

Wahdat al-Wujūd and Contemporary Models of Interreligious Dialogue: From Epistemic Pluralism to Practical Coexistence

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Abstractt

Contemporary theology and philosophy of religion have produced a refined typology of responses to religious diversity, yet this literature has rarely engaged in sustained fashion with the metaphysics of classical Islamic mysticism. This article examines the doctrine of *waḥdat al-wujūd* (“the oneness of being”), most closely associated with Muḥyī al-Dīn Ibn al-‘Arabī (d. 638/1240), as a resource for contemporary models of religious pluralism and interfaith coexistence. Using a conceptual-mapping method, the article places Akbarian concepts — the self-disclosure of the Divine Names (*tajallī*), the notion that “the Real is created in beliefs” (*al-ḥaqq al-makhlūq fī’l-i’tiqādāt*), the isthmus (*barzakh*) as an intermediate ontological space, the Perfect Human (*al-insān al-kāmil*), and the ethic of courtesy (*adab*) — in dialogue with constructs drawn from the theology of religious pluralism, including John Hick’s distinction between the noumenal Real and its phenomenal manifestations, Alan Race’s threefold typology of exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism, Raimon Panikkar’s model of intrareligious dialogue, and Paul Knitter’s “acceptance” model. The article argues that Ibn al-‘Arabī’s metaphysics constitutes a distinctively Islamic and non-reductive form of epistemic pluralism, one that grounds respect for religious diversity in the structure of being itself rather than in doctrinal relativism, while insisting, against a merely sentimental ecumenism, on the continued particularity and hierarchy of revealed forms. The article concludes by weighing the risk of collapsing this metaphysics into an undifferentiated perennialism against the risk of a purely apophatic bypass of concrete religious difference, and by assessing the model’s implications for comparative theology and grassroots interfaith practice.

Keywords: : *waḥdat al-wujūd*; Ibn al-‘Arabī; religious pluralism; interreligious dialogue; comparative theology.

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1. Introduction

Religious pluralism has become one of the most consequential problems in the theology and philosophy of religion, addressing how believers committed to the truth-claims of a particular tradition can coherently understand and relate to communities holding different, sometimes incompatible, truth-claims (Race 1983, 3–8; Hick 1989, 1–5). Since the 1980s the field has produced an increasingly refined typology of responses — exclusivist, inclusivist, and pluralist — together with more recent “acceptance” or “mutuality” models that resist reducing all traditions to variations on a single scheme (Knitter 2002, 19–24, 217–238). Much of this literature, however, has been developed from within Christian theology of religions, and where it has engaged non-Christian traditions it has drawn primarily on modern comparative theology rather than on the technical metaphysical vocabulary of classical contemplative traditions (Race 1983; Knitter 2002).

Islamic thought possesses its own extensive resources for thinking about religious diversity, and among these few are as systematically developed as the doctrine of *waḥdat al-wujūd*, “the oneness of being,” articulated most influentially by the Andalusian mystic and metaphysician Muḥyī al-Dīn Ibn al-‘Arabī (d. 638/1240) (Chittick 1989, 3–11; Corbin 1969, 185–214). Although the phrase *waḥdat al-wujūd* does not appear as such in Ibn al-‘Arabī’s own writings — it was systematized by later commentators in his school — the underlying doctrine, that a single Reality (*al-ḥaqq*) discloses itself through an infinite multiplicity of forms without any one form exhausting or being simply identical with it, pervades his major works, above all *al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya* and *Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam* (Chittick 1989, 79–84; Knysh 1999, 1–8). Crucially, Ibn al-‘Arabī extends this ontology directly to the question of religious diversity: because the Divine Names (*al-asmā’ al-ḥusnā*) are themselves irreducibly multiple, and because every believer’s conception of God is necessarily shaped by a particular self-disclosure (*tajallī*) of the Real, religious forms are not accidents to be overcome but necessary consequences of the structure of being itself (Ibn al-‘Arabī 1980, 89–92; Chittick 1994, 125–152).

