

# Holy Friendship for a Religiously Plural World:

Insights from Thomas Aquinas and Ibn al-ʿArabī

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# Holy Friendship for a Religiously Plural World:

Insights from Thomas Aquinas and Ibn al-ʿArabī

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## Abstract

Interreligious engagement is often seen as a means to other ends, such as social change, ecological justice, or societal peace. Rarely is it thought of as a means to cultivate holiness. Drawing upon the theological wisdom of St. Thomas Aquinas and Ibn al-ʿArabī, this paper utilizes a comparative method to argue that interreligious friendship can positively impact the participants' holiness. This argument is grounded in their shared theomorphic vision of ethics. According to both authors, friendship with God transforms the faithful from within so that such a person communicates God to the world in a unique way. The friend of God becomes a conduit of divine life in the world. This paper will first examine how Aquinas grounds this theomorphic transformation in the Incarnation of the Word as the normative means for Christians to achieve holiness. This will be followed by examining how Ibn al-ʿArabī sees emulation of Muhammad as the normative means to acquiring or actualizing the divine names. The benefit of this model is that it accommodates itself to pluralist, inclusivist, and exclusivist approaches to religious plurality. It does not require either community to give up what is particular to it, such as the doctrine of the incarnation or the finality of the Prophet Muhammad. At the same time, it also makes room for the missionary impetus that caused both of these traditions to spread around the globe.

**Keywords:** *Thomas Aquinas, Ibn al-ʿArabī, Jesus, Muhammad, Friendship, Virtue*



## Introduction

**In religiously plural societies, interreligious friendships occur. While some people may intentionally pursue interreligious friendships, most begin in the same way as other friendships.**

We recognize someone as good in some way, which results in a desire to be around such a person. That is, friendships usually begin as a precognitive admiration or affection that pulls people together. The would-be friend has a quality or virtue that renders him or her admirable.<sup>1</sup> On a practical level, friendship does not deal with abstract categories but with the real relationship between people that must constantly be renewed in every new context. Friendship can be liberating; our friends can help us recognize our own shortcomings. Friendship can also be risky. We are vulnerable in our friendships; we put our emotional, psychological, physical, and even spiritual well-being in the hands of another. We must trust that their love for us is true. Although friendship can be uncertain, its rewards are great, and without it, according to Aristotle, human flourishing is impossible.<sup>2</sup> Further, Aristotle sees friendship as a bond that holds society together.<sup>3</sup>

In the following, I will turn to the respective theologies of St. Thomas Aquinas and Ibn al-‘Arabī to examine their respective understandings of the “economy of friendship” as a resource for positively evaluating interreligious friendship.<sup>4</sup> Though not representative of the entire Christian or Muslim tradition, both Aquinas and Ibn al-‘Arabī nonetheless have a profound and expansive impact on their respective traditions, making their insights on friendship valuable for understanding friendship in a religiously plural society.

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<sup>1</sup> Linda Zagzebski, “Admiration and the Admirable.” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, Supplementary Volumes 89 (2015): 205–21. According to Zagzebski, admiration differs from marvel and awe in that admiration leads to a desire to emulate. In the case of interreligious friendship, it is a recognition of holiness in the other that would inspire one to strive after greater holiness..

<sup>2</sup> John M Cooper, “Friendship and the Good in Aristotle.” *The Philosophical Review* 86, no. 3 (1977): 290–315.

<sup>3</sup> Lorraine Smith Pangle, *Aristotle and the Philosophy of Friendship* (Cambridge University Press, 2002), 17.

<sup>4</sup> By “economy of friendship,” I mean how God communicates Himself in friendship to others and through others, as well as the effect this friendship has on individuals.

**“...both Aquinas and Ibn al-‘Arabī...have a *profound and expansive impact* on their respective traditions, making their insights on friendship valuable for understanding friendship in a *religiously plural society*.”**

## Creation: Some Common Ground

Central to Christian and Muslim theology is the idea that God has freely created the world, sustains it in its existence, and calls everything in creation back to *Godself*.<sup>5</sup> For both Aquinas and Ibn al-‘Arabī, creation presents a paradox. On the one hand, by the logic of creation, God must transcend the created world as something wholly other, something independent of the world. In God’s majesty, God is incomparable to all of creation.

At the same time, however, since creation is not self-sufficient, God must be profoundly immanent or near to creation in order to sustain its existence. God gives existence to the creation and, therefore, must be entirely outside its constrictions, but God sustains creation and must be present in it. Aquinas and Ibn al-‘Arabī resolve this paradox only by understanding God as an infinite *Being*. For both our authors, creatures are neither identical with God, nor independent of God, nor wholly different than God. The idea of creation demands a union of similarity and difference, which can be characterized, to borrow an idiom from Erich Przywara, as “God beyond-and-in creation.”<sup>6</sup> God is beyond creation but also immanent to creation, near *and* far, similar *and* dissimilar. This is the fundamental relationship between God and every creature or primordial context. It is upon this relationship that all other relationships are built.

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<sup>5</sup> On the doctrine of creation in Christianity and Islam (and Judaism), see David Burrell, *Freedom and Creation in Three Traditions* (University of Notre Dame Press, 1985).

