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Experiential Depth: Understanding a Hindu-Muslim Relationship through a Trinitarian Theology of Religions

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Abstract: In the wake of the global rise of racism, populism, and nationalism, engaging with an array of religious others can be profoundly challenging. While tolerance is a good beginning to address the issue, it fails to remove our stereotypes and misconceptions of one another. To address the issue, scholars have developed pluralistic notions to promote the active seeking of understanding across lines of difference through dialogue and encounter, criticism and self-criticism. This article shows how profound spiritual experiences could deepen one’s perception of religious pluralism, encourage mutual understanding, and develop harmonious relations with religious others. Taking seriously the religious and spiritual experiences people report, I argue that such an experiential depth helps overcome external divisions through internal reflections. As a case study, I explore a Hindu-Muslim relationship between Pramukh Swami Maharaj, a Hindu monastic-guru, and Dr. APJ Abdul Kalam, a devout practicing Muslim, through S. Mark Heim’s trinitarian theology of religions. I particularly compare their cordial Hindu-Muslim relations with Heim’s theology of understanding diverse religious traditions through various dimensions of the triune God. Building on this comparative theological study, I show how the experiential depth attained and maintained through close relationships and open dialogue could foster energetic engagement with religious diversity.

“I have vivid memories of my childhood in Rameswaram, but one memory particularly stands out, and comes to mind occasionally,” states Dr. APJ Abdul Kalam, a former President of India, in his book Transcendence. Beginning the book with this remembrance, he further narrates:

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As a ten-year-old boy, I recall seeing three contrasting personalities meet from time to time in our home: Pakshi Lakshmana Shastrigal, the Vedic scholar and head priest of the famous Rameswaram temple; Rev. Father Bodal, who built the first church on Rameswaram Island; and my father, who was an imam in the mosque. These three would sit in our courtyard, each with a cup of tea; and they would discuss and find solutions to the various problems facing our community.”1

In the wake of the global rise of racism, populism, and nationalism, engaging with an array of religious others can be profoundly challenging. In our world of inescapable, increasing diversity, religious and cultural heterogeneity has created isolated ghettos with little or no movement between them, engendering tensions and confrontations among various traditions. While tolerance of religious others is a good beginning to address the issue, it fails to remove our ignorance, stereotypes, and misconceptions of one another. Therefore, scholars of religion, theologians, philosophers, political theorists, and even scientists like Kalam have developed pluralistic notions that actively seek to understand others across lines of difference. Pluralism does not require religious people to leave their commitments and identities behind; instead, it advocates developing relationships with and understanding religious others through “dialogue and encounter, give and take, criticism and self-criticism.”2

In this article, I show how profound spiritual experiences could deepen one’s perception of religious pluralism, encourage mutual understanding, and develop harmonious relations with religious others. Taking seriously the religious and spiritual experiences people report, I argue that such an experiential depth helps overcome external divisions through internal reflections. Despite their grounding in diverse—sometimes conflicting—theological, philosophical, and ontological systems, such mystical experiences convey truths and values to their adherents in a way that potentially blurs the boundaries between different religious traditions. As a case study, I explore a Hindu-Muslim relationship between Pramukh Swami Maharaj, a Hindu monastic-guru, and Dr. APJ Abdul Kalam, a devout practicing Muslim, through S. Mark Heim’s trinitarian theology of religions. I particularly compare their cordial Hindu-Muslim relations with Heim’s theology of understanding diverse religious traditions through various dimensions of the triune God. To this end, I use Francis Clooney’s method of comparative theology to compare two works: Kalam’s memoir Transcendence: My Spiritual Experiences with Pramukh Swamiji; and Heim’s work The Depth of the Riches: A Trinitarian Theology of Religious Ends.3

Building on this short comparative theological study, I show how the experiential depth attained and maintained through close interreligious relationships and open ecumenical dialogue could foster energetic engagement with diversity. However, I will not be able to address two aspects related to religious pluralism: the tension that may arise from the differences between Hindu and Muslim theological, soteriological, and ontological teachings; and what Pramukh Swami learned and experienced from his conversations with Kalam. This is primarily because Kalam himself does not mention these aspects in his book. Although he often presents Islamic beliefs and practices correlated with their conversations

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and acknowledges that Pramukh Swami appreciated them, Kalam does not indicate any potential tension and instead focuses on spiritual experiences that rise above religious commitments.

