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5. The ‘Son of God’ in the Gospel of John and its Relevance for Muslim-Christian Dialogue

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Abstract. The term ‘son of God’ has been a source of confusion and controversy in the history of Christian-Muslim encounter. Christian tradition regards the gospel according to John as the account which most clearly portrays the deity of Christ and points to his being the ‘son of God’ as proof of his divinity and equality with God. This chapter presents a Muslim scholar’s challenge to this understanding. After examining the term in the Hebrew scriptures, he argues that the term ‘son of God’ in John’s gospel refers to an anointed king (messiah) who, as heir of the Davidic kingdom, has authority to act as God’s surrogate on the earth. The equality of the son does not refer to a divine nature but his being God’s unique agent possessing full authority from God. It is not a claim to be on par with God or an incarnation of God. A Christian scholar’s response, after explaining the broad scope of usage of ‘God’ and ‘son of God’ in the Jewish scriptures, agrees with the exegetical emphasis on divinity as referring to Jesus’ unique authority as the Christ. Yet there are other nuances of meaning, such as his revelatory relationship to God. He then traces developments from John’s usage to those in later Christian theology. Questions over the inner nature of God in Christian Trinitarian theology and Muslim *kalam* debates are a related, but different topic, yet one in which there is much common ground. The final section offers implications for Muslim-Christian dialogue that accord with Cornille’s five preconditions.

Keywords: son of God, Jesus Christ, messiah, Jewish, Christian, Muslim, theology, Christology, incarnation

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Interfaith Dialogue: Introduction, Methodology and Intended Contribution

Interfaith dialog has become a common program for promoting better communal relationships and peaceful coexistence, yet Catherine Cornille (2013) asserts these aims have frequently not been achieved:

As the history of religions amply bear out, the encounter between members of different religions leads to tension and violence more often than to peaceful coexistence and collaboration, and the existence of other religious traditions is often regarded as a source of religious disturbance of at best indifference rather than as an occasion for mutual enrichment (p. 2).

Over the past couple of decades, two interfaith practices aimed at reducing tensions have emerged: Comparative Theology and Scriptural Reasoning. A brief look at them will help situate this chapter's dialogue in the current interfaith context.

Betül Avcı (2018) describes Comparative Theology (CT) as “a comparative enterprise in search of truth and meaning that is based on faith seeking intellectual understanding and/or existential/spiritual experience” (p. 2). Francis Clooney (2010), one of the pioneers of CT, elaborates: “The comparative theologian must do more than listen to others explain their faith; she must be willing to study their traditions deeply alongside her own, taking both to heart. In the process, she will begin to theologize as it were from both sides of the table, reflecting on old and new truths in an interior dialogue” (p. 13).

CT is a practical response to the pressures created by the increase in religious diversity in the twenty-first century which some may prefer to ignore, viewing the study of other religions as a diversion from deepening the knowledge of their own. However, Clooney (2010) emphasizes the benefit of interreligious dialog on areas of theological difference—it not only enables us to better understand the other religious community, but it also provides us with insights into the understanding and practice of our own faith tradition, stating: “Comparative theology is not primarily about which religion is the true one, but about learning across religious borders in a way that discloses the truth of my faith, in the light of their faith” (p. 16).

Scriptural Reasoning (SR), a second contemporary interfaith practice, is described as “an open-ended practice of reading- and reasoning-in-dialogue among scholars of the three Abrahamic traditions. There are no set doctrines or rules of SR, since the rules are embedded in the texts of scripture and their relation to those who study and reason together” (*Journal of Scriptural Reasoning Forum*, 2005). SR, according to Peter Ochs who coined the term, seeks to facilitate an alternative “academic scriptural theology that avoids the intellectual reductionism of strictly plain-sense studies of Scripture as well as the religious reductionism of orthodox theologies that eschew the plain sense sciences altogether” (*Journal of Scriptural Reasoning Forum*, 2005). Avcı (2018) illustrates with the “house-tent” metaphor used by SR to describe itself:

In this case, home signifies each individual's own religious tradition, i.e., Judaism, Christianity, or Islam. Each individual practitioner primarily belongs to her own house, and her relation with the external world originates from there. An SR session is considered to be a “tent” in which the individual is a guest and encounters the “other” tradition. When the

individual travels out of her house and stays in another's tent for a while, she encounters novel experiences. Finally, on the way back home, she would be filled with new questions, inspiration, and confusion. Consequently, a person who has spent sometime in the tent of the "other" would be existentially/spiritually and/or intellectually challenged and transformed into a different person" (p. 5).