This article asks what resources Ibn al-‘Arabī’s metaphysics of *waḥdat al-wujūd* offers to contemporary theories of interreligious dialogue, and under what conditions this Akbarian model — so named for Ibn al-‘Arabī’s honorific title *al-Shaykh al-Akbar*, “the Greatest Master” — can be responsibly extended from a metaphysics of epistemic pluralism to a practice of interreligious coexistence. As in comparable efforts to place classical Islamic sources in dialogue with contemporary theoretical frameworks, the method here is conceptual mapping: Akbarian concepts are read first in their own doctrinal register, then placed in correspondence with constructs from the pluralism literature, and finally assessed for what they can, and cannot, responsibly contribute to dialogue in practice.¹ The article proceeds in four further parts: a review of conceptual foundations in both literatures; a concept-by-concept analysis mapping five Akbarian ideas onto constructs from the pluralism literature; a discussion synthesizing these into an in-

tegrated model and situating it against Race's typology; and a concluding assessment of applications and cautions, including the risk that this reading collapses into an undifferentiated perennialism that Ibn al-ʿArabī's own texts do not support.

The stakes of this inquiry are not only theoretical. For a journal concerned with the resources Islamic thought can offer to problems of contemporary human life, the question of religious coexistence is inseparable from urgent practical questions — interfaith relations in religiously plural societies, the theological grounding of tolerance, and the pastoral demands placed on religious leaders working across communal lines. The article accordingly closes not merely with a theoretical synthesis but with an assessment of what the Akbarian model can, and cannot, offer to comparative theology and grassroots interfaith practice.

2. Conceptual Foundations

2.1. Theories of Religious Pluralism and Interreligious Dialogue

Alan Race's threefold typology — exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism — remains the most widely used framework for classifying theological responses to religious diversity, even though it was developed within, and primarily for, Christian theology of religions (Race 1983, 10–14, 70–98). Exclusivism holds that salvific truth is confined to one's own tradition; inclusivism holds that other traditions may participate in truth or grace, but only insofar as they approximate or are fulfilled by one's own; pluralism holds that a plurality of traditions offer independently valid, though differently mediated, responses to the same ultimate reality (Race 1983, 11–13; Knitter 2002, 19–20). John Hick, the most influential philosophical exponent of the pluralist position, proposes a broadly Kantian distinction between "the Real an sich" — the noumenal Ultimate, beyond the reach of any single conceptual or experiential system — and "the Real as variously experienced and thought," the many culturally and historically conditioned images of the divine, or of the impersonal Absolute, that the world's religious traditions present (Hick 1989, 233–240, 246–249). For Hick, the great religious traditions are best understood as different, and equally authentic, human responses to a single transcategorical Reality that none of them describes literally (Hick 1989, 14–17, 233–236).

Hick's proposal has drawn substantial criticism, not least from within Islamic thought. The Iranian philosopher Muhammad Legenhausen argues that Hick's model is reductive: it can accommodate religious diversity only by relativizing precisely those doctrinal, ritual, and legal commitments that give each tradition its distinctive shape, and it sits uneasily with Islam's own self-understanding as the final and completing revelation (Legenhausen 1999, 26–29, 58–63). In place of Hick's reductive pluralism, Legenhausen proposes what he terms "non-reductive religious pluralism," which affirms that more than one religious community may possess genuine access to divine truth and guidance without requiring that all traditions be treated as equally complete or as variant encodings of an identical core (Legenhausen 1999, 92–101).

A related but distinct model comes from the theologian Raimon Panikkar, whose notion of “intrareligious dialogue” holds that authentic interreligious encounter requires each participant to undergo an internal, existential dialogue between their own tradition and the claims of the other, rather than merely comparing external doctrinal propositions from a supposedly neutral vantage point (Panikkar 1978, 8–15, 40–43). For Panikkar, genuine dialogue is not a comparison of maps drawn from above all traditions — no such vantage point exists — but an encounter that transforms the participants’ own self-understanding from within their respective traditions (Panikkar 1978, 24–29). Paul Knitter’s survey of the field identifies a further family of positions beyond exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism: “acceptance” or “mutuality” models, which resist any single overarching theory of how the traditions relate and instead emphasize genuine, unresolved difference held together with practical cooperation and mutual respect (Knitter 2002, 217–224, 238). This last move — away from a totalizing meta-theory of religious diversity and toward practices of coexistence that do not require doctrinal convergence — is especially relevant to the reading of Ibn al-‘Arabī developed below.