Pramukh Swami (1921–2016) was the guru of the BAPS Swaminarayan Sanstha, a transnational Hindu organization that has spread globally in the last four decades and can be found in contexts ranging from subaltern, low-caste, low-class communities in rural India to the second-generation Indian diaspora in North America. BAPS followers believe that Pramukh Swami was a manifestation of Aksharabrahman or Akshardham, the eternal abode of God—Bhagwan Swaminarayan—and hence in constant communion with God.4 “With over 2,900 centres, 950 sadhus, 55,000 youth volunteers and millions of followers worldwide,”5 Pramukh Swami has been listed among the “top 20 most influential people” in the world in the 2002 edition of Guinness World Records.6 Dr. Kalam, the eleventh President of India, was known as the Missile Man of India for his four-decades-long work as a leading scientist at the Defence Research and Development Organisation (DRDO) and Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO). Affectionately known as the People’s President, Kalam was the recipient of many national and international awards, including honorary doctorates from forty-eight universities all over the world and India’s highest civilian award, the Bharat Ratna.7

In his last book Transcendence, published just a month before his death, Kalam narrates how despite being a proud, devout, practicing Muslim, he felt he was in perfect harmony and communion with a Hindu monastic-guru Pramukh Swami. Remembering his first impression of Pramukh Swami, Kalam narrates: “Resplendent in saffron robes, the gentle, fair-complexioned Pramukh Swamiji was radiating divinity.”8 Kalam then presented his ideas of “Vision 2020” to transform India from a developing country into a developed country in the next thirty years by advancing five important areas: “education and health care, agricultural, information and communication, infrastructure and critical technology.” When Kalam requested Pramukh Swami for guidance, he suggested:

Along with your five areas to transform India, add a sixth one—faith in God and developing people through spirituality. This is very important... We need to first generate a moral and spiritual atmosphere... [W]e need to rekindle faith in our scriptures and God. Without this, there will be no transformation; nothing will be solved, and you shall not be able to achieve your dream... The goal behind God’s creation of the universe is that every person, every soul, attains bliss... So, together with this worldly knowledge, knowledge given by God—spirituality—is equally necessary.9

Respecting all religious beliefs and practices, Pramukh Swami told Kalam to include the factor of faith in God along with moral and spiritual values. While planning for the development of India, Kalam never thought of generating a cadre of value-based citizens by inspiring them to develop faith in their respective religions, scriptures, and divinities. In making this suggestion, Pramukh Swami not only welcomed the plurality of diverse religious traditions but also sought to build a common platform on which their moral, ethical, and spiritual values could be fostered. Without differentiating between different conceptions of the divine propagated by diverse religious
traditions, he focused on the practical benefits of common human values that almost all religious faiths advance. Kalam was not only touched by Pramukh Swami’s pluralistic religious views but also senses, in him, a kindred spirit. He felt as if he had known Pramukh Swami all his life, and he was sitting the presence of his father, a Muslim imam, and beloved teachers. “I realized that,” Kalam expresses, “here with Pramukh Swamiji, I was within a transformative moment in my life. I felt as if I was crossing into another realm.”

Pramukh Swami’s use of religious plurality and his cordial connection with Kalam illustrate Heim’s trinitarian theology of religious ends. Kalam’s spiritual experiences with Pramukh Swami address Heim’s question: “Can religions recognize other ways to religious fulfillment than their own, and if so, how?” Usually, most pluralism theorists categorize religious traditions by their beliefs and practices required to attain a supposedly single ultimate goal, articulated differently by different religious traditions. Heim argues that the Christian doctrine of salvation as communion with the triune God holds a key to answer this question. By projecting the relationships between the three persons of the Trinity onto different relations that other religions have with the divine, Heim considers multiple religious ends as part of the final eschatological scheme. I compare this theology of religions, which is founded on the relationship of difference in communion, with the Hindu-Muslim relationship between Pramukh Swami and Kalam, using Clooney’s method of doing comparative theology, characterized as theology, which may be briefly described as faith seeking understanding, grounded in community, cognizant of claims regarding truth, and open to the implications of study for spiritual advancement and practice; and it is comparative, familiar with and respectful of the best work in comparative studies of religion today, yet also committed to learning from both outside and within one’s own community in a way that remains theologically sensitive and conducive to mutual transformation in study.