Avcı (2018, p. 3) further observes, "SR does not try to build up an agreement or to reach a common ground among its practitioners in respect to the texts they study. It neither looks forward to reaching a conclusion, nor tries to find easy satisfaction for its members. Rather, SR seeks to gain a deeper understanding of the scriptures in the presence of others." While CT and SR both involve representatives of different faith communities reading texts or traditions together, "the main distinction between the two practices is that SR is extroverted, explicitly conversational, and focuses mainly on scripture, in contrast to CT's inclination toward individual, introverted reading, focusing on secondary theological writings" (Avcı 2018, p. 1).

The present study values the character and contributions of both CT and SR—and like them involves members of different religious communities reading traditions and texts together. Yet the dialog in this chapter diverges from both in some respects. Whereas an SR study group would typically read religious texts from both the Qur'an and the Bible, this dialog focuses on only one, the Gospel of John. Unlike the neutrality of SR, it seeks to establish common ground and reach definite conclusions on some important points. In addition, unlike CT as envisioned by Clooney, the Muslim scholar enters the scriptural world of Christians, not to acquire a richer understanding of his Islamic faith, but to reveal truth in the biblical scriptures that he is convinced that most Christians are missing or misreading. His study of the theme of the 'son of God' demonstrates that we can gain fresh insights from outsiders who appropriately examine our own scriptures. Outsiders are able to read another's scripture without the theological filtering and shaping of the other religious tradition; they may observe things that have been overlooked or minimized.

Outsiders can approach or interpret another religious tradition's scriptures in ways that are considered invalid or cause offense (avoiding tension is a prime motivation behind CT and SR). Therefore, in *Sacred Misinterpretation*, Martin Accad (2019) calls for theological engagement that employs hermeneutical approaches that are considered legitimate by the other faith community. For instance, when engaging Muslims, Christians might search the Islamic exegetical tradition for Muslim scholars who utilized the biblical scriptures as a valid source of information, rather than arguing for scriptural integrity using Bible verses and Christian sources.

An excellent example of this hermeneutical approach is Joseph Cumming's (2001) analysis of the widespread Muslim denial of the death of Christ. Rather than approaching the issue using biblical statements and Christian apologetics, Cumming examined authoritative Muslim commentators of the Qur'an. He demonstrated that though it has been a minority view, there have always been exegetes in the Muslim world who allowed that Jesus might have died and risen. Cumming's (2011) approach led to Al-Azhar University, the prestigious center of Sunni Islamic orthodoxy, to invite him to present a lecture on his study. Cumming (2020) recently employed a similar method on a much larger scale in his analysis of the Trinity according to the Qur'an and

Muslim interpretation. Running on the same track as Accad, his study follows a hermeneutical approach that Muslims can view as valid. He engages in careful exegesis of the few Qur'anic verses that appear to many Muslims as incompatible with the Trinity and then surveys the interpretation of these verses in the major Islamic commentaries across the spectrum of Islamic sects. Cumming (2020, pp. iii–iv) follows this with an examination of Muslim theologians' discussions of the “qualities of Essence” as they relate to the Trinity and then compares these qualities to their discussion by Arab Christians. His conclusions show the value of an outsider studying another's scriptures using a hermeneutical methodology that is acceptable to the insiders.