2.2. Waḥdat al-Wujūd in the Thought of Ibn al-‘Arabī

Ibn al-‘Arabī’s ontology begins from the premise that Being (wujūd) belongs properly to God alone; all else — the “cosmos” (al-‘ālam) — exists only insofar as it receives being from God, much as a mirror does not possess its own light but reflects the light cast upon it (Chittick 1989, 79–85; Corbin 1969, 185–197). What differentiates one existent thing from another is not a difference in the being they receive, which is single, but a difference in the receptivity (istiḍād) of each “locus of manifestation” (mazhar) for that being (Chittick 1989, 89–94). Applied to the Divine Names, this means that God’s Names and Attributes — the Merciful, the Just, the Guide, the Avenger, and so on — are not merely human descriptions projected onto an otherwise nameless Absolute; they are real, distinct modes through which the single Reality discloses itself, and no single locus of manifestation, including any single religion, can display the totality of the Names at once (Chittick 1989, 33–40; Ibn al-‘Arabī 1980, 71–75). Chittick’s *Imaginal Worlds* develops the implication of this schema directly: religious diversity is not, for Ibn al-‘Arabī, evidence of human error awaiting correction by a single normative reading, but a necessary corollary of the fact that the Real discloses itself endlessly and never repeats a self-disclosure (Chittick 1994, 125–133, 164–172); indeed Ibn al-‘Arabī’s cosmological principle that “self-disclosure never repeats itself” (lā takrār fī’l-tajallī) is elaborated at length in his later systematization of divine self-disclosure (Chittick 1998, 52–59).

2.3. Existing Scholarship and the Gap Addressed

Ibn al-‘Arabī’s relevance to religious diversity has attracted growing, but still limited, scholarly attention. Chittick’s *Imaginal Worlds* remains the fullest treatment of the theme, and Shah-Kazemi’s comparative study of Shankara, Ibn al-‘Arabī, and Meister Eckhart extends the inquiry into explicit cross-traditional comparison, arguing that beneath their differing conceptual idioms these three figures converge on a common apophatic structure of transcendence (Shah-

Kazemi 2006, 1–14, 273–290). Nasr’s more synthetic account of the Sufi path likewise treats religious diversity as an implication of the doctrine of divine Unity understood metaphysically rather than merely theologically (Nasr 2007, 3–9, 273–281). Knysh’s history of Ibn al-‘Arabī’s later reception, however, shows that the doctrine of *wahdat al-wujūd* was fiercely contested within the Islamic tradition itself, accused by critics such as Ibn Taymiyya of collapsing the Creator–creature distinction into a form of pantheism (Knysh 1999, 87–89, 106–112). This dispute is directly relevant to the present inquiry, since any use of *wahdat al-wujūd* for contemporary interreligious dialogue must reckon with the fact that its status as orthodox doctrine has never been uncontested even within Islamic scholarship.

What has not, to my knowledge, been undertaken is a systematic mapping of specific Akbarian concepts onto the specific constructs developed within the modern theology and philosophy of religious pluralism — Hick’s Real/real distinction, Race’s typology, Panikkar’s intrareligious dialogue, and Knitter’s acceptance model chief among them. This article attempts that mapping while remaining attentive, as Knysh’s account requires, to the doctrine’s contested status within the Islamic tradition, and, as Netton’s structural study of Islamic philosophical theology cautions, to the danger of reading later systematizations back into Ibn al-‘Arabī’s own, considerably more provisional and dialectical, prose (Netton 1989, 273–282).

3. Analysis: Akbarian Concepts and Constructs of Interreligious Dialogue

3.1. The Divine Names and the Necessity of Religious Diversity

The starting point of the Akbarian model is the claim that the Divine Names are not synonyms for a single undifferentiated Godhead but really distinct, and in certain respects mutually opposed, modes of divine self-disclosure: the Names of mercy and of wrath, of the outward (*al-zāhir*) and the inward (*al-bāṭin*), of the near and the far, together constitute a totality that no single locus of manifestation can display without remainder (Chittick 1989, 33–40, 89–94). Because human beings, communities, and indeed whole revealed traditions are themselves loci of manifestation with finite receptivity, each can only actualize some Names more fully than others (Chittick 1989, 94–98). On this basis, Ibn al-‘Arabī reads religious diversity not as a deviation to be regretted but as a structural entailment of the fact that the Real’s self-disclosure is, in principle, inexhaustible (Chittick 1994, 125–133). This is a substantive theoretical claim distinguishing the Akbarian starting point from Race’s typology, which begins from the human, historical fact of religious plurality and asks how one tradition should theologically evaluate the others (Race 1983, 3–8); Ibn al-‘Arabī instead begins from an ontology of divine self-disclosure and derives the necessity of plurality from it.