Clooney’s method is typically used to compare theological doctrines, devotional practices, normative ethics, or even the social aspects of two religious traditions; however, in this article, I will compare two theologies of religions that are intrinsically comparative in themselves. I understand that this is an ambitious task that necessarily requires a book-length project. Nonetheless, within this article’s limited scope, I highlight some potential areas from both works that could be meaningfully compared using Clooney’s methodology to yield “fresh theological insights that are indebted to the newly encountered tradition/s as well as the home tradition.” While I show how Heim’s theology sheds new light on Kalam’s work, I will not be able to show the opposite due to the limited space I have in this essay. First, an overview of Heim’s theology of religions.

S. Mark Heim’s Trinitarian Theology of Religious Ends

As Alan Race shows, Christian views of religious others are grounded in three paradigms: exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism. Expanding these categories, Paul Knitter proposes a fourfold model: the replacement model, the fulfillment model, the mutuality model, and the acceptance model. These theories, Heim argues, underplay both the integrity of other religious traditions and the
possibility of finding substantial truths in their claims. Moreover, such theories stand among and not above religious traditions of the world, and hence do not provide a bird’s eye view that rises above specific worldviews, cultures, and environments. To address this issue, Heim develops a theology of religious ends that grants other religious traditions authenticity and legitimacy, without undermining his commitment to Christianity.

In his earlier work *Salvations*, Heim argues that religions are distinguished by the search for more than one attainable religious goal or final human fulfillment, with each of them being genuinely good and real. With this premise of the multiplicity of religious ends, Heim suggests that the doctrine of the Trinity best represents the Christian context for interpreting religious pluralism. Drawing on John Zizioulas, Heim maintains that the triune God is a non-reductive ultimate divinity in whom three distinct persons coexist as a single homogenous person through a relationship of difference in communion. Heim equates this relationship to a musical polyphony in which “a simultaneous, non-excluding harmony of difference” constitutes one unique reality from three interdependent persons. This theological doctrine has far-reaching implications in understanding the religious other and otherness, the one and the many.

Building on this trinitarian doctrine, Heim proposes that various religious traditions pursue their distinct goals by directly or indirectly developing a relationship with God that is constituted by “a limitation or intensification within a particular dimension of the triune life.” Although different religious traditions engage only partial dimensions of the Trinity, their varied aspirations and conceptions of the highest good are welcomed and embraced by the triune God. Consequently, due to the common factor of having a relationship with God, various religious traditions can be considered being in communion with one another as well. Mapping this aspect of the shared triune life onto different religious traditions, Heim proposes that a relationship with God can be developed in one of the channels: 1) “impersonal emptiness” and “impersonal identity;” 2) “iconic and personal encounter;” and 3) “personal communion.”

Now, I show how Kalam’s cordial relationship and spiritual experiences with Pramukh Swami not only exemplify these three channels but also unify them into a coherent whole.

Impersonal Emptiness and Impersonal Identity

Heim argues that God has two impersonal aspects: “the emptiness” that “is one of God’s relations to creation, a fundamental dimension of distance given in the creative act itself;” and, second, “the identity” that is “one unshakable reality [that] sustains all things by pervading all things, by identity with all things.” Impersonal emptiness is, for instance, best represented by the Buddhist precept of nirvana and the apophatic theology of Orthodox Christianity; and impersonal identity by the Advaita Vedanta Hindu tradition’s understanding of “I am that.”

After the first meeting in 2001, Kalam met with Pramukh Swami multiple times over fifteen years, asked many questions, and held lengthy discussions. Some of his questions focused on the relationship between the cosmos, its creator God, and human life. Summarizing Pramukh Swami’s answers, Kalam writes:
I realized that a divine life can have no base unless we recognize the eternal spirit as the inhabitant of this bodily mansion, and integrate all of which the eternal spirit is comprised. That all those living on this planet Earth—around me, away from me, in my country, in other countries; even other species and vegetation and minerals—are all different forms of a great unity. At the most elementary level, all nature is one. Only one noble material weaves constantly different garbs. The nascent convergence of Nano-Bio-Info-Cogno technologies is a testimony to this.