<sup>6</sup> Przywara argues that a phenomenological perspective on metaphysics reveals how the Absolute, representing existence and Truth, manifests itself within finite existence and thought as something “beyond” since no finite existence or thought can fully coincide with absolute Being and Truth. However, this same absolute Being and Truth reveals itself in and through finite existence and thought. For an overview of Przywara’s ideas, see the introduction by John Betz in Erich Przywara, *Analogia Entis: Metaphysics: Original Structure and Universal Rhythm*, trans. John Betz and David Bentley Hart (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2014), 43-74.

**“God is *beyond* creation but also *immanent* to creation, near *and* far, similar *and* dissimilar. This is the fundamental relationship between God and every creature or primordial context.”**

The “beyond-and-in” relationship between God and the created world forms the basis for all relationships, be they with God, other individuals, or the universe. The “beyond-and-in relationship” means that all the actions of, and interactions between, creatures are related to the infinite activity of God. God is always present when two creatures engage one another without obviating the creature’s own freedom and responsibility for that action. Thus, when one person engages with another, they simultaneously engage God. In other words, what we do unto others, we do unto God.<sup>7</sup> This ambiguous situation, which characterizes the human-divine relation, is augmented when this relationship acquires the further quality of friendship since one of the effects of friendship is union.<sup>8</sup> The difference between God and creation never disappears.

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<sup>7</sup> This idea presents itself in Christianity in the Gospel (Matthew 25:42-45): “*I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.*” Then they also will answer, “*Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison and did not take care of you?*” Then he will answer them, “*Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.*” See Michael D. Coogan et al., *The New Oxford Annotated Bible: New Revised Standard Version With the Apocrypha, Fully Revised Fourth Edition* (Oxford University Press, 2010).

A similar narration occurs in the Hadith tradition of Islam (Saḥīḥ Muslim, Book 45, Hadith 54): “*Allah (mighty and sublime be He) will say on the Day of Resurrection: O son of Adam, I fell ill and you visited Me not. He will say: O Lord, and how should I visit You when You are the Lord of the worlds? He will say: Did you not know that My servant so-and-so had fallen ill and you visited him not? Did you not know that had you visited him you would have found Me with him? O son of Adam, I asked you for food and you fed Me not. He will say: O Lord, and how should I feed You when You are the Lord of the worlds? He will say: Did you not know that My servant so-and-so asked you for food and you fed him not? Did you not know that had you fed him you would surely have found that (the reward for doing so) with Me? O son of Adam, I asked you to give Me to drink and you gave Me not to drink. He will say: O Lord, how should I give You to drink when You are the Lord of the worlds? He will say: My servant So-and-so asked you to give him to drink and you gave him not to drink. Had you given him to drink you would have surely found that with Me.*” See Sahih Muslim, *The Book of Virtue, Enjoining Good Manners, and Joining of the Ties of Kinship*, 2569.

<sup>8</sup> Anthony Carreras, “Aristotle on Other-Selfhood and Reciprocal Sharing”, *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 29, no. 4 (2012): 319–36.

However, the preservation of difference, even in union, opens up ground to highlight the integrity and dignity of both God and humanity and the transformative effect of friendship. Although both of our authors agree on this general structure of the God-human relationship, their particular ways of elaborating the friendship structure in the context of creation will differ significantly. Aquinas and Ibn al-‘Arabī believe that God has provided a definitive revelation that is normative for thinking about God-human friendship. As we will see in the following two sections, Aquinas and Ibn al-‘Arabī diverge in their thinking about *authentic* holy friendship. This difference highlights a central feature of interreligious friendship in Christianity and Islam: differences simultaneously saturate those points in which the two traditions are similar.

## Aquinas and the Trinitarian Character of Friendship

Aquinas elaborates his mature understanding of the economy of friendship in the *Summa Theologiae* by synthesizing scriptural testimony, Christian Neo-Platonism, and Aristotelian philosophy while giving this synthesis a Trinitarian structure. Drawing from Aristotle, Aquinas asserts that friendship, as an act of love, causes an indwelling among friends. In the act of apprehension, each friend draws the other into him or herself, and in the act of love, each friend is exteriorized into the other.<sup>9</sup> This mutual communion between friends is a complex dynamic of self-giving and reception. Friends give and receive one another in knowledge and love. This vision of love shapes Aquinas’s entire thinking on the transformative effect of divine friendship with the *Triune God*.

Aquinas accepts the fundamental premise that friendship requires some kind of likeness between friends. The doctrine of creation, as has already been noted, grounds Aquinas’s thinking on the similarities and differences between God and the human person.

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<sup>9</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, ed. Aquinas Institute, trans. Laurence Shapcote (Emmaus Academic, 2018), Ia-IIae.q28.a1-3.