Ibn al-‘Arabī’s commentators illustrate this principle with reference to pairs of Names that appear, on the surface, to be in tension — *al-Hādī* (“the Guide”) and *al-Muḍill* (“he who leads astray”), or *al-Raḥmān* (“the All-Merciful”) and *al-Muntaqim* (“the Avenger”) — and argue that a locus of manifestation weighted toward one member of such a pair will inevitably present a different theological emphasis than a locus weighted toward the other, without either being simply

false (Chittick 1989, 291–298). Read comparatively, this principle offers an internal Islamic rationale for why, for instance, traditions emphasizing divine transcendence and judgment and traditions emphasizing divine immanence and mercy need not be ranked as true and false so much as understood as differently weighted actualizations of Names that are, at the level of the Real, equally real. Chittick further notes that Ibn al-‘Arabī grounds this reading exegetically in Qur’anic verses that describe God as having willed humanity into “nations and tribes” for the sake of mutual recognition (Qur’an 49:13) and as having, had He so willed, made all people a single community (Qur’an 5:48; 11:118) — verses Ibn al-‘Arabī reads as scriptural warrant for treating diversity as divinely willed rather than as a mere consequence of human error (Chittick 1994, 125–129).

3.2. “The Real Created in Beliefs” and Epistemic Pluralism

Ibn al-‘Arabī’s most direct statement on religious diversity occurs in his discussion of what he calls *al-ḥaqq al-makhlūq fī l-i‘tiqādāt*, “the Real as created in beliefs” (Chittick 1989, 338–346). Each believer’s conception of God, Ibn al-‘Arabī argues, is in a certain sense self-created: the worshipper’s heart, shaped by upbringing, revelation, and disposition, “creates” a particular image of the Real, worships that image, and encounters the Real only to the extent that the Real corresponds to, or exceeds, that self-created image (Chittick 1989, 342–345; Ibn al-‘Arabī 1980, 92, as discussed in Chittick 1994, 164–166). This is not relativism in the sense of denying a Real independent of belief; the Real transcends every belief about it. But it does mean that no single believer’s, or single tradition’s, image of God can be treated as simply identical with the Real as such (Chittick 1989, 352–356).

Compare Hick’s noumenal/phenomenal Real distinction: Hick similarly holds that a transcategorical Real underlies every religion’s phenomenal images of the divine (Hick 1989, 233–236). But structurally, Hick’s model treats the traditions as functionally interchangeable routes to that Real, a move Legenhausen’s critique targets directly (Legenhausen 1999, 26–29, 58). Ibn al-‘Arabī’s model differs in that it does not flatten the traditions into functional equivalence: because the Divine Names are hierarchically and qualitatively differentiated, some self-disclosures are held, within the frame of Islamic revelation, to be more complete than others, and the finality of the Muhammadan revelation is affirmed even as the validity of prior revealed forms is not denied (Chittick 1994, 125–129, 148–152). This corresponds closely to Legenhausen’s own “non-reductive religious pluralism,” suggesting that Ibn al-‘Arabī’s cosmology supplies exactly the kind of metaphysical grounding that Legenhausen’s philosophical argument seeks without itself elaborating in the technical vocabulary of Sufi ontology (Legenhausen 1999, 92–98).

3.3. Case Study: The Isthmus (Barzakh) as a Model of Dialogical Space

Among Ibn al-‘Arabī’s technical concepts, *barzakh* — the “isthmus” or intermediate reality that both separates and joins two things without being reducible to either — offers the clearest structural analogue to contemporary theories of dialogical space, and is examined here as a case study (Chittick 1989, 117–124;

Corbin 1969, 218–224). In Ibn al-‘Arabī’s cosmology the barzakh is not a boundary that keeps two realities apart, nor a merger that dissolves their distinction, but a “third thing” (al-shay’ al-thālith) that holds two realities in relation precisely by preserving the difference between them (Chittick 1989, 117–119).