In this chapter, Ungaran Rashid parallels the methodology of Cumming and Accad, but from a Muslim's perspective. He does not rely upon Islamic sources which carry little weight for Christians—and which typically view the term ‘son of God’ negatively (due to its usage in the Qur'an to condemn pagan notions of biological, sexual procreation of deities with humans). Instead, Rashid examines biblical scriptures and relies upon Jewish and Christian scholarship to determine the meaning of the term as it applies to Christ Jesus. Christians can sanction his hermeneutical method and his respect for the biblical text, even though his resulting conclusions challenge a common Christian interpretation of the Bible. This enables a Christian scholar, Mark Harlan, to affirm (with nuance) the validity of his interpretation. Citing lesser known Jewish and Christian perspectives, Harlan then presents an alternative biblical understanding of the term's significance which many Christians can find persuasive, and which can be more satisfying to Muslims.

Nevertheless, the use of valid hermeneutical methods does not guarantee a constructive dialog—especially over theological and doctrinal issues which are often passionately held or intellectually difficult. To ensure that interfaith interaction is effective, Catherine Cornille (2008) has identified a set of pre-requisites: (1) empathy (viewing another religion from the perspective of its believers); (2) doctrinal humility (belief that one can learn from another religious tradition); (3) commitment (toleration of other faiths without reducing commitment to one's own); (4) interconnection (a sense of commonality with another religious tradition and its relevance) and (5) hospitality (openness to finding truth in the other religion). These pre-requisites will be explained further, but their presence in the dialog which follows are critical for its constructiveness.

This paper is organised as follows: following the introduction (Section 1) is a Muslim study of the term ‘son of God’ in the Jewish scriptures and its application to Jesus the Messiah in the Gospel of John. This will challenge common Christian assumptions and interpretations (Section 2). Next, a Christian's reading and response will first affirm the Muslim study while addressing apparent conflicts with Christian theology. He then examines the notions of ‘God’ and ‘son of God’ in the Jewish scriptures. Next, he explores the significance of Jesus as the ‘son of God’ in the Gospel of John (Section 3). Last is an analysis of the significance of this article for interfaith practice that draws pertinent implications that accord with Cornille's (2008; 2013) framework of preconditions. It concludes with a brief statement of the paper's limitations and presents some opportunities for future scholarship and practice (Section 4).

A Muslim Reading

In this section, Muslim scholar of the Bible, Ungaran Rashid, presents the findings of his study of the ‘son of God’ in the Gospel of John. He examines the term’s meaning in the Jewish scriptures, followed by its application to Jesus in the Gospel of John.

The Term ‘son of God’ in the Jewish Scriptures

The term ‘son of God’ is used in the Tanakh and in Jewish tradition. In addition, Jesus, whose name is linked to the epithet ‘son of God,’ was a Jew. Al-Faruqi (1967, p. 50), a modern Muslim scholar, says, “Jesus was a Jew among Jews. He was brought up under the influence of their spirit, their consciousness, their ethic.” Therefore, those who are interested in studying the term ‘son of God’ should delve into Jewish sacred writings and theology, otherwise, they will not understand it correctly. This researcher examines the term ‘son of God’ from the Jewish scriptures and theology and its relation to another figure in Jewish community, namely ‘Messiah.’

To understand Jewish theology, one must begin with the *shema*,³ the central declaration of the Jewish faith, especially in Jewish liturgy (Segal 2008). The *shema* describes the relationship between God and the Children of Israel. To the Children of Israel, *YHWH* is not only their God, but also their loving Father, King, Judge, Sustainer, and Redeemer. Nevertheless, this does not imply that they know God completely; God is beyond understanding and comprehension. Although the Children of Israel may describe God in anthropomorphic terms, they disagree with the Christian concept of God assuming human form (Trepp 1967).

