

Politics and the Religious Imagination

**Edited by John Dyck, Paul Rowe,
and Jens Zimmermann**

First published 2010

by Routledge

2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon, OX14 4RN

Simultaneously published in the USA and Canada

by Routledge

270 Madison Avenue, New York, NY 10016

*Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group,
an informa business*

© 2010 Editorial selection and matter, John Dyck, Paul Rowe and Jens
Zimmermann; individual chapters, the contributors

Typeset in Times New Roman by Bookcraft Ltd, Stroud, Gloucestershire
Printed and bound in Great Britain by The MPG Books Group

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reprinted or reproduced or
utilized in any form or by any electronic, mechanical, or other means, now
known or hereafter invented, including photocopying and recording, or in
any information storage or retrieval system, without permission in writing
from the publishers.

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from
the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Politics and the religious imagination / edited by

John Dyck, Paul Rowe and Jens Zimmermann.

p. cm. -- (Routledge studies in religion and politics)

Includes bibliographical references and index.

Religion and politics. I. Dyck, John, (John H. A.),

1951- II. Rowe, Paul. III. Zimmermann, Jens, 1965-

BL65.P7P6423 2010

201'.7209--dc22

2009051851

ISBN: 978-0-415-77998-2 (hbk)

ISBN: 978-0-203-84922-4 (ebk)

Scripture quotations marked (NIV) are taken from the Holy Bible,
New International Version®, NIV®.

Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 by Biblica, Inc.™

Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved worldwide.
www.zondervan.com

1 Imagining the sacred stranger

Hostility or hospitality?

Richard Kearney

Introduction

In order to address the overall topic of this conference, “Politics and the Religious Imagination,” I want to suggest that, at a political level, most wars are and always have been inspired by a certain religious passion, and that this has not gone away. One thinks of Belfast; one thinks of the Balkans; one thinks of the West Bank, of Burma. Although examples for religiously inspired wars are almost endless, in our post-Enlightenment era and in this secular world, most people would prefer to think that religion has nothing to do with it. But if it is true that religions or religious passions inform many of the conflicts that persist in our world, I’m going to argue that there are resources within religion to serve as an antidote, and that, in fact, without religion as an antidote to these perverted religious passions that cause wars, no economic, military, or political solution will find a lasting solution to these conflicts.

What I want to do in this lecture is to examine within the very religious structure itself two contradictory elements: first, I want to look at the source of the violent potential of religion, which I call “hostility,” and, second, I want to focus on the healing potential of religion, “hospitality,” which is obviously the one I’m going to wager on. I’m going to concentrate mainly on the monotheistic tradition, the Western biblical monotheistic tradition. I think the elements of hostility and hospitality are available in others too, but it is the Judeo-Christian tradition I know best. It is my own tradition. I say that from the outset: I’m not going to be discussing Buddhism or Hinduism, although that may come up at the end in some discussion. The key question is how these elements of hospitality and hostility shape our imagination. My central argument will be that they demand a response of hermeneutic discernment. My basic suggestion here is that in the beginning was the Word, and that means in the beginning was hermeneutics: that is to say, the interpretation of the Word. And as such, every religion is a hermeneutic battleground between different interpretations, and you cannot have a creative interpretation without a creative imagination to respond to the signs that are there in Scripture.

The great religions tell us that there are two ways in which the human imagination responds to manifestations of the Divine: hostility and hospitality. What both responses share is a recognition that the Holy One is a Stranger first and foremost.

That's why there is a deep ambiguity built into religions from the outset. You can kill the Stranger, treating him or her as a threat and the enemy, or you can overcome the initial reaction of fear, responding instead with a gesture of welcome. Emile Benveniste acknowledges the drama of this inaugural ambivalence in his analysis of the common root of our terms "hospitality" and "hostility," which derive from the common Latin root, *hostis*, which can mean enemy or host. The poet Rilke tells us in the *Duino Elegies* that every angel is terrible and it is our decision as to how we respond to this terror. You can think of various manifestations of the Divine, theophanies, as they are called in Scripture, for example. Once the Divine appears, usually in the form of an angel, the response is fear in the human recipient until the Divine says from a voice in the clouds or whatever, "Do not be afraid." But the initial reaction is fear.

In his influential study, *Das Heilige*, Rudolph Otto shows how the holy is experienced in most religions as a *fascinans et tremendum*, that is, both inviting and fascinating on the one hand and terrifying on the other. From its inception then, religion has been a double-story of violence and peace, of wrath or love, of genocide or justice, of Thanatos or Eros. We return to my earlier point: the great religions are battlegrounds of the hermeneutical imagination and I want to suggest some ways for recognizing and shaping a common or interreligious imagination; I want to propose ways in which we might struggle with the perennial angels of life and death, turning the horrors of night into the promise of a second day. But to return after the night of not knowing to a second light, or a second faith, or a second hope, we need to traverse the darkness. To do this, we must engage, I suggest, with the bold challenge of critical and iconoclastic atheism, for if we don't fully acknowledge the murderous potential of religion exposed by genuine atheistic critiques, we cannot honestly hope to embrace the Stranger who comes from the desert rather than, as so often in the past, condemning the alien to summary execution. So, the stakes are high.