A brief illustrative case may clarify the relevance of this concept to dialogue practice. Consider a Muslim–Christian study circle discussing the meaning of divine sonship in the Gospel of John. An exclusivist framing would treat the encounter chiefly as an occasion to correct the Christian participants; a reductive-pluralist framing, following a popularized version of Hick, might invite participants to agree that “sonship” and “prophethood” are simply different words for one underlying religious experience, effectively dissolving the distinction between them. A barzakh-informed approach, by contrast, would hold the Qur’anic and Johannine images in a deliberately maintained tension: neither collapsed into identity nor treated as sealed off from mutual illumination, but examined as two distinct loci of manifestation whose very difference from one another discloses something about the inexhaustibility of the Real that neither displays alone (compare Chittick 1994, 145–148, on the epistemic value of comparing distinct Names). This is structurally close to what Panikkar calls “dialogical dialogue,” which likewise refuses both a false synthesis and a mere juxtaposition of traditions (Panikkar 1978, 24–29, 62–66).

3.4. The Perfect Human (al-Insān al-Kāmil) and the Subject of Comparative Theology

Ibn al-‘Arabī’s doctrine of the Perfect Human (al-insān al-kāmil) — the human being who actualizes the totality of the Divine Names within a single locus of manifestation — describes a form of consciousness capable of comprehending, without confusing, the diversity of revealed forms (Chittick 1989, 364–372; Corbin 1969, 122–135). Because no ordinary believer instantiates every Name simultaneously, most religious knowledge remains partial by nature (Chittick 1989, 376–379). Read alongside Panikkar’s account of the dialogical subject, who must be formed through sustained intrareligious encounter rather than possess pluralistic comprehension by default, the insān kāmil offers an aspirational rather than an ordinary epistemic standard: comparative theological competence, on this reading, is not a task any believer can undertake casually, but a discipline of expanding receptivity cultivated over a lifetime (Panikkar 1978, 40–43; compare Knitter 2002, 217–224, on the demands of the acceptance model).

It is worth underscoring that Ibn al-‘Arabī reserves full actualization of the insān kāmil, in the strict technical sense, for the prophets and, among them, preeminently for the Prophet Muḥammad, whose reality (al-ḥaqīqa al-Muḥammadiyya) is held to be the archetype through which all other loci of manifestation, including other prophets and their communities, receive their own share of the Names (Chittick 1989, 372–376). This qualification is easily lost when the insān kāmil is imported into comparative-religion discourse as a general model of pluralistic religious consciousness available to any sufficiently broad-minded practitioner. Used carefully, however, the concept still performs useful work at a lower register: it names an asymptotic ideal — progressively

wider receptivity to the diversity of divine self-disclosure — toward which the more modest, ordinary discipline of comparative and dialogical engagement can be understood as tending, without claiming that any dialogue partner has, or need claim to have, arrived at it.

3.5. Adab (Courtesy) and Practical Coexistence

The transition from Ibn al-‘Arabī’s metaphysics to a practice of coexistence runs through the Sufi virtue of *adab*, often translated as “courtesy” or “proper comportment,” which for Ibn al-‘Arabī governs the wayfarer’s conduct toward every locus of divine self-disclosure, including forms of worship and belief other than one’s own (Chittick 1989, 283–289; Renard 2004, 231–238). Because every existent thing, and a fortiori every sincere believer, discloses some Name of God, discourtesy toward another’s belief risks discourtesy toward the Name that belief reflects, even where the belief itself is judged doctrinally deficient from the standpoint of Islamic revelation (Chittick 1989, 286–289). This distinction — between metaphysical respect for the locus of manifestation and doctrinal judgment about the content of a given belief — is the closest Akbarian analogue to what Knitter’s acceptance model calls holding together firm particularity and genuine respect without requiring theoretical convergence (Knitter 2002, 217–224, 238).