Kalam’s learning resembles what Heim calls “impersonal emptiness,” through which God pervades his creation. God’s such presence and immanence have been profusely articulated in the sacred texts of most religions, especially Hinduism. The famous Upanishadic verse “īśā vāsyamidaṁ sarvāṁ yatkiṁca jagatyaṁ jagat,” for example, means that “all this is pervaded by the divine, whatsoever is animate (or inanimate) in this world” (Isopanishad 1, my translation).

Heim, however, adds an interesting dimension to this traditional understanding by characterizing the divine presence as “the radical immanence and the radical emptiness, by which the divine persons indwell each other and make way for others to indwell them.” This aspect of the triune God sheds new light on the Hindu conception of omnipresence. God making way for others to indwell him suggests that not only does the divine reside in the soul, but the soul can also reside in the divine. For Hindu devotional (bhakti) traditions, this would mean that a close relationship between divine persons—God and God-realized devotees—would make them “indwell each other and make way for others to indwell them.” God and his devotees’ mutual, deep love for one another makes them to be and live in one another. Krishna states in the Bhagavad Gita “udārāh sarva evaite, jñāṇī tv atmaiva me matam,” that is, “all these are certainly great souls, but he who is situated in knowledge [of me], I consider to be just like my own self” (7.18, my translation).

Being God’s own self (atman), such devotees dwell in the heart of God. Thus, Heim’s trinitarian view of understanding the divine immanence through the mutual indwelling reveals a new perspective for the Hindu conception of presence: God’s presence in the soul could be reciprocated by the soul’s presence in God, if the soul realizes and internalizes the supreme knowledge of God.

Further, using an analogy of energy, Kalam fuses what he calls “true science” and “true spirituality” to illustrate God’s impersonal immanence:

Since I first met Pramukh Swamiji in 2001, I have explored the relationship between the scientific and the spiritual. I have found that true science and true spirituality are not merely compatible; they can be one and the same. What is the source of life? We don’t even know what an atom is—whether it is a wave or a particle—or if it is both... That is the reason we speak of the Divine. There is a transcendent energy source... That energy is the aspiring energy of all things. Mystic worship addresses this.

In the exact same vein, Heim uses the Quantum Mechanics principle of matter converting into energy and vice versa to contend that the omnipresent divinity manifests “emptiness,” in that it dissolves all physical entities into the uniform flux of energy. Heim argues that this divine force is “something like an electric charge or field, generated by the
constant interchange of the three divine persons with each other.” It is this force that causes the Trinity’s individual personhoods to disappear. Just as our personhood is not observable or detectable at the molecular level, God’s personhood is also not discernible at the most minuscule level permeated by divine immanence.

Heim’s intriguing connection of the universe’s emptiness with the flux generated by the constant interchange between the divine persons makes an important intervention in the Hindu understanding of the universe filled with divine energy. In the light of Heim’s theology, the Hindu conception of divine immanence could be understood as the divine energy flowing at the most micro level being representative and evidential of the divine person at the most macro level.32 Just as formless energy and formed matter convert into and coexist with one another, the formless emptiness or energy of the divine underlying the universe converts into, coexists with, and represents God’s divine form. Further, Kalam recalls Pramukh Swami telling him, “Kalam, you are not what you think you are… Let God be at the core of all your decisions and reasoning. God is the source of all energy.”33 Such conversations prompted Kalam to realize what Heim calls “impersonal identity” of “I am that.” Now, I examine Pramukh Swami and Kalam’s relationship in light of Heim’s second dimension of “iconic and personal encounter” in which God relates directly with the world.

Iconic and Personal Encounter

Heim contends that God’s absence and immanence allow for God’s presence and transcendence. In contrast to the impersonal ways, this aspect is interpersonal, albeit in only one direction, from the divine to the people. It reveals divine nature and purpose in two ways. One focuses on God as a personal being but primarily as a law and morality figure whose injunctions must be religiously followed and promises trusted. This dimension highlights God as a personal agent and deity, who “acts, covenants, commands, punishes, loves and redeems.”34 Such external, interpersonal, “I-thou” relations are, for example, assumed with the God of the Biblical and Qur’anic traditions.35 The second way focuses on encounter with the divine authority not through a person but an icon: a transcendent law, command, or structure; for example, the Buddhist dharma taken as an eternal structure or order, the “‘Tao” of Taoism or the logos in Stoicism, or the Kantian moral law.”36 What is intriguing here is Heim’s inclusion of Kant’s moral law: human action is morally good if done from a sense of duty. Building on this premise, Kant derived his influential, debatable principle of “categorical imperative:” “Act as if the maxim of your action were to become by your will a universal law of nature.”37