The Stranger as divine encounter: hostility and hospitality in the monotheistic traditions

Most of the great religions have acknowledged the inaugural moment of religion as an encounter with the Stranger. Faced with the ambivalent and undecidable character of the alien who arrives in the night of not knowing (I'll give some examples in a moment), our initial responses are those of the imagination. These can be hostile or hospitable: we can welcome the Stranger or we can kill the Stranger, and religion is the story of how these two options are played out. Let me give some examples. I'm going to draw, as I said, from the religions of the Book, that is, from those religions that have most informed the narratives of Western theism, that is, the Abrahamic religions: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

Let me begin with the story of Abraham himself. Abraham was the wanderer par excellence – the nomadic tent dweller celebrated in Psalm 119: "I am a stranger on this earth." Hegel famously describes him, in the "Spirit of Christianity and Its Fate," as a stranger on earth to soil and men alike. For this reason, Hegel was no advocate of the Abrahamic model of hospitality towards strangers who come

from nowhere. But if Abraham is the first prophet of strangeness, he is also the first to experience the temptation of sameness, namely, the urge to confuse the sacred with the home, the family, the territory, the tribe, the nation. The temptation, in short, is to fold his tent and build a fortress. Abraham is capable of both great and terrible things. For example, he cruelly expels his foreign slave girl Hagar into the wilderness with their son Ishmael, but he also welcomes the three strange men, *anashim* (אנשים), who appear out of nowhere to announce the birth of his son Isaac. Only after the breaking of bread with the strangers under the Mamre tree does Abraham recognize the guests as Yahweh himself (Gen. 18:10). In short, the great founder of monotheistic biblical religion is capable of both acts: hostility towards Hagar, hospitality towards the strangers who announce the birth of his child and Sarah's. The followers of the patriarch have proven themselves very capable indeed of following suit throughout history, rejecting the Stranger or celebrating the Stranger. In fact, the annual Jewish festival of Sukkot is a special reminder to the followers of Abraham that they are forever tent-dwellers, strangers on the earth committed to the welcoming of other strangers. This is observed by Jews even to this day – particularly in Israel – but also by diaspora Jews. On the feast of Sukkot they build a tent in the house and beside the house to remind them that they are actually wanderers and strangers on this earth. This is, it could be argued, a timely reminder for all the Abrahamic religions, which have not ceased to persecute and accuse each other throughout the centuries. One thinks of the pogroms, the Crusades, the inquisitions, and the infamous holy wars that continued to be waged, until all too recently, on the streets of Belfast, and the Balkans, and the West Bank – and it's far from over. It all comes down, in the heat of the hunt, to a wager of faith – a hermeneutic reading of the Word of God.

Abraham's heartless banishment of Hagar and Ishmael is totally at odds with his hospitable reaction to the three alien nomads from the desert, intruding into his camp out of nowhere. Capable of those cruel acts, Abraham is also capable of welcoming the potentially threatening strangers into his home with open arms. And as a result of his radical trust, he opens up for himself and his wife Sarah the possibility of new life, that is, the impossible becomes possible (Gen. 18:14). They are barren, but a new child is born to them, to this very ancient couple, nonetheless. Witnessing this impossible act, Sarah, Abraham's wife, laughs. She has the imagination to make the impossible possible. She overcomes her deep fears that were instrumental in the expulsion of her rival, Hagar, and says yes to the advent of the radically Other. Their son bears the name "Isaac" meaning "laughter" – a way of accepting the unfamiliar and the contradictory, as Henri Bergson shows in his study of laughter.

Later in the story, Abraham himself is compelled to make another dramatic choice in his response to two commanding angels of the Lord. You all know the story of Mount Moriah. There is one angel who tells him to kill his son Isaac. The other bids him to leave the tribal ways of sacrifice behind and embrace his son instead as a gift of life. Abraham chooses life over death, but only after much fear and trembling – as Kierkegaard so brilliantly analyzes it in his book on the subject, *Fear and Trembling*. So the entire Bible, it may be said, is a shared religious

imaginary made up of similar stories of struggle between two different ways of responding to the alien addressee: hostility or hospitality.

Saul, for example, goes out for destruction against the Amalekites, but in the very battle against the foreigners, he decides to abandon the blood-lust for sacrifice and commit, instead, to mercy. A similar result occurs in Jacob's case. Jacob wrestles with the dark anonymous someone, *ish* (יִשׁ), right through the night. He fights with what he perceives to be a threatening alien until he finally opens himself to the Other, receiving a divine mark upon his body, his hipbone, and the new name of Israel. Jacob opts for peace, ultimately acknowledging the face of God in the visage of his mortal enemy, the man he has wrestled with through the night. Indeed, it is significant that the very day after he has wrestled with the Lord, whom he recognizes after the event in the Stranger, he is then finally able to embrace God in the guise of his estranged rival and brother, Esau. The reconciliation with Esau follows the fight with the dark man in the night.

For the Divine, a Stranger, is in each human other who faces us, defenseless and vulnerable – asking us to receive him or her into our midst. The face that serves as a trace of transcendent divinity is also a portal to humanity in its flesh and blood immanence. As Emmanuel Levinas, the Jewish-French philosopher, puts it in his book *Totality and Infinity*, “The epiphany of the face qua face opens humanity. The face in its nakedness as a face presents to me the destitution of the poor one and the stranger.”¹ And of course, for Levinas, the face is the trace of the Divine. My hospitable relation with the Stranger gives meaning to my relations with all Strangers: proximate or distant, human or divine. In this sense, it is a political option for justice over murder.

The great stories in Israel are, I am suggesting, imaginative testaments to the deeply paradoxical origins of biblical religion – at once a sort of violent conflict or peaceful embrace. This, in effect, makes every dramatic encounter between the human and the Divine into a radical hermeneutic wager: hospitality or murder – you either welcome the Stranger or you sacrifice him. Monotheism is the history of this either-or.