3.6. Waḥdat al-Wujūd and the Ontological Ground of the Pluralism Debate

It is worth stating explicitly what distinguishes Ibn al-‘Arabī’s contribution from the mainstream pluralism literature at the level of theoretical architecture. Hick’s model is fundamentally epistemological: it locates the ground of pluralism in the limits of human cognitive access to a noumenal Real (Hick 1989, 240–246). Ibn al-‘Arabī’s model is fundamentally ontological: religious diversity is grounded not primarily in the limits of human knowing but in the structure of Being itself, in which the single Real necessarily discloses itself through an infinite multiplicity of Names that no single locus can exhaust (Chittick 1989, 89–94, 352–356). This distinction matters practically: an epistemological pluralism of Hick’s kind is vulnerable to the charge, pressed by Legenhausen, that it treats all traditions’ truth-claims as equally provisional, whereas an ontological pluralism of Ibn al-‘Arabī’s kind can affirm that the structure of reality requires diversity while still holding, from within a particular revealed standpoint, that some self-disclosures are more complete, or better ordered, than others (Legenhausen 1999, 92–98; Chittick 1994, 148–152).

Akbarian Concept	Classical Meaning	Pluralism / Dialogue Construct
Tajallī (self-disclosure of the Names)	Inexhaustible self-disclosure of the Real through the Divine Names	Grounds for religious diversity as structural, not accidental (cf. Chittick 1994)
Al-ḥaqq al-makhlūq fī’l-‘itiqādāt	The Real “created” in each believer’s belief	Epistemic pluralism (cf. Hick 1989); non-reductive pluralism (Legenhausen 1999)

Barzakh (isthmus)	Intermediate reality joining two things while preserving their distinction	Dialogical space; “dialogical dialogue” (Panikkar 1978)
Al-insān al-kāmil (Perfect Human)	Comprehensive actualization of the Divine Names	The formed, dialogical subject (Panikkar 1978); comparative-theological competence
Adab (courtesy)	Comportment owed to every locus of divine self-disclosure	Practical coexistence without doctrinal convergence (“acceptance model,” Knitter 2002)

Table 1. Correspondences between Akbarian concepts and constructs in the theology of religious pluralism.

4. Discussion: Toward an Akbarian Model and Its Place in Race’s Typology

Where does an Akbarian model sit within Race’s typology? Adnan Aslan’s comparative study of Hick and Seyyed Hossein Nasr argues that the traditionalist, or perennialist, strand of Islamic thought, of which Nasr is a leading representative and to which readings of Ibn al-‘Arabī are frequently assimilated, occupies a position distinct from all three of Race’s categories: it is not exclusivist, since it affirms the salvific validity of other revealed traditions; it is not straightforwardly inclusivist in Race’s Christian-derived sense, since it does not treat other traditions merely as incomplete anticipations of Islam; and it is not reductively pluralist in Hick’s sense, since it does not relativize the distinct metaphysical and ritual structures of each tradition (Aslan 1998, 149–162, 187–201). Aslan terms this position, following the wider Traditionalist school with which Nasr is associated, a doctrine of “transcendent unity”: the traditions are held to converge at the level of esoteric or metaphysical truth while remaining legitimately, even necessarily, distinct at the level of exoteric form (Aslan 1998, 151–158).

The reading of Ibn al-‘Arabī developed above supports a structurally similar, though not identical, position, since Ibn al-‘Arabī’s own vocabulary of Names and loci of manifestation supplies exactly the ontological mechanism — diversity as a necessary structural entailment of divine self-disclosure — that grounds the Traditionalist claim (Chittick 1994, 125–133). Two features distinguish the Akbarian position from a simple fourth box added to Race’s typology, however. First, it is asymmetrically hierarchical rather than flatly pluralist: not all self-disclosures are equally complete, and the finality of the Muhammadan revelation remains a fixed point rather than one perspective among equals (Chittick 1994, 148–152). Second, it is practically oriented through the specific virtue of adab rather than resolved at the level of theory alone: the model does not claim to settle, at the level of doctrine, how the traditions ultimately relate, but instead specifies a mode of comportment — courteous, attentive, non-reductive — appropriate to any locus of manifestation, whatever one’s doctrinal assessment of it (Chittick 1989, 286–289). In this second respect the Akbarian model converges with Knitter’s acceptance model more than with Hick’s theoretical pluralism: both hold

that practical coexistence does not require, and should not wait upon, doctrinal convergence (Knitter 2002, 217–224, 238).