Creation for Aquinas means that creatures are at once like and unlike God because creation is ultimately a self-communication of the entire *Godhead*.<sup>10</sup> As a result, the ontological structure of creation is *Trinitarian*, as the Father creates through the Son and the Holy Spirit.<sup>11</sup> Hence, all things bear some trace or vestige of the Trinity.<sup>12</sup>

The likeness between human persons and God for Aquinas is particularly strong, so much so that the soul is understood as being constituted in the image of God.<sup>13</sup> The fact that humans are made according to the image and likeness of God, for Aquinas, means that human soul is “fit to receive God” (*capax dei*).<sup>14</sup> The human person has an objective potential to be in union with God, which is experienced as a desire for happiness.<sup>15</sup>

Is divine friendship redundant if creation is already a self-communication of God’s existence to that which does not exist? In other words, since friendship is an act of self-giving, then the act of creation seems to be an act of friendship. Since God is being itself, then creation is a self-communication of God because God gives existence to that which does not yet exist. For Aquinas, friendship is not redundant. Creation, as the self-communication of God, only establishes a creature in its being. Creation is a one-way self-communication.

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<sup>10</sup> God, in His Trinitarian Communion of Persons, is the efficient exemplar and final cause of everything other than God. This means that God causes creation to exist, that this existence reflects God’s own Communion of Persons, and that communion with the Trinity of Persons is the goal and fulfillment of all that exists. See Giles Emery, *The Trinitarian Theology of Saint Thomas Aquinas*, trans. Francesca Aran Murphy (Oxford University Press, 2007), 338-359.

<sup>11</sup> When Aquinas discusses the act of creation, he often compares God to an architect. Before the architect builds something, she first conceives of the object to be built, then uses her will to bring the idea into existence. Thus, creation involves both an act of knowing and an act of willing. These two acts (knowing and willing) are foundational for Aquinas’s understanding of the persons of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. The Son is generated by the Father in a manner analogous to intellectual thought, and the procession of the Holy Spirit by the Father and the Son is analogous to love, which results from two persons. See Emery, *The Trinitarian Theology of Saint Thomas Aquinas*, 151-297.

<sup>12</sup> Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Ia.q45.a7.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, Ia.q93.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid, Ia-IIae.q113.a10.

<sup>15</sup> Stephen Wang, “Aquinas on Human Happiness and the Natural Desire for God,” *New Blackfriars* 88, no. 1015 (May 2007): 322–34.



Although all of creation has already experienced a type of connection with God, the unity established by creation does not fulfill the human desire for happiness. This union is only obtained through friendship with God. Therefore, while each person, in his or her concrete reality, is a self-communication of God's existence, every person needs greater divine self-communication to elevate the human person to a state of friendship.

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In keeping with the context of Creation, Aquinas asserts that God is with all creation by His presence, power, and essence.<sup>16</sup> So the dynamic exchange resulting from friends does not place God somewhere new, as though He were not already everywhere. Friendship enables the befriended to relate to God in a novel way, by knowledge and love.<sup>17</sup> Friendship results in a change on the part of the creature, not God. In friendship, God communicates His very life in grace. Since friendship is an act of knowing and loving, the grace God communicates in friendship must take place through God's *Intellect* and *Will*. Hence, for Aquinas, friendship must take place through the persons of the Son and Spirit, not as though operating separately, either from each other or the Father, but in so far as certain actions are appropriated to each person according to the mode of their relations.<sup>18</sup> Thus, since the Spirit proceeds as love between the Father and the Son, it is through the Spirit that God loves the friend. There is a near seamless continuity between the immanent procession of the Spirit and the act of love in the dynamism of friendship. Likewise, it is in the Son that the act of knowing occurs since He proceeds by way of intellect.<sup>19</sup>

The potential for friendship is grounded in the Trinitarian reflection of God in the human soul. Nevertheless, since friendship, following Aristotle and Augustine, results in a communion between friends, by which the friend is made ever more like God, Aquinas needs to articulate how this occurs while maintaining the difference between God and creature. Aquinas develops his thinking along the logic of the incarnation.


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<sup>16</sup> Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Ia.q8.a3.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, Ia.q12.a13

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, Ia.q39.a7-8. On Aquinas's understanding of divine persons as relationships, see Herbert McCabe, "Aquinas on the Trinity," *Angelicum* 78, no. 4 (2001): 535–57.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, Ia.q43.a1. Aquinas calls the immanent processions the ratio or reason for the invisible missions of the Word and Holy Spirit whereby the human intellect and will are united to God.

 **...since the Spirit proceeds as love between the Father and the Son, it is through the Spirit that God loves the *friend*.**

For the Angelic Doctor and Catholic tradition, the Word is sent by the Father “even while we were enemies” (Romans 5:10) in order to bring humanity back into divine friendship. This takes place through the incarnation, which is the assumption of human nature into the unity of the person of the Word in such a way that both the divine and human nature maintain their own integrity.<sup>20</sup> Therefore, even in the incarnation, human nature is not transformed into God even while it experiences an elevation through grace. Jesus offers friendship through the Holy Spirit as fully God and fully

human. The Father sends the Word, who sends the Holy Spirit. Through the Holy Spirit, the human soul, intellect, and will are conformed to the Triune nature of God.