Kalam advocates such duty-based ethics and morality, and appreciates Pramukh Swami’s manifold efforts to impart value education.38 Participating in such activities, Kalam recalls composing a handwritten message for the inauguration of the BAPS Swaminarayan Vidyamandir in Raisan, India—one of the “over 100 schools, hostels, research centres and institutions” built and run by BAPS. Inspiring students to develop “courage” to “think different,” “invent,” “discover the impossible,” and “combat the problems and succeed,” Kalam ends the message with a dutiful pledge to work for the nation:

I, the youth of my nation,
Will work and work with Courage  
For prosperity of my nation.  

While this exhortation has a patriotic appeal, Kalam situates it under the umbrella of moral and ethical values required to “live in the witness of God.” It could be classified as what Raimon Panikkar calls “iconolatry,” “a representation of the divine under some particular form, mental or material.” Heim asserts that any definite entity representing the ultimate—whether a personal deity or even “a law, a teaching, or a narrative”—that “resists reduction to merely one limited expression among others serves as an icon.” In this vein, Kalam’s appeal to serve the nation as a moral imperative could be regarded as an iconic and personal encounter of the divine with the students. Kalam further notes that his message was paired with Pramukh Swami’s “profound words for the children of the world: ‘Beloved Children, Whatever is written, if not read; whatever is read, if not contemplated; whatever is contemplated, if not practiced in life, then what is the point of writing? So, pray daily to God and sincerely work hard. Strengthen good character in your life. And serve your parents, society and country.’”  

Kalam’s and Pramukh Swami’s messages exemplify, especially when read together, Heim’s premise that the focus of the iconic encounter is “the outward communication of the will, purpose, thoughts and feelings of one to the other, on the analogy of the external interpersonal relations.” By imparting moral edification, both the messages develop special relations with readers by making an impact in their daily lives and encouraging them to serve God through one’s parents, society, and country. Unlike the impersonal modes explored above, the personal, iconic mode shows a distance between where we are and where we need to go, and thereby creates momentum toward transformation. “The motto of iconolatry,” Heim contends, “is not “thou art that” but “become what you are called/structured to be”.” This view helps understand Kalam’s further proposition that imbibing moral, ethical, and spiritual values are facilitated by the “satpurush,” an enlightened, God-realized person, “who is in charge of his senses and mind, who performs all his actions with God at the centre, who observes a strict moral code and worships God.” Such a satpurush would act as what Heim calls an agent or iconolatry of God. However, rather than engaging such enlightened beings through iconic encounters, it could be more fruitful if one observes how they think, perceive, speak, and act, for they reflect, as Kalam emphasizes, “God and God’s ways.” Engaging, interacting, and developing relations with such a satpurush could lead to Heim’s third dimension of “personal communion.”  

**Personal Communion**  
In contrast to encountering God as an impersonal, distant entity or a particular, assertive icon, Heim’s third dimension of “personal communion” is a sharing of personal lives in which the human and the divine are in intimate communion. It is built on mutual affinity, receptivity, and respectability, enriched by the reciprocal interaction and participation in each other’s inner life. One example of this relationship can be found in Paul’s letters: “When Paul says “not I, but Christ in me” he does not mean “not me, but instead Christ who has now replaced me;”” rather, he signifies “a communion so close and full that not only external acts and effects are exchanged.
between persons, but also features of their inner lives.” Such a communion is so intersubjective that the persons in a relationship realize that some of their thoughts, feelings, emotions, and actions arise not from their isolated individuality but from the indwelling of the other person.