The fact that the Abrahamic legacy has witnessed both traditions of interpretation speaks for itself. On the one hand, it provides more than ample evidence, alas, for those critics who see religion as an irredeemable source of political intolerance and war. One thinks of the advocacy of Enlightenment atheism, the trenchant critiques of Marx, Freud, and Nietzsche, right down to the recent controversial exposés by the likes of Hitchens, Dawkins, and Dennett, the “anti-God squad.” On the other hand, the Abrahamic legacy provides powerful resources for those, including myself, who wish to post-critically retrieve a liberating politics in the Bible – one that fosters a radical attentiveness to the Stranger as portal to the Divine. It is important for the second reading that we might recall that three of the most formative books of the Jewish Scriptures are all about strangers: Job, Ruth, and the Song of Songs. Job struggles with Yahweh before finally accepting his strange ways. Ruth is a Moabite alien accepted by Boaz into his community, thereby initiating a long line of hybrid descendants including David and Jesus, while the last of these books, the Song of Songs, may be cited as paradigmatic of the coming together of Israel and its Egyptian enemies. King Solomon courts

the foreign Shulamite woman, defying tradition to embrace this black and beautiful alien as his beloved bride. And it is telling that the Song itself celebrates a Jewish love story about human-divine love in the borrowed form of a Babylonian-Egyptian marriage poem (epithalamium). Loving your Other is more divine than loving your own, this song suggests, which is arguably why the Hebrew Bible has 36 commands to love the Stranger as opposed to only two to love your neighbor.

Deuteronomy is, of course, one of the richest books in reference to the Stranger. To cite just a few of the characteristic examples: Deuteronomy 10:18, “He shows his love to the stranger by giving him food and clothing.” The term used for the Stranger here is actually *ger* (גֵּר). It renders as *xenos* (ξένος), hence “xenophobia,” in Greek, and *peregrinum* in Latin, hence “peregrinatio” or “the wanderer.” Deuteronomy 27:19: “Cursed is he who distorts the justice due a stranger, orphan, and widow.” Here, the Hebrew *ger* (גֵּר) is rendered as *advenae* in Latin and variously as “alien” in English, but *advenae* is very interesting because it is “the one who is to come” or “the one who is always to come.” The Stranger is the messianic God who always is to come. Deuteronomy 24:17: “You shall not pervert the justice due a stranger or an orphan, nor take a widow’s garment in pledge.” Or again, Deuteronomy 16:11: “You shall rejoice in the Lord your God ... and the stranger and the orphan and the widow who are in your midst in the place where the Lord your God chooses to establish His name.” And the list goes on.

There are several telling things about these references to the Stranger in our midst. First, the Stranger is associated with the name of God. Second, the Stranger is invariably linked with allusions to the orphan and the widow, that is to say, vulnerable and defenseless ones without parents, spouses, protectors, or guarantors. Third, the advent of the Stranger calls for a justice that seems to go beyond our normal conventions of security and closure, which tend to exclude strangers, orphans, and widows. The very fact that the Lord must repeatedly enjoin justice to prevent the hatred and murder of the alien is itself an acknowledgment that initial responses to aliens are more likely to be fear rather than love. Finally, the Latin translations of the Hebrew *ger* (גֵּר) as *advenae* and *peregrinum* are particularly suggestive in that they connote, first, one who comes from outside, afar, the future – that is, *advenae* – and, second, someone who wanders, strays, and migrates across borders of nations, tribes, or homes – the *peregrinum*, as in our word “peregrinatio” or “peregrination.” The Stranger, in short, is the uninvited one who has nowhere to lay his head unless we act as hosts and provide a dwelling place. There is a sense of radical surprise and irruption about the coming of this estranged and estranging outsider – a sense of unknowability calling for risk and adventure on our part. Hospitality to the radically other does not come naturally. It requires imagination and faith. So while the Torah acknowledges the natural and predictable impulse to persecute such alien intruders, it exhorts us to overcome our murderous impulses and accept the advening one: “What is hateful to you, do not do to another. This is the whole Torah. All the rest is contrary.”²

It is noteworthy that the Stranger is often treated as a human persona of the Divine. Indeed, what appears as an all-too-human stranger appearing out of the night to wrestle with Jacob or out of the desert to visit Abraham is subsequently recognized as Divine. Not at first but *après coup*, after the event. The Latin translation of the Hebrew *ish* (יִשׁ) as *vir*, “man,” and *anthropos* (ἄνθρωπος) in Greek,

carry this sense across translations. Although some English translations speak here of angels, most remain faithful to the original biblical sense of the Divine revealing itself in and through the human. For example, in Genesis 32:24 we read, "Jacob was left alone and a man wrestled with him until daybreak." It was only after the long struggle with the stranger in the dark that Jacob realizes that he has been marked and blessed by the face of God, "Peniel." And that becomes the name of the place where he has wrestled with the Lord.

God is revealed after the event in the wake of the encounter in the trace of his passing. This episode reminds us that if Divinity moves toward us cataphatically in the face of the Stranger, it also absolves itself apophatically from the immediate grasp of our human cognition. When God is revealed as having been present all the time, God is already gone. That is why God remains a Stranger even as he wrestles with us through the night: "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways" (Isa. 55:8). The Other remains Other even in the most intimate embrace. The Divine and the human are neither separable nor the same, neither divorceable nor identical.

This double legacy of Abrahamic tradition continues in Christianity, which constitutes the second major response to monotheistic revelation. Christianity has also known an ambidextrous politics of love and hate towards the Stranger. For every Francis of Assisi, there has been an Inquisitor. Here again the drama of the Stranger (*xenos*, *peregrinum*, *haliænus*, *hostis*) is powerfully enacted in the primal scene, namely, the Annunciation. Mary, a young Nazarene maiden, is confronted with the advent of divine eros. The angel is, once again, terrifying, and Mary is full of fear. But tending carefully to the voice of love that whispers, "Do not be afraid," Mary opens herself to the sacred Stranger and conceives a child. She chooses grace over fear; she dares imagine the impossible being made possible; she says, "yes;" a child is born.