Through this offer of friendship, the friend receives the *Trinitarian God* into the soul following the mode of Trinitarian persons and the structure of friendship. Accepting and reciprocating God’s offer of friendship makes the friend “connatural” to God according to the *Trinity of Persons*. The Father dwells in the soul by sanctifying grace, and from this sanctifying grace flows the theological virtues of faith, hope, and charity, along with the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit as outlined in Isaiah 11. For Aquinas, the gift of *Wisdom* is the presence of the *Word* in the *Intellect*, and the theological virtue of Charity is the presence of the Holy Spirit in the *Will*.<sup>21</sup> Possessing the *Trinity of Persons* in the very principle of human agency (the soul and its various powers), the agency of the friend takes on a *theandric* quality. The person is moved by God to be, in a way, a medium whereby God is present in the world.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, IIIa.q2. See also Stephen T. Davis, Daniel Kendall, and Gerald O’Collins, eds., *The Incarnation: An Interdisciplinary Symposium on the Incarnation of the Son of God* (Oxford University Press, 2002).

<sup>21</sup> On the indwelling of the Trinity, see Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on the Gospel of John 9-21*, ed. The Aquinas Institute (Emmaus Academic, 2013), C.14, L.6 and Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Ia.q43.a3.

<sup>22</sup> The person is not moved against their will, like a puppet, but freely submits to God to move according to God’s own instinct. See Anselm Stolz, *The Doctrine of Spiritual Perfection*, trans. Aidan Williams (The Cross Road Publishing Company, 2001), 182-184.

Thus, the freedom and integrity of the human person are not abolished in the union with God through friendship.<sup>23</sup> The friend is made “connatural” with God and, moved by the Holy Spirit, is conformed to the whole Trinity following the model of the incarnation. Those who are friends of God thus have a distinctively Trinitarian Christ-like character. United and conformed to the Son and the Spirit, the friend of God can be thought of as quasi-sacramental. That is, the friends of God are sacramental in that, by virtue of their communion with God, they make the invisible God present in and through their bodies, souls, and actions. This gives them the possibility to communicate the divine life of God to others through their own friendships.

This union with the Trinitarian God through friendship entails the experience of lasting happiness or joy. By possessing God in the intellect and *Will*, the friend of God has complete perfection. It renders the friend of God happy. By uniting the intellect with the Son in the gift of *Wisdom* and uniting the *Will* with the Holy Spirit through the theological virtue of Charity, the human soul experiences its ultimate fulfillment. By friendship with God, the human soul possesses all perfection and subsequently possesses permanent, lasting joy.

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## **Ibn al-‘Arabī and the Muhammadological Character of Friendship**

Just as Aquinas elaborated on the “economy of friendship” with a distinctly Trinitarian and Christological character, Ibn al-‘Arabī elaborates on an economy of friendship with a distinctly Muhammadological character (*akhlāq muḥammadīya*).

<sup>23</sup> In the context of the Incarnation, Aquinas talks about Jesus’s human nature as a free and voluntary instrument of the grace of the Word; see Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, IIIa.q7.a1.ad3. Likewise, in friendship, the friend of God is a free and voluntary instrument of God’s activity in the world.

In an early work, *The Book of the Fabulous Gryphon Concerning the Knowledge of the Seal of the Friends and the Sun in the West* (Kitab ‘anqā’ mughrib fī ma‘arifa khatm al-awliyā’ wa-shams al-maghrib), Ibn al-‘Arabī lays the foundation for his future thinking on the nature of divine friendship (*wilāya*).<sup>24</sup> In the middle portion of this treatise he details, in mythic fashion, the role that the Prophet Muhammad has in creation, as well as the relationship between God, humanity, and the cosmos.

In the ‘Anqā’, Ibn al-‘Arabī portrays Muhammad as the *protological* source of “everything other than God.” From eternity without beginning to eternity without end, Muhammad is the perpetual mirror of God’s ineffable transcendence, receiving the pleroma of divine names from God. He is the disclosure site of the greatest and most comprehensive name, Allāh. Hence, for Ibn al-‘Arabī, Muhammad is a divine figure.<sup>25</sup> Although the middle passage in the ‘Anqā’ constitutes his most extensive treatment of the divine nature of Muhammad, it is a position he maintains throughout his oeuvre.<sup>26</sup> Creation, for Ibn al-‘Arabī, is depicted as a series of interrelated images, where the less remote an image is, the greater its ability to reflect the *Reality of God* according to its own constitution. Muhammad is the perfect image of God, receiving everything from God perfectly and reflecting it entirely back to God so that God sees Himself wholly and eternally in the mirror of Muhammad. Muhammad is the revelation of God to *Godself*. Adam is made according to the image of Muhammad, humanity is a reflection of Adam, and the rest of creation is a reflection of humanity.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> For a critical edition and translation on Ibn al-‘Arabī, see Gerald T. Elmore, *Islamic Sainthood in the Fullness of Time: Ibn al-‘Arabī’s Book of the Fabulous Gryphon* (Brill, 1999). Henceforth, this work will be referred to as the ‘Anqā’.

<sup>25</sup> On the development of Muḥammad’s divine status, see Khalil Andani, “The Metaphysics of Muhammad: The Nur Muhammad from Imam Ja‘far al-Sadiq (d. 148/765) to Nasir al-Din al-Tusi (d. 672/1274),” *Journal of Sufi Studies* 8 (2019): 99-175.

<sup>26</sup> In the *Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam* he says that “the whole affair [i.e., creation] begins with him and is sealed by him. He was a prophet ‘while Adam was between water and clay.’ Then he is the Seal of the Prophets in his elemental make up.” See Ibn al-‘Arabī, *The Ringstones of Wisdom: Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam*, trans. Carner K. Dagli (Great Books of the Islamic World, 2004), 277.