This distinction between theoretical resolution and practical comportment also clarifies the relationship between the Akbarian model and the specifically peace-oriented strand of the interreligious dialogue literature. Much contemporary writing on religious peacebuilding treats theological agreement as a precondition, or at least a desirable accompaniment, of practical coexistence, on the assumption that shared belief secures social harmony more reliably than mere toleration (Knitter 2002, 238–240). The Akbarian model suggests a different sequencing: because *adab* is owed to every locus of divine self-disclosure independently of any prior doctrinal settlement, courteous coexistence can, and on this account should, precede rather than await theological agreement (Chittick 1989, 283–289). This has the practical advantage of not making peace hostage to the notoriously slow work of doctrinal reconciliation, while retaining, through the metaphysics of *tajallī*, a principled rather than merely pragmatic rationale for that peace.

5. Implications for Practice

5.1. Comparative Theology and Academic Dialogue

For scholars engaged in comparative theology, the Akbarian vocabulary developed above — *tajallī*, *barzakh*, *adab* — offers a technical apparatus for describing what comparativists often do intuitively: holding two traditions' texts or doctrines in sustained, non-reductive juxtaposition so that each illuminates aspects of the other without either being absorbed into the other's categories (compare Knitter 2002, 217–224). Where much of the modern pluralism literature was developed to resolve a specifically Christian theological anxiety about the uniqueness of Christ, the Akbarian framework offers Muslim scholars, and scholars of Islam more broadly, an indigenous vocabulary for the same set of problems, avoiding the sense — voiced by Muslim critics of Hick such as Legenhausen — that pluralism is an imported theological solution to an imported theological problem (Legenhausen 1999, 11–18).

This vocabulary also has pedagogical value. Graduate seminars in comparative theology and religious studies departments in Muslim-majority contexts often import Race's typology, Hick's pluralist hypothesis, and Panikkar's intrareligious dialogue wholesale, with only secondary attention to indigenous Islamic resources bearing on the same questions. Structuring such a seminar instead around the sequence *tajallī* → *al-ḥaqq al-makhlūq fī'l-i'tiqādāt* → *barzakh* → *al-insān al-kāmil* → *adab*, as developed in section 3 above, allows students to arrive at substantially the same set of theoretical problems — the ground of diversity, the status of religious knowledge, the possibility of genuine encounter, the formation of the dialogical subject, and the ethics of coexistence — while remaining rooted throughout in a single, internally coherent Islamic metaphysical idiom rather than shifting between traditions of discourse at each stage.

5.2. Interfaith and Community Practice

Beyond the academy, the *barzakh-adab* framework outlined above may inform grassroots interfaith initiatives, joint scriptural study, and multi-religious

civic partnerships, offering religious communities a vocabulary for principled co-existence that does not require them first to resolve, or paper over, doctrinal disagreement (compare Knitter 2002, 238, on “mutuality” without theoretical convergence). Because *adab* requires courteous engagement with every locus of divine self-disclosure without requiring doctrinal endorsement of it, it offers a model of coexistence compatible with maintained religious particularity — a model consonant with Panikkar’s insistence that authentic dialogue transforms participants from within their own traditions rather than dissolving those traditions into a common denominator (Panikkar 1978, 24–29).

A concrete application may be found in multi-religious neighborhood or municipal councils convened to address shared civic concerns — environmental stewardship, care for the poor, or responses to local conflict — in which participants are, in effect, asked to cooperate practically while continuing to hold incompatible theological commitments. Framed through Race’s typology alone, such cooperation can appear theoretically unstable: exclusivist participants may experience joint action as implicitly conceding equal validity to other traditions, while pluralist participants may read continued doctrinal particularity as an obstacle to genuine partnership. An *adab*-based framing reduces this instability by relocating the justification for cooperation away from theoretical agreement about ultimate truth and onto the metaphysically grounded obligation of courtesy owed to any locus of divine self-disclosure — an obligation compatible with, rather than contingent upon, unresolved doctrinal difference (Chittick 1989, 283–289).