Monotheism in early Judaism developed in a polytheistic world. The situation of the early Jewish community, as ascribed by Goldenberg (2007), was one in which the House of Israel was entering the land promised to them by their God. That land, however, was occupied by people who believed they had been given the land by their gods. In this situation it appeared that the God of Israel fought against the gods of the other nations. Furthermore, Goldenberg (2007) states that this view was a development towards monotheism. It appears that, on the one hand, the early Jewish community was growing in their understanding of monotheism, while on the other hand, from God’s side, monotheism was a statute to be always observed and kept in mind by the Israelites.⁴

In Hebrew, the term son (*ben*) means a male offspring of human parents (Harris et al. 2003). In the Jewish scriptures, however, the term is used to express several ideas. Firstly, the term is employed to denote one’s profession, for example, *ben hasarpi* is literally son of a goldsmith

³ “Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God, the LORD is one. Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength. These commandments that I give you today are to be upon your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates” (NIV translation). The term LORD in this translation is derived from the Hebrew word *YHWH* who becomes the name of God for the children of Israel.

⁴ This is expressed in different ways such as God is one, God is a jealous God, and no other God. See Deuteronomy 6:4, Exodus 20:25, 34:14; Deuteronomy 4: 24, 5: 9; 6:15; Joshua 24:19; Isaiah 45:14; and Daniel 3:29. It is further confirmed by the Qur’an, an-Nahl: 36, “For We assuredly sent amongst every People a messenger, (with the Command) ‘Serve Allah, and eschew Evil’: of the people were some whom Allah guided, and some on whom Error became inevitably (established). So, travel through the earth, and see what was the end of those who denied (the Truth)” (Yusuf Ali Translation).

(Nehemiah 3:31), meaning goldsmith. Secondly, it is used to show a state or condition, for example, *ben nekar*, son of a foreign country (Genesis 17:12), meaning foreigner. Thirdly, *ben* is employed to expose a certain character such as in *ben hayil*, son of valor (1 Samuel 14:52) meaning brave. Lastly, it is used to explain a certain nature, for example, *ben adam*, son of man (Job 25:6), which implies being human.

The term ‘sons of God’ (plural) occurs several times in the Jewish scriptures. This refers to individuals, nations, and angels who belong to God and have a close relationship with God (Brown 2000). The term ‘son of God’ (singular) appears as an appellation from God to the nation Israel, to a king, and to the anointed one (messiah). For example, in Exodus 4:22 God says, “Israel is my firstborn son,” whereas in Psalm 2:7 God speaks to a king saying, “You are my son, today I have begotten you.”

In Psalm 2 God explicitly calls the king his son, “You are my son, today I have begotten you.” Unfortunately, the word begotten in this section creates a problem because it could give the impression that the ‘son of God’ is the offspring of God or even an incarnation of God as seen in the beliefs of the surrounding nations, such as Babylon and Canaan (Mowinckel 1954). Adam Clarke (n.d.) in his commentary states that this refers to a wonderful and supernatural birth. He asserts that this verse describes the Incarnation of God. To the contrary, the Interpreter’s Bible states that the word “begotten” in this section should be understood as the legal process of adoption which describes a special relationship between the king and his Lord (Buttrick 1952, p. 25) Mowinckel (1954) concurs with this understanding explaining that absent from Israel was any notion of a king being divine in relation to Yahweh. The phrase “You are my son; I have begotten you today” is only an adoption formula (Mowinckel 1954, p. 78).

As mentioned above, this Psalm has similarities with the Egyptian tradition of viewing the king as the ‘son of God.’ The same formula “You are my son, today I have begotten you” is found in an inscription at the mortuary temple of Hatshepsut (Collins & Collins 2008, p. 13). Seeing the similarity, there is a possibility that the ritual appointment of the king in the kingdom of Israel or Judah was influenced by Egyptian ideas of kingship, at least from the understanding that the king is expressed as the son of god, or even *elohim* (a god) (Collins & Collins 2008).

Another passage in the Jewish scriptures that directly links the king to being God’s son is 2 Samuel 7:14. This verse describes God acting as a father to the king, “I will be his father, and he will be my son. When he does wrong, I will punish him with the rod of men, with floggings inflicted by men.” In this passage God does not use the word ‘begotten’ in stating his relationship with the ‘son of God,’ but reveals that the nature of the relationship is one in which God will punish him if the ‘son’ diverges from the straight path. Therefore, the difference between 2 Samuel 7:14 and Psalm 2:7 is that the Psalm shows the relationship between God and the ‘son of God’ as a process of adoption, whereas 2 Samuel 7 shows the relationship between the two as a covenant

between God and David's descendants.⁵ God's covenant in 2 Samuel 7:14–15 is repeated in 1 Chronicles 17:13, “I will be his father, and he will be my son. I will never take my love away from him, as I took it away from your predecessor.”