In the *Futūḥāt al-Makkīya* he calls Muḥammad the omniverba (*jawām’i al-kalim*, comprehensive words). The “words,” in this case, refer to both the divine names and to everything that is created. See Ibn al-‘Arabī, *Futūḥāt al-Makkīya*, ed. Aḥmad Shams al-Dīn, vol. 1–9 (Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyyah, 1999), vol. 1 ch. 5, 139.

<sup>27</sup> Gerald T. Elmore, *Islamic Sainthood in the Fullness of Time*, 372-381 and Khalil Andani, *The Metaphysics of Muhammad*, 148-150.

Through the eternal *Reality of Muhammad*, God bestows upon all creation His divine names. However, everything in creation variously receives the divine names according to their own innate potential (*isti'dād*). From the moment of its constitution, creation reflects all of the divine names of God in a kaleidoscopic and differentiated mode. Human persons, on the other hand, in their concrete lives, only manifest a handful of divine names, though they have the *theomorphic* potential to reflect all the divine names. Actualizing this potential is the innate desire of all human persons.

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According to Ibn al-‘Arabī, human persons receive divine names from God through the mediation of a particular prophet or messenger.<sup>28</sup> Fundamentally, this means that friendship with God will display itself concretely according to the model of a particular prophet or messenger. For this reason, Ibn al-‘Arabī will talk about Mosaic friends (*walī Mūsawī*), Abrahamic friends (*walī Ibrāhīmī*), Jesus-based friends (*walī Īsawī*), and Muhammad-based friends (*walī Muḥammadī*).<sup>29</sup> Believers in the various religious communities befriend and are befriended by God through the various prophets sent to humanity.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>28</sup> “The prophets, sent with or without scripture, and the knowing-inheritors (*al-‘ārifūn al-wārithūn*) are a perfect copy [of Muhammad and Adam]. The knowing-inheritors in other religious communities (*min sā’ir al-umam*), and the ordinary believers [in the community of Muḥammad] are a copy of Adam and the heart of Muḥammad, in accordance with a most-exact image, while the ordinary believers in other religious communities are a copy of Adam and the exterior of Muḥammad in the Presence of Majesty. As for the people of mischief and the left hand, they are a copy of the clay of Adam and nothing else, there being no way for them unto any good.” See Gerald T. Elmore, *Islamic Sainthood in the Fullness of Time*, 377-378.

<sup>29</sup> While this is not the place to go into detail about the more complex idea of the “Seal of the Friends” (*khātm al-awliyā*), a few words can be said about it. According to Ibn al-‘Arabī, Jesus is the “Universal Seal of the Friends” (*khātam al-awliyā’ al-amma*), and Ibn al-‘Arabī himself is the “Seal of Muhammad-based Friends” (*khātam al-awliyā’ al-muḥammadiya*). All the prophets and messengers are friends with God through participation in the reality of the Seal of Universal Friendship, and all persons in the community of Muḥammad are friends with God through participation in the Seal of Muḥammad-based Friends. For a fuller treatment of this topic, see Michael Chodkiewicz’s *Seal of the Saints: Prophethood and Sainthood in the Doctrine of Ibn ‘Arabi*, trans. Liadain Sherrard (The Islamic Text Society, 1993), 103-146.

<sup>30</sup> William Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge: Ibn al-‘Arabi’s Metaphysics of Imagination* (State University of New York Press, 1989), 170-171.



In his mature work, *Fuṣūṣ al-Ḥikam*, Ibn al-ʿArabī elaborates on this same idea in terms of the divine names. Ibn al-ʿArabī characterizes friendship with God as putting on or assuming the divine names. In the context of the economy of friendship, the divine names are mediated through the prophets and messengers.<sup>31</sup> In the fifth chapter, “The Ringstone of Abraham”, Ibn al-ʿArabī relates the idea of ecstatic love (*huyūm*) with friendship (*khalīl*).<sup>32</sup> This should not be surprising since friendship implies some kind of love or desire. *Huyūm* is significant because it brings into the idea of friendship not just love but bewilderment and ecstasy. It transposes the lover outside the self and into the beloved. Friendship establishes a union where the ecstasy caused by love (*huyūm*) results in a spiritual permeation of the friends.

At the start of the chapter on Abraham, Ibn al-ʿArabī explains that Abraham is worthy of the title “friend” (*khalīl*) because a mutual permeation (*takhallul*) takes place between Abraham and God. That is, from one perspective, Abraham permeates God, and from another perspective, God permeates Abraham.<sup>33</sup> The divine names of God permeate Abraham because God has chosen Him as a friend. For Ibn al-ʿArabī, the names of God are relative realities; they are mediating relations between God and “everything other than God.”<sup>34</sup> As such, the effects of the divine names can be traced throughout the created order. By virtue of these traces, creation can be said to be similar (*tashbih*) to God even though God is simultaneously dissimilar to creation (*tanzih*). Since the divine names belong to God but display their effects in creation, Ibn al-ʿArabī thinks of the cosmos, everything-other-than-God, as a self-disclosure or self-revelation (*tajallī*) of God. This is especially true for human persons.