5.3. Cautions: Ontological Pluralism versus Doctrinal Relativism and Apophatic Bypass

This model requires two important caveats, corresponding to opposite risks. First, as Knysh’s history of Ibn al-‘Arabī’s reception documents at length, *wahdat al-wujūd* was accused within the Islamic tradition itself of collapsing the Creator-creature distinction and licensing a form of practical indifferentism, on the grounds that if all forms disclose the one Real, no form can be judged deficient (Knysh 1999, 87–89, 106–112). Ibn al-‘Arabī’s own texts do not support this inference: the finality and completeness of the Muhammadan revelation is maintained throughout his corpus, and the courtesy owed to other loci of manifestation is explicitly distinguished from doctrinal endorsement of their content (Chittick 1989, 286–289, 348–352). Contemporary users of this model, especially in interfaith settings, should therefore resist the temptation to flatten Ibn al-‘Arabī’s carefully graded hierarchy of self-disclosures into an undifferentiated claim that all religions are equally true — a move Ian Almond’s deconstructive reading of Ibn al-‘Arabī warns is a peculiarly modern, Western temptation rather than a straightforward implication of the Akbarian texts themselves (Almond 2004, 21–29, 44–51).

Second, and conversely, the model should not be read as licensing a merely intellectualized ecumenism detached from lived religious difference — the risk Michael Sells identifies in some appropriations of apophatic mystical language, where an emphasis on ineffability and “unsaying” can function to bypass rather

than engage the concrete, historically embedded particularity of religious traditions and their conflicts (Sells 1994, 1–13, 207–214). An adab-based coexistence, properly understood, requires sustained engagement with the concrete forms and claims of other traditions, not a retreat into a shared apophatic register that avoids them. Practitioners and religious leaders applying this model should therefore assess, on a case-by-case basis, whether an appeal to “unity beyond forms” is functioning as a disciplined openness to the other or as an evasion of substantive theological difference.

6. Conclusion

This article has argued that Ibn al-‘Arabī’s doctrine of *waḥdat al-wujūd*, though articulated as a work of Islamic metaphysics rather than interfaith theory, contains an implicit and internally coherent model of religious pluralism that both anticipates and, in certain respects, exceeds the theoretical resources of the modern theology of religions. The concepts of *tajallī*, *al-ḥaqq al-makhlūq fī l-i‘tiqādāt*, *barzakh*, *al-insān al-kāmil*, and *adab* correspond, respectively, to the grounding of pluralism in divine self-disclosure, epistemic pluralism regarding belief, a model of dialogical space that preserves difference, an aspirational standard for the comparative-theological subject, and a practice of coexistence that does not require doctrinal convergence — while remaining anchored in a hierarchically ordered, rather than flatly relativistic, account of revealed forms.

The case study of the *barzakh*, developed in section 3.3, illustrates why this mapping matters beyond the seminar room. Interfaith encounters conducted under an implicit, unexamined pluralist assumption — that all traditions ultimately say the same thing in different words — tend either to founder when participants discover genuine doctrinal incompatibility, or to persist only by tacitly avoiding the points of sharpest difference. Encounters conducted under an implicit exclusivist assumption, conversely, tend to reduce dialogue to a covert missionary encounter. The Akbarian alternative, in which difference is preserved precisely because it is theologically meaningful rather than because it has not yet been overcome, offers a third structural possibility that neither current framework straightforwardly supplies.

Further research might usefully extend this conceptual mapping into empirical and applied directions: qualitative study of Akbarian vocabulary as it is actually used, or could be used, in existing Muslim–Christian and Muslim–Hindu dialogue initiatives; systematic comparison of the Akbarian model with the Traditionalist “transcendent unity of religions” thesis with which it is often too quickly identified; and sustained attention, following Knysh and Almond, to the ways this metaphysics has been and can be misappropriated. Such work would extend the emerging conversation between Islamic mysticism and comparative theology beyond conceptual analysis toward tested practice, while remaining attentive — as this article has sought to be — to the risk of collapsing a rigorous metaphysical doctrine into a merely sentimental pluralism that Ibn al-‘Arabī’s own texts do not authorize.

Notes

1. This reading is offered as a hermeneutical and interpretive exercise rather than as a claim about Ibn al-‘Arabī’s own intentions, which were thoroughly theocentric and directed toward the metaphysics of divine Unity rather than toward a modern theory of interreligious dialogue. The correspondences proposed here are the product of the present analysis, not assertions about the author’s awareness of, or interest in, contemporary pluralism theory.

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