be mediated by a body or bodies. However, when speaking of God's love as embodied through human love, we must take care not to conflate the two fully. As Werner Jeanrond warns, "any identification between human forms of love and divine love, however well intended, are in danger of not respecting and not loving

God as God and the human being as human being."¹⁷ Therefore, although human love is fundamentally conditioned by a loving and creative God, it also belongs to a human subject that relates to others. Love on the side of both humans and God is most adequately affirmed, enhanced and consummated in a network of loving relationships where the differences between God and humans are recognized and not dissolved.

That God manifests the love that wants to embrace and take up in itself all of creation cannot be without relevance for the understanding of other religious traditions. From a Christological and incarnational point of view, Christianity understands God as inclusive, meaning that there is in God a desire for unity with all of creation, even in its imperfect character, in order to bring it to completion. This completion implies the overcoming of all instances of "Wrongness" (W. James). That creation is incomplete is mirrored in *every* religious tradition, in their imperfection and failure as well as in their aspirations for transformation. God, as incarnated and loving, implies a promise about salvation as the redemption and deliverance from *all* such wrongness.¹⁸

ENDNOTES

¹ Personal contact between Christians and Muslims takes place "at work, in educational institutions, on playgrounds, in hospitals, shops, the military, and so forth. People share the same experiences and conditions by living in the same community, or are in situations similar in other ways. Sometimes people of different faiths are linked through the intimate ties of family and friendship." These experiences need to be taken into account when one speaks about interreligious encounters that are shaped by more than religion. Rasmussen, "Engineering Bridges," in Rasmussen, L. (2007). *Bridges instead of walls: Christian-Muslim interaction in Denmark, Indonesia and Nigeria* (p. 175). Minneapolis, MN: Lutheran University Press.

² Cf. Fletcher, J. H. (2005). *Monopoly on salvation? A feminist approach to religious pluralism* (p. 96). New York, London: Continuum.

³ Fletcher (2005, p. 107).

⁴ Fletcher (2005, p. 84), quoted from Young, I. M. (1986). The ideal of community and the politics of difference. *Social Theory and Practice*, 12(1), 1–26, here p. 3.

⁵ The reifying approach to Islam is by no means restricted to those who see their competing religious faith threatened by it. Richard Dawkins contributes to it, as well. For more nuanced descriptions that take contextual variation into consideration, see Rasmussen (2007).

⁶ To employ the notion of friendship in this context is not new or original. See, in addition to the presentation of the virtues in C. Cornille (2013) "Conditions for Inter-Religious Dialogue" in Cornille, C: *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Inter-Religious Dialogue*, Oxford: Wiley, also Fredericks, J. L. (1998). Interreligious friendship: A new theological virtue. *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, 35(2), 159–174.

⁷ Cf. the impressive study of people with a dual belonging to Christianity and Buddhism, in Drew, R. (2011). *Buddhist and Christian? An exploration of dual belonging*. Routledge critical studies in Buddhism. London: Routledge. A theological contribution to the same field, in addition to Schmidt-Leukel, P. (2017). *Religious pluralism and*

interreligious theology: The Gifford lectures—an extended edition. Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, is the different works by Kristin Largen. See Largen, K. J. (2009). *What Christians can learn from Buddhism: Rethinking salvation*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press; Largen, K. J. (2017). *Finding God among our neighbors an interfaith systematic theology*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press.

⁸ For example, I think there are good reasons to address the ways women are treated in other different traditions as well, and the way the caste system functions in India. However, each tradition should preferably develop their own self-criticism, under the awareness that voices from the outside may be instrumental in doing this in a sufficiently thorough manner. The critical attitude is inbuilt in many religious traditions, which distinguish between truths and the Truth, of which the latter is not possible to grasp in fullness. The distinction also makes it possible to develop a critical awareness of the relativity of the truths that the traditions adhere to. Cf. for this the extensive discussion in Depoortere, F & Lambkin, M. (2012). *The question of theological truth: Philosophical and interreligious perspectives, currents of encounter* (p. 271). Amsterdam, New York: Rodopi.

⁹ Cf. Heim, S. M. (2001). *The depth of the riches: A Trinitarian theology of religious ends* (p. 129). Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans.

¹⁰ Cf. Heim (2001).

¹¹ Heim (2001, p. 125).

¹² Hart, D. B. (2013). *The experience of God: Being, consciousness, bliss* (p. 33). New Haven, CT; London: Yale University Press.

¹³ Cf. Henriksen, J.-O. It's personal—or not at all: On God as love/r. *Dialog*, 50(1), 63–70.

¹⁴ Cf. Mühling, M. (2013). *Liebesgeschichte Gott: Systematische Theologie Im Konzept, Forschungen Zur Systematischen Und Ökumenischen Theologie*. Göttingen, Germany: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht.

¹⁵ This reasoning is inspired by the question referred by Riesebrodt: Is religion a phenomenon of human alienation or the full realization of the human person? Riesebrodt, M. (2010). *The promise of salvation: A theory of religion* (p. 4). Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

¹⁶ Cf. the point made in Steen-Johnsen, T. (2019). The rhetoric of love in religious peacebuilding. *Journal of Contemporary Religion*. Forthcoming.

¹⁷ Jeanrond, W. G. (2010). *A Theology of Love* (p. 243). London: T & T Clark.

¹⁸ On “wrongness” as the basis for religious experiences expressed in the diversity of religious traditions, see James, W. (1985). *The varieties of religious experience: A study in human nature* (p. 508). New York, London: Penguin Books.

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