**“Since the divine names belong to God but display their effects in creation, Ibn al-ʿArabī thinks of the cosmos, ‘everything other than God,’ as a self-disclosure or self-revelation (*tajallī*) of God.”**

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<sup>31</sup> Ibn al-ʿArabī, *The Ringstones of Wisdom*, 19-35.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid, 59-65.

<sup>33</sup> In his own summary of the *Fuṣūṣ*, Ibn al-ʿArabī relates this to the ideas of *fanāʾ* and *baqāʾ*, that is, annihilation and subsistence. In the first phase, *fanāʾ*, the friend loses the conscious sense of self; in the second phase, *baqāʾ*, the person returns to self-consciousness, fully aware that God is acting in and through them with them being identical with God. See William Chittick, “Ibn ʿArabī’s Own Summary of the *Fuṣūṣ*: ‘The Imprints of the Bezels of the Wisdom,’” *Journal of the Muhyiddin Ibn ʿArabī Society* 1 (1982), 50-52.

<sup>34</sup> William Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge*, 33-41.

This reinforces Ibn al-‘Arabī’s teaching in the *‘Anqā’* that the universe is a differentiated expression of the *Reality of Muhammad*. What is special about the human form is its unique capacity to freely assume the divine names and grow in greater similarity to God. Though each person has the capacity to assume the divine names, this capacity is only a potency latent to the nature of human beings (*fiṭra*). This potential has to be actualized, and this is known as assuming the divine names (*al-takhalluq bi-akhlāq allah*) or gaining similarity to God (*al-tashabbuh bi’l-ilaha*). It is *ta’allu*, or becoming like God. The end result is that the friend fully realizes their own *theomorphic* potential and becomes a complete person (*insān al-kāmil*).<sup>35</sup>

The complete person, in virtue of actualizing their *theomorphic* potential, concretely manifests God/the *Reality of Muhammad* in the world. The complete person has both a cosmic function and a soteriological function. Cosmically, it is by virtue of the complete person that God maintains the existence of the cosmos.<sup>36</sup> In addition, and perhaps more importantly, the complete person, through his or her concrete life, calls people back to God.<sup>37</sup>

The complete person receives God’s divine names either directly from the Prophet Muhammad or indirectly from Muhammad through the other prophets so that they are, in effect, God’s vicegerent (*khalīfa*) on earth. Hence, all the friends of God will manifest God’s names and attributes but will do so either according to direct conformity with the Prophet Muhammad or by indirect conformity through the mediation of another messenger or prophet. The believer experiences this conformity as the fulfillment of desire, the eternal felicity.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> This is often translated as “perfect man.” While accurate, it does not accommodate itself well to the gendered connotations of the term “man.” *Insān* does not refer to a male human (*rajūl*) nor to that feature of humanity that is common to animals (*bashar*), but to the spiritual constitution of humanity which is held in common by both men and women and which elevates them above the rest of creation in the cosmic hierarchy.

<sup>36</sup> “For this reason was he [Adam] named vicegerent, for through him the Real protects His creation [...] So the world shall always be protected so long as this [complete person] (*insān al-kāmil*) is found within it.” See Ibn al-‘Arabī, *Ringstones of Wisdom*, 6.

<sup>37</sup> “This is why God’s messenger [Muḥammad] said concerning the attribute of God’s friends, ‘when they are seen, God is remembered,’ because of the light of the face that they have gained, the face that is the object of their desire.” See William Chittick, *The Self-Disclosure of God: Principles of Ibn al-‘Arabī’s Cosmology*, (SUNY Press, 1995), 102.

<sup>38</sup> “For any creature who has individual desires (*aghrād*), felicity is to attain, in his actual situation, to all the individual desires created within him.” See William Chittick, *Sufi Path of Knowledge*, 150.

**“...all the friends of God will manifest God’s names and attributes but will do so either according to direct conformity with the Prophet Muḥammad or by indirect conformity through the mediation of another messenger or prophet.”**

## **Interreligious Friendship: The Question of Evangelization and Da’wa**

In summary, the previous sections focused on how Aquinas and Ibn al-‘Arabī elaborate their understanding of the economy of friendship. For both authors, divine friendship results in a union with God whereby the friend becomes like God and makes God present to the world in a new way. This friendship, however, is not abstract; it is shaped by their various theological histories and is normed by how each understands God’s definitive revelation to humanity (Jesus for Aquinas and Muhammad for Ibn al-‘Arabī). This section will explore the implications of their respective understandings of divine friendship concerning the question of interreligious friendship and the missionary impulse of their respective communities.<sup>39</sup>

**“This friendship... is shaped by their various theological histories and is normed by how each understands God’s definitive revelation to humanity (*Jesus for Aquinas and Muhammad for Ibn al-‘Arabī*).**

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<sup>39</sup> For Christians (Matthew 28:19), the missionary imperative is found in the great commission: “Go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit.” See Coogan et al., *The New Oxford Annotated Bible: New Revised Standard Version With the Apocrypha*, 2010.

For Muslims (Qur’ān 41:33-34), the missionary impulse can be summarized as “And who is better in speech than him who invites [others] to his Lord and does right, and says: Truly, I am one who submits [to God]. The good deed and the evil deed are not alike. Repel the evil deed with one which is better, then, the enmity which was between you and him will become as though a friend.” See Seyyed Hossein Nasr et al., eds., *The Study Quran: a new Translation and Commentary* (San Francisco, CA: HarperOne, 2015).