The poet Denise Levertov captures this moment powerfully in her poem "Annunciation" when she writes of Mary's audacious choice:

We know the scene: the room, variously furnished,
almost always a lectern, a book; always
the tall lily.

Arrived on solemn grandeur of great wings,
the angelic ambassador, standing or hovering,
whom she acknowledges, a guest.

But we are told of meek obedience. No one mentions
courage.

The engendering Spirit
did not enter her without consent.

God waited.

She was free
to accept or to refuse, choice
integral to humanness.³

Mary's situation exemplifies the hermeneutic wager: she could have said "no" and there would have been no Christianity, but she said "yes" to the Stranger, and that's the adventure. Do we react in fear and recoil in suspicion and closure? Or do we open ourselves to the divine Advent, the "advening One"? The fact that the birth of this impossible child, called Jesus, is worshipped by the advent of the three wise strangers from the East, the Magi, confirms the sense that epiphanies and divine eros and mentality always involve the incursion of the foreign into the frame of the familiar – the Wise Men come from afar, from the East.

It is fitting, I think, that this Trinity of strangers, the three visitors to Abraham and the three visitors to Mary, was chosen by the icon painter of Russian Orthodoxy, Andrei Rublev, as the most appropriate form of the three divine persons of the Christian deity. It is a telling feat of the religious imagination that in Rublev's icon of the Trinity, painted in 1411 and housed to this day in the monastery of Zagorsk, north of Moscow, the three angels are seated in a circle around an empty chalice. This gaping emptiness of the center of the circle and at the center of the chalice serves as a symbol of the gap in our human horizons of time and space where the radically other may arrive unexpected and unknown. And this empty receptacle at the core of the circle is none other than the womb-heart of Mary herself – *cora* is the Latin term used. As a Greek inscription on the Mother and Child mosaic of the monastery of Chora in Istanbul to this day reads, *chora a choraton* (χωρά á χωρατόν) – the container of the uncontainable. You have the Mother and the Child and the Child is in the womb of the Mother, the Madonna, at the center. And the inscription is *chora* (χωρά); she is the *chora* – the container of the uncontainable (the "uncontainable" of course being the divine child). For those of you who don't know the icon, it is actually the most sacred icon in the Orthodox tradition and it represents the three persons of the Trinity, the Christian Trinity, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. But in terms of the three angels that appear to Abraham or the three wise kings, you might say, who may have prefigured the Trinity.

The biblical story of sacred strangers does not of course stop there. After the Annunciation, Incarnation, and the Nativity comes the life of Jesus himself. Jesus was repeatedly experienced by his disciples as a terrifyingly strange apparition. Think about it: on Mount Tabor when he was transfigured, on Lake Tiberius when he appeared over the stormy waves, on the shores of Lake Galilee when he manifested himself to his apostles after his own death. In each of these episodes, Jesus's most intimate followers responded to him as if he were a total stranger and he has to respond again and again with the words, "Do not be afraid." They have known him for what, twenty years? But he still has to say, "Do not be afraid," twenty times over in his divine guise as a Stranger. Each time Christ turns their terror into hospitality: he prepares fish for them on the lakeshore after he has been resurrected. And when he appears to them, he breaks bread for them at the inn of Emmaus. Indeed, the famous Emmaus scene of epiphanic love flaring up in the darkness of fear and suspicion is beautifully evoked in Rembrandt's series of portraits, most poignantly the Emmaus painting of 1628, where Jesus's black silhouette is offset by the light of epiphany, the light which counters the fear of the disciples, who recoil from the irruption of divinity as Jesus breaks bread. And in the breaking of bread, they recognize, for a moment, the divinity in the Stranger.

They didn't know who he was until then, although, again, they had known him for fifteen or twenty years, because each time the divine comes, it comes as a Stranger. Even if you've known the person, it comes as a Stranger. And this can occur. I mean, let's stick with Jesus – but this can occur in everyday life in a regular sense – even with people you know very well. Camus gives some beautiful descriptions of this in the *Myth of Sisyphus* where he says: you look at somebody you've known and loved for thirty years and suddenly you see this kind of passing shadow, and you recognize that this person is a total stranger to you. Well, that's the moment, Camus says, when you can really love them because either you fear that moment and you suspect it, or else you welcome it as the Stranger and the Other whom you thought you knew. In any case, back to Christianity and the life and narrative of Jesus. They recognize Jesus in Emmaus in the breaking of the bread. This irruption is, of course, a return of Jesus to the incognito of the departed one – he's already dead and now he's back. He had to leave in order to come back. He has to die as alien and condemned, as a broken reed, as a nobody and a nothing on the cross before he could live again. Unless the seed died, it could not grow, *anatheos*: the return of God after the death of God.

Most of Jesus's contemporaries, friends and enemies alike, did not recognize him as divine. Even his closest relatives, we're told in Mark 3:21, set out to seize him, for they said, "He is out of his mind." This is his own family, not his mother presumably, but the aunts and the uncles and the cousins and the second-cousins: you know, this guy's crazy, he's out of his mind. I'm not making that up: that's Mark 3:21. If Jesus's immediate acquaintances had such difficulty recognizing the presence of the Divine in him, is it any wonder that so many of his followers down through the ages have misinterpreted his message, that is, mistaken his call to hospitality and service as an invitation to triumphal power and dominion? This radical hermeneutic of liberty of the Christian event makes Christians existential pilgrims who must become, as Kierkegaard put it, contemporaneous with Christ himself if they are to become authentic recipients of his scandalous strangeness.