Throughout the book, Kalam narrates how his close relationship and personal encounters with Pramukh Swami across the Hindu-Muslim religious distinctions helped him come up with unanticipated solutions that ultimately brought him closer to God. In his chapter Self-discipline Is the True Path to Dharma, Kalam elaborates on his dilemma as the President of India about signing a controversial bill popularly known as the Office of Profit Bill. Although India’s parliament passed it through a cross-party consensus, Kalam felt that the manner in which the bill exempted certain offices of profit was self-serving, injurious to the constitution, and against the larger public interest. Hence his dilemma: “Why amend the very Constitution of our country merely to accommodate a few politicians who may risk losing their membership of the house?” After due deliberation, Kalam exercised his right to send back the bill to the parliament with a request to examine the legality and suitability of the bill’s provisions. However, he was surprised and disappointed when the then United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government sent the bill back without any changes. Eventually, he had to sign the bill even though in his view, the criteria for exemption was not just, fair, reasonable, and applied across all states and Union territories.

During this period, Kalam expresses, “I experienced an intense moral dilemma: should I have signed or should I have resigned? I needed spiritual guidance: an assurance about my decision to sign the bill, to enact legislation which I was convinced was flawed.” Incidentally, Pramukh Swami arrived in New Delhi in a few months, and hence Kalam went to see him at Akshardham, especially to resolve his predicament. However, recalling how his confusion was resolved most unexpectedly, Kalam states: “before I could broach the topic, I found the answer to all my questions in his presence... [I felt that] my decision to follow the Constitution and bow before the supremacy of the parliament was indeed right.”

In light of Heim’s trinitarian theology of religions, Kalam’s experience represents the third dimension of relationship with God, which is “personal not only in the sense of interaction between persons, but in the sense of communion among them.” In such a personal communion, the need for external conversation is fulfilled by internal communication, which is beyond words and hence cannot be sufficiently articulated. One feels comfortable in the other’s presence, yet one may not be able to explain the reason. Kalam did not raise his question, nor did Pramukh Swami inquire or address anything related to it, but still, Kalam got the answer. It was not his visit to the Akshardham temple but Pramukh Swami’s company, Kalam believes, that solved his issue. Kalam could not comprehend the rationale behind such a resolution of his predicament. He simply felt profound peace in Pramukh Swami’s presence, without understanding the hows and whys of the experiential depth.

Heim’s exposition of the trinitarian dimension of personal communion helps understand Kalam’s experience in a new light. The classical trinitarian doctrine suggests that communion between any two persons of the Trinity implies communion of each of them with
the third. Thus, a typical feature of a genuine communion is, Heim argues, “the discovery in ourselves of an openness or response to a third person which we can hardly credit as coming from us, except by the virtue of the indwelling of a second in us,” and, therefore, “[n]o one can love God and hate their neighbor.” Kalam’s close relationship with Pramukh Swami led him to have an openness toward the parliamentarians despite their ostensibly mean act of passing a self-serving bill. Although no words were exchanged between Kalam and Pramukh Swami on this topic, the warmth and comfort found in the other’s presence generated consideration for the third. The deep communion between the two helped Kalam see the third as a part of the divine creation, imbued with the divine presence. Without this sort of intersubjective relationship, it might have been difficult for Kalam to forgive the politicians as well as himself. Kalam’s cathartic experience demonstrates the motto of this dimension: “transformation through communion.”

“Deeply comforted, and with all the confusion evaporated from my mind,” Kalam further narrates, “I thanked Pramukh Swamiji by saying, ‘Pashyeam sharad shatam, jeevema sharad shatam,’ a Vedic mantra, meaning, ‘May you see a hundred years; may you live a hundred years.’” Pramukh Swami graciously accepted Kalam’s affection, lovingly reciprocated with the same wish for him, and yet firmly declined his hopeful wishes by citing a Bhagavad Gita verse, “Na jayate mriyate va kadacin ... the soul is eternal; it is never born and never dies.” Kalam was touched by how Pramukh Swami conveyed complex truths simply and spontaneously. Such a communion focuses more on hearty responsiveness to one another than on the profuseness and richness of the words exchanged. Heim characterizes such a communion as “mutual indwelling, in which the distinct persons are not confused or identified but are enriched by their participation in each other’s inner life.”

Thus, Pramukh Swami and Kalam treasured each other’s presence by sharing their views and values. Although their beliefs and practices were grounded in different religious traditions—Hindu and Muslim respectively—that advocate different means and ends, their close relationship exemplifies all three dimensions of the communion: impersonal emptiness and identity; iconic and personal encounter; and personal communion. As Heim shows, most religious traditions usually represent one or two dimensions, but not all three. In this context, Kalam’s relationship with Pramukh Swami emerges as an exceptional case to study not only theology of religions or comparative theology but also pluralism. It was the depth of Kalam’s “spiritual experiences with Pramukh Swamiji” that helped build bridges across the lines of religious distinctions.