Since Aristotle, friendship has generally been divided into three kinds: pleasurable, pragmatic, and virtuous.<sup>40</sup> Friendships of pleasure result when one person is friends with another simply because there is something about the person they find pleasant to themselves. In this instance, two people of different religious traditions may be friends simply because they are, for example, witty. In this case, even though the friends have different religious backgrounds, their religious affiliation plays almost no role in their relationship. The friendship will end as soon as one party ceases to bring pleasure to the other. Pragmatic friendship, on the other hand, occurs when the relationship is established to accomplish some goal. Interreligious friendships can be understood as people of different religions working together to serve a vulnerable community, such as people experiencing homelessness, or to address a multireligious community's political, social, or economic needs. Interreligious friendships in this context will continue so long as there is a need for their continued cooperation.<sup>41</sup> In both modes of interreligious friendship, the good or the holiness of the other person is not the primary concern. In either case, the missionary imperative has, at best, no function or, at worst, may be viewed as detrimental.<sup>42</sup>

**“Interreligious friendships...will continue so long as there is a need for their continued cooperation.”**

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<sup>40</sup> Aristotle's most extensive treatment of friendship can be found in books 8 and 9 of the *Nicomachean Ethics* in Aristotle, *The Complete Works of Aristotle: The Revised Oxford Translation*, trans. Johnathan Barnes (Princeton University Press, 1984). For an analysis of friendship in Aristotle, see Lorraine Smith Pangle, *Aristotle and the Philosophy of Friendship, Chapters 2-4*, (Cambridge University Press, 2002).

<sup>41</sup> This is probably the best description of most interreligious friendships and organizations that advocate for interreligious engagement. People from different religions are organized and brought together to effect a positive change in the world. For example, the Parliament of World Religions, the longest-standing interreligious gathering of the modern period, was organized to facilitate world peace:

*“The Parliament of the World's Religions cultivates harmony among the world's spiritual traditions and fosters their engagement with guiding institutions in order to achieve a more peaceful, just, and sustainable world. Its origins are rooted in the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago, where the historic first convening of the World Parliament of Religions created a global platform for engagement of religions of the east and west.”*

<sup>42</sup> In interreligious friendships, engagement in evangelization or *da'wa* may be seen as offensive since it directly implies that the religion of the other is lacking in some significant way. For pragmatic interreligious friendships, this could lead to hostility among parties, which would entail fragmentation and an inability to achieve the desired goal. In friendships of pleasure, if religion is irrelevant to the pleasure sought, then evangelization or *da'wa* will likewise be irrelevant to the friendship or act as a barrier to pleasure.

Paradoxically, the friendship of virtue unites the prior two types of friendship and best accommodates itself to the missionary impulse of Christianity and Islam. According to Aristotle, virtuous friendship is a mode of friendship where the involved parties actively seek the good of the other. In this mutual pursuit of the good of the other, the friends are engaged in a process of mutually beneficial transformation. These types of friendship are useful insofar as they make the friends good, and insofar as they make the friends good, they experience pleasure or happiness.<sup>43</sup>

 **Paradoxically, the friendship of *virtue* unites the prior two types of friendship and best accommodates itself to the *missionary* impulse of Christianity and Islam.**

While Aristotle understands this to be the best and most lasting form of friendship, he believes such a friendship is rare. This type of friendship is rare because virtuous people are rare and require time. People must be intimate with one another, experience hardship and joy together, and ultimately be vulnerable with one another, none of which happens quickly. Further, it requires a mutual recognition of virtue and a desire to be virtuous. According to Aristotle, a virtuous person cannot be friends with someone who neither possesses nor wants to possess virtue. Virtue is the necessary precondition for a virtuous friendship. One or both parties must already be virtuous to some degree for a virtuous friendship to occur. It is the presence of virtue that acts as the catalyst for virtuous friendships because it is the recognition of virtue that motivates someone to seek the friendship of another.<sup>44</sup> Said another way, virtuous friends admire one another since the virtuous friend is inherently good, and possessing such goodness, they are both desirable and happy. Once virtue is recognized among such would-be friends, the two can be intimate, mutually allowing them to grow in virtue.

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<sup>43</sup> “*Perfect friendship is the friendship of men who are good, and alike in excellence; for these wish well alike to each other qua good, and they are good in themselves. Now those who wish well to their friends for their sake are most truly friends; for they do this by reason of their own nature and not incidentally; therefore, their friendship lasts as long as they are good—and excellence is an enduring thing. And each is good without qualification and to his friend, for the good are both good without qualification and useful to each other. So too they are pleasant; for the good are pleasant both without qualification and to each other.*” See Aristotle, trans. Johnathan Barnes, *The Complete Works of Aristotle: The Revised Oxford Translation*, Nicomachean Ethics, 1156b, 5-14.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 1167a, 1-20.