Perhaps it was out of fidelity to this road of radical strangeness that Jesus himself refused to be captured in written words. He never wrote anything down except some illegible words in the sand that prevented a woman from being stoned to death. He left the rest to our imaginations. Likewise, Jesus refused the temptations of the demons in the desert to become a mighty emperor imposing a new religion on the credulous populace. This drama, of course, is brilliantly portrayed by Dostoevsky in the famous "Grand Inquisitor" chapter of *The Brothers Karamazov*, where he shows how Jesus resisted the temptation to perform this vast miracle to turn the stones into bread, and become a magician who's rescued by his angels, and then an emperor who takes possession of all the cities of the world, because to do so would be to take away human freedom – to impose divinity as a fact, a *fait accompli*, a necessity, which, of course, he refused to do. Truly Jesus was announcing his role as unfamiliar host when he described himself not as some illustrious monarch, but as an uninvited stranger knocking at the door or, as the very least of these, wandering the streets asking to be fed or housed: "If you give to the least of these, you give to me." The key passage here is Matthew 25:35. Let me quote it again, "For I was hungry and you gave me food; I was thirsty

and you gave me to drink; a stranger and you welcomed me." *Hospes* is the term used here – *hospes* is the Stranger. To which the righteous answer, "Lord, when did we see you a stranger and welcome you?" For they have not recognized the Divine embodied in the alien in their very midst. They were looking to some metaphysical god: some "omni-god" of omnipotence, omnipresence, and omniscience – to some metaphysical god in the sky rather than to the flesh and blood presence here on earth. They were looking up, not down. They were looking in the wrong place.

This is no casual comment by Jesus, in reference to "When you saw the stranger, you saw me. That was me." The invocation of the surprising divinity of *hospes* occurs actually four times in the same passage as the key for entry into the Kingdom. Those who get into the Kingdom recognize the Divine in the Stranger. Eschatology, if you like, is realized in the real presence of the alien before us. That is what Jesus seems to be saying: the cup comes in this crucial and ultimate choice to welcome or repudiate the stranger. To love those who love you is normal, says Jesus in Matthew 5:43–48. To greet your brothers and sisters only is expected, but to love the alien, even when it takes the form of the adversary, that is the most difficult and the most divine thing of all. So when Jesus says he is the way, which he does, he makes it clear that this is the way not of the sovereign, but of the stranger, with all that this implies in terms of radical hospitality, healing, and service. But when Jesus says that he is a stranger, he means also a stranger to whatever religion you think is the only true religion to possess the only true God. This is actually a radical interreligious hospitality, even though when Jesus says he is the least of these, he means there is no one next to him. So truly he says, only through me you come to the Father, but that "only" is an exclusion of exclusion, which is a pretty radical message. Nobody is excluded from the divine, regardless of their creed or creedlessness.

The deep ambiguity of Abrahamic religion recurs in Islam, the third confessional response to the monotheistic revelation. Once again, we need no reminder of the belligerent expressions of Islamic faith down through the centuries. In the wave of 9/11, the bloodier chapters of this history have been rehearsed again and again. And of course, certain fundamentalist interpretations of the Qur'an from the earlier caliphate from the sixth century to the rise of Wahhabism in our modern era have given sorry credence to this negative legacy of Islam. But one too easily forgets here again how the words of the Prophet Muhammad may be read in a very different way. Each episode of the Qur'an, similar to the previous testaments of Abraham and Jesus, is susceptible to conflicting hermeneutical readings, namely, those in the name of hospitality to the Stranger and those in the name of war against the Infidel. There are, after all, 72 branches of Islam, and one of the most holy teachings of the Prophet says this, "Islam began as a stranger and it will become a stranger, so blessed are those who are strangers."⁴

The Arabic term used in this celebrated short hadith is *gharib* (غريب), in the sense of an outsider beyond tribal ties and destinations and determinations. It was used in multiple ways in later Islamic traditions, especially esoteric and mystical ones where it was considered a term of the highest praise to be a stranger, *gharib*, a holy *gharib* or a holy stranger. But it is not an isolated exception. In Islam we

also find similar precepts of hospitality being cited and commented upon again and again: “Not one of you truly believes unless you wish for others what you wish for yourselves.” Or again, “We have made you unto nations and tribes so that you can get to know and befriend each other, not to be boastful of your heritage.”⁵ Hardly recipes for a politics of war.

The liberating legacy of Islam, just like Judaism or Christianity, has to be critically reclaimed rather than assumed. It is once again a matter of bold hermeneutical imagination and, in this instance, one particularly acute and often contested in contemporary Muslim culture, due to the fact that Islam, unlike Judaism and Christianity, did not undergo the purgative rigors of a modern secular Enlightenment. A number of contemporary Islamic scholars have been engaged in this task of pioneering re-appropriation, notably Maqbool Siraj and Abdolkarim Soroush. In counter-distinction to the belligerent readings of Islam in the early caliphate of the sixth century or later Wahhabi movements from which the politics of Al-Qaeda hails, these thinkers, these contemporary scholars, offer alternative accounts of Islamic history. Their counter-narratives to fundamentalist orthodoxy are more in keeping with the original Imamic philosophy of Islam, that is, with the intellectual legacy of Muslim Andalusia, represented by Muslim thinkers like Averroes and others. Siraj, for example, explores the legacy of Islam on the Indian subcontinent and aims at a creative synthesis and imaginative accommodation, always to strangers. Particularly moving is his description of the inspiring interfaith vision of enlightened Mughal leaders and emperors, Islamic leaders, like Babur and Akbar, visionaries who engaged in a vast translation of Islamic and Hindu texts including renditions of the Ramayana, the Mahabharata, and the Upanishads in Persian. Akbar was even credited with the promotion of a new interspiritual philosophy known as *din-e-ilahi*, drawing from the best insights of the different faiths practiced in his jurisdiction. In fact, recently I took a vacation near Agra to visit his mosque and his temple. He has four gates: one for Christians, one for Jews, one for Muslims, and one for Hindus – and he was a great Islamic emperor of the largest empire of the world at the time.