The Experiential Depth

Kalam’s last meeting with Pramukh Swami (before writing the book) was quite remarkable. On March 11, 2014, Kalam traveled to a small village called Sarangpur in Gujarat to meet Pramukh Swami. Remembering this soulful meeting in a garden inhabited by peacocks and surrounded by beautiful flowers, Kalam writes:

In an emotionally and spiritually charged atmosphere, Swamiji held my hand for ten minutes. No words were spoken. We looked into each other’s eyes in a profound communication of consciousness. It was a great spiritual experience... I became oblivious to the people around us, and was
drawn into a kind of timeless silence... I heard in the silence of his grip on my hand, 'Kalam, go and tell everyone that the power that would lead us to eternal victory amid these struggles is the power of good within us. Communicate to mankind the vision of a harmonious world... And a harmonious world begins with a harmonious inner world—an unavoidably spiritual quest. For us to ignite our spirituality, we need to look inward and transcend our egos. We need to recognize, connect with and integrate the eternal spirit within.'

A lot transpired in this short, silent meeting. A close reading of their interactions—both vocal and silent—both substantiates and transcends Heim’s theology of religions by fusing its threefold dimensions in one interreligious relationship. The comparative theological analysis of Kalam’s interactions and experiences with Pramukh Swami shows that their accounts intricately intertwine all three dimensions derived from the triune God: impersonal, iconic, and communion. From chapter to chapter, story to story, Kalam swiftly and effortlessly moves from one dimension to another, blurring their theological boundaries. Their fusion depicts a relationship of difference in communion that rises above the usual association of one dimension with one religious tradition.

Even though Hindu and Muslim theologies, soteriologies, and ontologies significantly differ, there were no contrary claims, uncomfortable positions, or religious reservations in this relationship. Despite devoutly practicing their Hindu and Muslim faiths, Pramukh Swami and Kalam agreed on almost all aspects of the ultimate reality. As is evident from the book, they easily switched between different modes of divinity, as if differences between religious ends do not exist. Their interactions were filled with soteriological and ontological fluidity, in which the distinctness between religious entities, ends, and means to attain them dissolved into one another.

Such accounts of what Kalam perceives to be “spiritual experiences” open new avenues to understand pluralism and theology of religions. Such experiences do not come to our sense-driven consciousness, historically tied with our intellectual ability; hence, believers from diverse religious traditions can comfortably communicate with one another, for they can mark and share their mystical experiences that go beyond the sense organs and human intellect. Kalam and Pramukh Swami could comfortably communicate across the religious, educational, cultural, and linguistic borders because their shared experiences were grounded in the internal communion and not the external connection. Kalam asserts that with Pramukh Swami, he felt “a strange connection with something that exists in the realm of spirit—the part that is closest to the Divine.”

Thus, the depth of their shared experiences was mediated by internal spiritual insights and not external sense organs. For some scholars, such deeply spiritual experiences are a component, an extension, or an evolved form of religion; for others, they represent a spirituality that is eternal and inherent to the self, and, hence, has nothing to do with religion, which is a social construction and contingent upon history. In either case, spirituality is often invoked to describe human aspirations, conceptions, and experiences that are, at once, immanent and transcendent, this-worldly and otherworldly. Their accounts could significantly complicate the longstanding theologies of religions and theories of pluralism grounded in not only
religious distinctions but also the secular-religious binary.

Courtney Bender and Ann Taves, for example, show that adding the third dimension of spirituality to the secular-religious binary and analyzing its intricately intertwined relationship with modernity can challenge the predominant dichotomous views about the secular and the religious, and, by extension, between religions. For instance, in retrospective analysis of his meetings with Pramukh Swami, Kalam felt that he primarily learned his true spiritual identity due to the conversations. Although their encounters were interreligious—a devout, practicing Muslim layperson interacting with a devout, practicing Hindu monk—they could effortlessly transcend the religious boundaries on the grounds of spirituality, making Kalam contemplate on:

Who am I really? Am I so-and-so with a certain past and a certain body and personality and certain roles, talents, weaknesses, dreams, fears and beliefs? Others may define me in these ways, but that is not who I really am. Who I really am can only be discovered... when the mind is quiet and no longer telling me who I am. When all the preconceptions about myself are stilled, what remains is who I really am: consciousness, awareness, stillness, presence, peace, love, and the Divine. You are that which is nameless, and yet has been given a thousand names.