Furthermore, insofar as virtuous friendships produce virtuous people, those very same people will communicate that virtue to society and the polis, creating a more just and unified society. In the context of interreligious friendship, we can look at Aristotle's insights through the lenses of Aquinas and Ibn al-'Arabī. The following conclusions can be drawn out:

- 1) For an interreligious friendship to be virtuous and not simply one of pragmatism or pleasure, the friends would need to recognize some level of actual holiness between one another. This recognition can be grounded in their shared understanding of the creation of the human person as the image of God, whether this image is Trinitarian (Aquinas) or Muhammadological (Ibn al-'Arabī).
- 2) The virtue or holiness of a person is always historically conditioned. In the case of Christians, a holy life will mirror the life of Jesus. It results from being united to the Son and the Spirit and being moved by God. In the case of Muslims, a holy life will mirror the life of Muhammad. It is the result of acquiring the divine names through a connection with Muhammad or other prophets. Since virtuous friendships inspire virtue between friends, this inspiration will be inseparable from the historical character of each of the friends. The Christian friend will inspire a Christological mode of holiness in their Muslim friend, and the Muslim will inspire a Muhammadological mode of holiness in their Christian friend.
- 3) Since virtuous friendships are both useful and pleasurable, interreligious friendships founded on mutual recognition of holiness will be both useful and pleasurable and, therefore, can positively impact society, even if that is only a secondary effect.
- 4) Finally, interreligious friendships, founded on the mutual pursuit of virtue or holiness, always have the possibility of conversion. Since admiration of the other is an essential feature of virtuous friendship, if one person possesses greater joy—which is an effect of friendship with God—it has the real possibility of inspiring the friend to change their religious affiliation.

In genuine interreligious friendships aimed at the well-being of each other, evangelization or *da'wa* becomes a crucial component. If God has made a definitive revelation either in the person of Jesus or through the person of Muhammad, then ultimate human fulfillment will be inseparable from that revelation. Evangelization or *da'wa* in the context of interreligious friendship then is not a function of superiority or supersessionism. However, it would be a natural outcome for friends seeking to share the very source of their own holiness and joy with one another.

## Conclusion

While the preceding analysis only scratches the surface, I will bring this reflection to a close by looking at the question of theologies of religions in light of interreligious friendship. When considering other religions' status, most religions usually conform to models of *exclusivism*, *inclusivism*, or *pluralism* from within the framework of their own given tradition. Thus, Christians will ask about the status of other religions by looking to their own tradition, often without any need to really "know" other religions or practitioners of other religions.<sup>45</sup>

**“When considering other religions' status, most religions usually conform to models of exclusivism, inclusivism, or pluralism from within the framework of their own given tradition.”**

The question I would like to end with is whether or not interreligious friendship requires a particular theology of religions, and if they do not, can interreligious friendships be a resource for theological reflection? On the one hand, it would seem that interreligious friendships can be accommodated to *exclusivist*, *inclusivist*, and *pluralist* approaches to theologies of religions. However, it will do so differently and, therefore, does not require an a priori theology of religions. For an exclusivist, calling someone to Islam or Christianity would be seen as the only way to truly desire and act for the good of the friend because it is only in union with God through Christ or Muhammad that someone can possess true holiness and authentic, lasting happiness. This calling can best be accomplished in and through friendship. For the inclusivist Christian or Muslim, virtue in the religious other would result from indirectly following Jesus or Muhammad, who is always present in every person by creation. Calling someone to Islam or Christianity then would be seen as calling them into an explicit or fuller relationship with God, which the religious other already has in an obscure fashion. Finally, from a pluralist perspective, calling religious others to Christianity or Islam is simply a function of sharing what one finds most meaningful with one's friend. The Muslim or Christian pluralist would not call others to their faith because they think he or she is misguided, but would do so simply because following Jesus or Muhammad brings them such joy that they would want to share with their friend by virtue of being a friend.

<sup>45</sup> James L. Fredericks, "Interreligious Friendship: A New Theological Virtue," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 35, no. 2 (1998), 167-172.

On the other hand, interreligious friendship seems to have the potential to sidestep many of the pitfalls of an a priori approach to religious plurality. Since religions cannot be reduced to a single text or a single practice but are living traditions that are constantly forming and reforming themselves both in the lives of individuals and their respective communities, interreligious friendships allow us to engage, experience, and learn about other religions and our own religions spontaneously and organically. These relationships can act as an inoculation to the ever-present temptation of reducing all religions to some lowest common denominator (*pluralist theologies*), reducing the religious other to our self (*inclusivist theologies*), or inflating religious difference to the point of absolute incommensurability (*exclusivist theologies*). That is, insofar as friendship results in an irreducible union of difference and similarity, Interreligious friendship provides a model for doing theology in a multireligious context where the theology of another is given room to be expressed in its own terms while accommodating itself and being accommodated to the theology of the other. Interreligious friendship and the theology that can flow from it should highlight the friend's integrity while also maintaining space for the possibility of transformation.

Real friendship is free. It cannot be forced on someone, even if it purports to have noble intentions. A friend is not a benevolent tyrant. Interreligious friendship must likewise be free. We must allow the religious other to be authentic and allow them to influence us, just as we must influence them. Such friendships will attend to the concrete holiness and virtue of the friends in their shared historical and social context in all its ambiguity and uncertainty, and only secondarily in the practice of self-reflection will each friend formulate a theology of religion that makes sense of interreligious experiences both individually and communally.

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## About CFIG

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