Akbar engaged in frequent discussions with delegates of various religions in his court from Purkotham Brahman and Sheikh Tajudden to Portuguese Christian missionaries and Zoroastrian representatives from Navsari in Gujarat. These exchanges led Akbar to believe in the commonality of all religions or, what he called, a general consensus, *Suffie Kul*, among religions on certain human values. Indeed, it is humbling for us Westerners to be reminded, especially in time of anti-Islamic prejudice and fear, that in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, when the Christian Inquisition was persecuting witches, Jews, Muslims, and heretics (Giordani Bruno, for example, was burned alive in the Campo de Fiori for his interreligious imagination in 1600), Akbar was convening multi-faith symposia in his Indian palace of Agra. One sometimes forgets that there have always been many schools of Islam, not one monolithic church. Indeed, religious diversities and minorities were often better treated under the Mughal empire than under its Holy Roman counterpart. One might also recall here the willingness of Islamic leaders to engage in creative imaginative dialogue with their Christian and Jewish adversaries at several important junctures in European history. We could cite, for example,

the hugely respectful exchanges between Muslim and non-Muslim thinkers in Andalusian Spain in the twelfth century, or again the famous interreligious council at Ferrara in Florence, convened by Nicholas de Cusa in the middle of the fifteenth century and attended by leading muftis of Constantinople and beyond.

A central figure in the Andalusian debates was the great Averroes de Cordova, known as Ibn Rushd (ابن رشد). Averroes boldly opposed fundamental clerics in his influential text, *Fasl al-Maqal*, a work in which he argued for a harmonious conversation between the Islamic religion and secular philosophy, at that time mainly Greek philosophy. Faith, he said, needed to be kept in critical dialogue with reason, however infidel it might seem to orthodoxy (because it was Greek and therefore non-Abrahamic). It was necessary for faith to be in critical dialogue with reason if the rich plurality of meanings, human and divine, were to be properly respected. In other words, Averroes already offers an early form of religious hermeneutics. Indeed, Fred Dallmayr suggested that the most apt translation of Averroes’ formative work is *The Book of Differences*. Referring to the pagan Greeks, the intellectual Others of his own Islamic culture, Averroes argued that “those who do not share our religion, were as likely to reach truth through the ways of reason as those who follow Islam.”⁶ For Averroes the ideal philosopher was one who would combine religious integrity with what he called “natural reason,” which was available to all human beings, not just Muslims. And as a consequence to this intellectual latitude, he, Averroes, was an audacious proponent of metaphorical and non-literal readings of the Qur’an. Where conflicts of interpretation occurred, as was inevitable, the matter should be consigned, he argued, to philosophers. For not only were they the most attuned to the rational clarification of complex and multiple meanings, what Dallmayr calls “depth interpretation,”⁷ but they were also directed toward the same horizon of truth as that disclosed in revealed Scripture. For Averroes, for instance, important scriptural adoptions like creation from nothing or the resurrection of the body called for a “broad tolerance of different readings and construals.”⁸ And against the orthodox literalists, who were always out to get him, he offered three different interpretations, advising that “it is every man’s duty to believe whatever his study leads him to conclude.” And he adds that a scholar “who commits an error in this matter is excused, while one who is correct receives thanks and reward.” So very tolerant hermeneutics indeed. If you make mistakes, that’s okay. We know this attitude from Talmudic readers who used to say to rabbis that there are at least ten ways of reading every line in the Bible. Here we find an Islamic scholar, perhaps one of the greatest of the Islamic philosophers, offering a similarly generous hermeneutic latitude.

With such expressions of intellectual freedom, Averroes announced a revolutionary brand of Islamic hermeneutics against those fundamentalists who, in his acerbic words, “threw people into hatred, mutual devastation and war.” Think of Al-Qaeda. Open philosophical inquiry was hailed as “the friend and meek sister of religion, not its sworn enemy as the literalists held.” Islam needed to learn from others, in particular the pagan Greek philosophers, if it was to be true to its mission of respecting the Alien and the Stranger. *Fasl al-Maqal (The Book of Differences)* concludes with a moving paean to differential friendship, to a loving relationship that respects differences without fusion or mutual separation.