Such profound experiences, I argue, blur theological and ontological boundaries, for they are grounded in what Charles Taylor considers “fullness” of “moral/spiritual life” along with and regardless of one’s religious beliefs and practices. In his celebrated work A Secular Age, Taylor shows how different religions’ encounters with the “secular immanent frame” in the last three centuries of modernity have fostered transcendent aspects of spirituality. In this vein, the depth of Kalam’s spiritual experiences diffuses the secular-religious binary when his secular identities built on “certain roles, talents, weaknesses, dreams” dissolve into “consciousness, awareness... love, and the Divine.” Similarly, it also diffuses distinctions between religions.

As is evident in Kalam’s expressions, the distinct religious dimensions of Heim’s ternary structure merge to create a homogenous experience of the divinity. For example, Kalam states at once that the divine is nameless and yet has been given a thousand names, the former being an aspect of impersonal emptiness and the latter of God in iconic encounter or personal communion. In parallel, Kalam also engages the aspect of impersonal identity when he asserts that “all those living on this planet Earth—around me, away from me, in my country, in other countries...—are all different forms of a great unity. At the most elementary level, all nature is one.” Throughout the book, Kalam juxtaposes and integrates these aspects, not to compare and contrast them, but to show that the external comparisons of religious beliefs and practices become less significant in light of the internal spiritual experiences attained by any means toward any religious end. At this metaphysical level, theological, ontological, epistemological, soteriological, and other religious differences dissolve in transcendent experiences that represent a coherent whole.

Kalam’s sections can be thus mapped onto Heim’s trinitarian framework. However, a key difference is that Heim places different religious relations, means, and ends in distinct categories, whereas Kalam fuses them in such a way that the
distinctions become insignificant. This fusion substantiates my thesis: the conception of religious pluralism could be broadened by focusing on the internal dimensions of spiritual experiences along with the external dimensions of religious tenets and ends. Those with profoundly peaceful and blissful experiences of the divine do not fight over its manifold diverse dimensions, because such spiritual experiences help them get a bird’s eye view that rises above specific worldviews, cultures, languages, and environments. Such an experiential depth helps overcome external divisions through internal reflections, and, thereby, develop harmonious relations with religious others.

I end this paper with a maxim cited by Kalam to begin the book: “Sanctify yourself and you will sanctify society” by the twelfth-century Catholic mendicant Saint Francis of Assisi. This quote represents the essence of my conception of deeper pluralism: the internal spiritual and devotional experience of the divine precedes and promotes the external sociocultural unity and human harmony among multiple, sometimes antithetical, religions.

Notes


4 Raymond Brady Williams, An Introduction to Swaminarayan Hinduism (Cambridge, UK; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 63.

5 Kalam, 235–36.


7 Kalam, Transcendence, front flap.

8 Kalam, 3.

9 Kalam, 4.

10 Kalam, 5.

11 Heim, The Depth of the Riches, 3.


Heim, *The Depth of the Riches*.


Heim, 167.


Heim, 40–43.

Heim, 43–46.


Heim, 190.


Heim, “The Depth of the Riches: Trinity and Religious Ends,” 34.


The limited scope of this paper does not allow me to present my comparative theological examination of the two. Nonetheless, I posit a theory that the divine energy flowing at the micro level represents and substantiates the divine person at the macro level. The famous Einsteinian priniple of energy and mass converting into each other could be applied to the formless emptiness or energy of the divine underlying the universe to show how it converts into, coexists with, and represents God’s divine form.

Kalam, *Transcendence*, 12.


Kalam, 105–6.


Heim, 42.

46 Kalam, 107.
49 Kalam, *Transcendence*, 35.
50 Kalam, 36.
51 Kalam, 37.
54 Heim, 44.
56 Kalam, 37.
57 Heim, *The Depth of the Riches*, 196.
58 Kalam and Tiwari, xi–xiii.
64 Taylor, 551–62.
65 Kalam, *Transcendence*, xi.