Averroes was by no means the only Islamic thinker to advocate a hermeneutics of faith. Recent scholarship by Islamic scholars including such figures as James Morris and Hannah Merriman have re-emphasized the interfaith resources of progressive Islam conceived as a multi-sided pyramid whose apex is reachable by many paths. Commenting on the extraordinary insights of Islamic sages such as Ghazali, Buruni, and Ibn 'Arabi, who was a great Sufi mystic and philosopher, Morris shows how these Islamic thinkers ingeniously sought to reconcile the historical multiplicity of religions with the unity of the one, hence called the *Din*. Ibn 'Arabi, in particular, treasured the process of what he calls "creative imagination"⁹ and promoted the reciprocal translations between languages and religions as a means of articulating the invisible human-divine reality that the Qur'an called the Heart (*Al-qalb*). The process of mutual exchange is vividly illustrated, for example, in the famous painting by Sultan Muhammad on the Hafiz love poem of the divine imagination. The Islamic tendency toward intellectual pluralism and cultural blending also found cogent expressions in the poetic spiritual works of Sufi mystics like Rumi, Al Hallaj, and Kabir. Here the notion of hospitality to the Stranger is the most pivotal and recurring motif. Indeed, throughout their poems and ghazals we find God being referred to again and again as the uninvited Guest. Kabir was a fifteenth century visionary raised in Islam who brought together what he considered to be the most promising aspects of both Muslim and Hindu faiths in the spirit of Bhakti and Sufi practices. He composed his poetic works, renowned throughout northern India at the time and throughout the world today, in a hybrid language that broke down barriers to experiencing the Divine. He and a friend, the contemporary woman mystic poet Mirabai, denounced the bigotry of narrow religious sects and invited people to seek God within themselves in simplicity, integrity, and love. Their basic argument was that if you believe in imagination, you cannot believe in a God who would exclude others; that imagination is a way – particularly poetic imagination, the mystical poetical imagination – for selves and Strangers to convene. Indeed, Kabir described himself as a hybrid child of Allah-Rama – Allah: Muslim, Rama: Hindu. He considered that these two deities had different names for the same unnameable God. Interestingly, Kabir refers frequently to God as the "Stranger at the door," "the unexpected Visitor from afar," "the migrant Lover with nowhere to lay his head."¹⁰

The traversal of Otherness is one of the surest signs of spiritual courage. The welcoming of the Divine guests in our everyday midst is a constant theme for Kabir and Islamic Sufi poets, leading them to transcend doctrinal constraints and constrictions. As Kabir explains:

I do not ring the temple bell:
I do not set the idol on his throne ...
When you leave off your clothes and
Kill your senses, you do not please the Lord.
The man who is kind and practices righteousness
Who considers all creatures on earth as his own self,
He attains the Immortal Being.
The true God is ever with him.¹¹

Formed and nurtured in the culture of Sufi Islam in India, Kabir pushed the doors wide open to interreligious belonging, to the common stranger-divine reflected in every human image:

If God be within the mosque, then to whom does this world belong?
If Ram be within the image which you find upon your pilgrimage,
then who is there to know what happens without?
Hari is in the East: Allah is in the West. Look within your heart
for there you will find both Karim and Ram;
All the men and women of the world are His living forms.
Kabir is the child of Allah and of Ram.¹²

Legend tells how, upon Kabir's death, when Muslim and Hindu sects rushed to appropriate his body for their rival funeral rites, they found no one lying beneath the shroud – only a bed of jasmine.

As with all three Abrahamic faiths, when it comes to the political legacy of Islam, the jury is still out. In Islam, just as in Judaism and Christianity, it is up to each of the followers of the Book ultimately to decide the matter by either welcoming or killing the Stranger.

Conclusion: the interreligious imperative

So let me conclude with some brief remarks on what I would call the interreligious imperative. Such an interreligious imperative is not in my view some categorical imperative of modern reason – I'm not talking about Immanuel Kant here. It is rather a summons of the imagination to transmigrate and translate between one's own religion and that of others. Paul Ricoeur, the French philosopher, calls this "interconfessional hospitality," and he links it in turn with the notion of linguistic hospitality in the act of translating between a host and a guest language. And second, he links it to Eucharistic hospitality as an exchange between hosts and strangers, be they human and/or divine. Starting with the basic process of translation, Ricoeur writes in his book *On Translation*:

Bringing the reader to the author, bringing the author to the reader, at the risk of serving and of betraying two masters, this is to practice what I like to call linguistic hospitality. It is this which serves as a model for other forms of hospitality that I think resemble it. Confessions, religions, are they not like languages that are foreign to one another? Their lexicon? Their grammar? Their rhetoric? Their stylistics? Which we must learn in order to make a way into them. And is eucharistic hospitality not to be taken up with the same risk of translation betrayal, but also with the same renunciation of the perfect translation. There is no perfect translation. There is no perfect language. There is no perfect religion.¹³

Which is not to say they're all the same; they're not. They're all different. If they weren't different, we couldn't welcome a stranger because we would all be the

same. To have strangers and to recognize the Divine in the Stranger, we have to preserve the notion of difference and distinctness and uniqueness of each religion. So they're not all the same. It's not a question of asking, "Are all religions the same?" It may be a question of saying, which is quite controversial, that religions have an equal right to claim access to truth, to divine truth, to the absolute. The difficulty comes in if and when any religion claims to have absolute access to the Absolute. Then we don't have Strangers anymore; we just have enemies.

To illustrate the power of trans-religious imagination, consider again some of the breakthrough events of the great wisdom narratives: Rumi and Kabir welcoming the uninvited guest – God; Abraham and Sarah receiving the three strangers under the Mamre tree; Moses taking an African spouse; Solomon embracing the Shulamite woman; Jesus greeting the Samaritan woman at the well and knocking like a Stranger at the door of our hearts (Rev. 3:20); the Buddha welcoming those from alien and alienating castes; or in the Greek tradition recall the famous instance of Baucis and Philemon receiving Zeus and Hermes as disguised strangers.

In our more modern history, we might invoke here the momentous impact of interreligious exchanges such as the great Assisi gathering of all the Wisdom traditions in 1986, the pilgrimage of Pope John Paul II to India and to the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem in the 1990s (when he famously asked for forgiveness), the visit of Bartholomew, the Patriarch of Constantinople, to the mufti of Sarajevo in the midst of the Bosnian War, or the revolutionary addresses of Eastern spiritual leaders like Vivekananda, Thich Nhat Hahn, and the Dalai Lama to Western religious gatherings such as the World Parliament of Religions or the World Council of Churches. Not to mention the ordinary, everyday healing encounters across sectarian divides witnessed in recent times and even still today in places like Northern Ireland, the Balkans, or Warsaw.

Cross-reading is a precious key to interreligious hermeneutics of the heart. By cross-reading I mean an endless and reversal process of translation between one religion and the next. This involves an activity of mutual disclosure where imagination and spirit go hand-in-glove. What happens, for instance, when we read texts like Shiva's pillars of fire alongside biblical passages on the burning bush or the Christian passages of Pentecostal fire? What new sparks of understanding and compassion fly up when we read Hindu texts on the Guha, on this mystical inner heart-cave, alongside the Buddha invocations of the void in the Heart Sutra, where emptiness is form and form is emptiness (but then again, for Buddhists, there is nothing so full as emptiness); or when we place these readings alongside biblical references to Elijah in his cave where he hears the thin, small voice, or Joseph at the bottom of the well, Jonah in the whale, Jesus in the tomb during his three days between the cross and the resurrection? What symbolic possibilities of semantics and resonance are generated by juxtaposing Sanskrit invocations of the sacred bird (*hamsa*) alongside the dove of Noah's Ark or of Christ's baptism in the Jordan? Not to mention the way in which the Islamic invocation of the Lote tree in Muhammad's famous mirage of the nocturnal ascent through the seven heavens may inter-animate with such related motifs as the tree of paradise in Genesis, or the thorn bush of Exodus 3, or Jesus's crown of thorns, or the famous axis mundi tree of the Vedantin cosmogonies and the Buddhist mandalas.

We might note, finally, how sculpted images of the Buddhist Trimurti, the three-faced deity, can powerfully reinvigorate Abraham's understanding of the three Strangers, or the three Persons of the Christian Trinity. The point being that it is not by embracing strange religions that you lose your own. On the contrary, it is by embracing strange religions that you rediscover your own, that you see the Trinity in a new way, that you see the images of the Sacred Heart or the Immaculate Heart in a new way, that you understand the symbol of the fire in the Pentecost or the burning bush in a new way, because you've seen what it means to a Zoroastrian or to a Hindu. Indeed, when Pope Paul VI visited India in 1964 for the first time, he asked for a Zoroastrian to carry the Pentecostal fire. For the Zoroastrian it is something else, but it is a sacred fire. Both recognized in the narrative, in the tradition, and in the experience and symbol of the Other something in its very Otherness which shed light on their own.

Recently, I was in India and I was staying with some Sacred Heart sisters who had an ashram up in Rishikesh, which is a very holy Hindu town. They said, "We didn't come here to convert anyone. We came here to converse, to listen, and to learn." And they hoped that if people from other religions came to their ashram – as they did, Buddhists, Hindus, Jews, and so on – they would not go away being better Christians at all, or becoming Christians, or converting to Christianity, but that they would go away as better Buddhists, better Hindus, and better Jews because of their exposure to this Christian environment of interreligious worship.

An initial hypothesis arising from such symbolic crossovers is that semantic exchange is at the heart of religious dialogue. Something new arises from the bilateral and multilateral translations between the ancient imaginaries of the great wisdom traditions. Out of the silent dark of the heart cave, from which many religions originate and to which they constantly return, there emerges a chorus of songs, images, and gestures soliciting endless translations into different religious liturgies. This very translatability fosters the transferability of religions. It makes interspiritual conversation into a fertile crossroads where diverse paths traverse and intersect. But such conversing and such traversing does not, I insist, lead to some super-spiritual highway – some New Age universal religion, which bypasses the multiple roads. On the contrary, the traversings proliferate into semantic diversity engendered by the confluence of multiple sources. Just as fish flourish where sea tides meet with freshwater streams, so too a hermeneutics of the Stranger finds its best hatching grounds in the living cross-currents between different spiritual rivers. Our wager is that it is precisely at the level of imagination, prior to and after theory, doctrine, ideology, or dogma, that the aboriginal signs of heart cave are first sounded and received in each religion. This space is called, in Sanskrit, *darśana*, meaning a sacred manifestation or imaging – the becoming visible and audible of the Divine in image, sound, or liturgy. It invites us to attend to the primal scenes and stages of embodying the Ultimate, so finely celebrated by Mahayana Buddhism, Hindu Puja, or the great religious imaginings of Jewish, Christian, or Islamic art.

In sum, we are wagering here on the possibility of a spiritual acoustics capable of reinterpreting the oldest prize of the religious imagination. But to open ourselves to such radical attention, we need to abandon the old omni-God of sovereignty and

theodicy. That God must die, so that the God of interreligious hospitality can be born, and insofar as religion has often served as a vehicle of infantile fear and dependency, the interreligious God may be described as a post-dogmatic God. That is why we advocate a rigorous atheistic critique of the deistic perversions of religions over time in order to facilitate a return to a liberating God of a liberating religion. This return, after the atheistic turn, we call “anatheism,” the return to God after God.

Notes

- 1 Levinas (1969: 213).
- 2 Talmud, Shabbat 31A.
- 3 Quoted in Kearney (2009: 25).
- 4 Quoted in Kearney (2009: 32).
- 5 *Ibid.*
- 6 *Ibid.*, 34.
- 7 Dallmayr (2002: 133).
- 8 Morris (2003).
- 9 *Ibid.*
- 10 Quoted in Kearney (2009: 36).
- 11 Kabir (2002: 109).
- 12 Kearney (2009: 37).
- 13 Ricoeur (2006: 23–24).