In conclusion, the term ‘son of God’ in Jewish understanding is God’s appellation to whomever he loves and is primarily addressed to the anointed king (messiah) to show that this king has a special relationship with God, but certainly not parity with God. Although the king received a divine title, this did not mean the king had a divine nature. The divine title indicated that the king was authorized to act as God’s surrogate on the earth (Collins & Collins 2008). In addition, it indicated that God was always with him. Thus, in Jewish understanding there is no perception, or at least agreement, that the ‘son of God’ is a part of God or an incarnation of God.

Jesus as the ‘son of God’ according to the Gospel of John

As mentioned above, in the Tanakh the term ‘son of God’ referred to the nation and an anointed (messiah) king. On the other hand, in Christianity, ‘son of God’ refers to Jesus, the Christ, God who became human. Christians get this understanding from their New Testament. However, as we delve into the writings of the New Testament differences regarding the term seem to surface. We will now look at one of these differences, the use of ‘son of God’ in the Gospel of John.

Unlike the Synoptic Gospels, which present Jesus as a person focused on preaching about God and his kingdom, the Gospel of John presents Jesus focused upon himself (Tuckett 2001). Further, terms that are quite prominent in the Synoptic Gospels, like ‘kingdom of God,’ only occur twice in John. Conversely, terms which surface often in John, such as ‘eternal life’ which appears seventeen times, is used only three times each by Matthew and Luke and twice by Mark. Noticing these differences, Clement of Alexandria commented that John wrote a spiritual gospel. The Gospel of John is, therefore, accepted as containing a profound theological portrait of Jesus (Stanton 1989).

Furthermore, the description of Jesus in John’s Gospel is very different from that of the Synoptic Gospels. Jesus is described as if he is God and possibly as equal to God. For example, in the prologue the author explains that the word (Jesus) was not just with God from the beginning but was “God” (1:1). Five chapters later, the author records the view of the Jews, with their claim that Jesus was making himself equal with God (5:18); and towards the end of his writing, the author tells the story of Thomas, one of Jesus’ disciples who confessed Jesus as “my lord and my god” (20:28). These three references cause a few questions to arise when one compares John with the Synoptics. Is it true that Jesus, in the Gospel of John, claimed to be God? Does the author introduce Jesus as God rather than the ‘son of God’? Or does the author understand the term ‘son of God’ as a synonym to king and Christ as written in the latter part of the Gospel: “But these are

⁵ Similarly, in first century Rome, it was through ‘adoption’ that the next emperor was selected.

written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name” (20:31)?

In the Gospel of John, speaks of the “Son (of God)” almost thirty times⁶ using the terms (the/his/your) “Son” (3:17, 35, 36; 5:19, 20, 21, 22, 23, 26; 6:40, 8:36; 14:13; 17:1), “the Son of God” (1:49; 5:25; 6:69, 11:27; 19:7; 20:31), “the only Son” (1:14, 18; 3:16, 18), and “God’s Son” (10:36; 11:4). Of these, only five times is it used by others to refer to Jesus—namely, John the Baptist (1:34), Nathanael (1:49), Martha (11:27), Jews accusing Jesus of using the term (19:7), and the author (20:31). All the other times it is utilized by Jesus, either to show his relationship with God or as his prayer to God. This researcher will not discuss all these passages, but only those that are important for understanding the meaning of the ‘son of God’ in this Gospel.

The term ‘the son of God’ was uttered for the first time by John the Baptist in 1:34, “I have seen and I testify that this is the Son of God.”⁷ John said this in a conversation with some of the priests and Levites who asked him, “Who are you?” He answered, “I am not the Christ.” The next day when he saw Jesus, he said, “Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world” (1:29). Explaining further, John eventually declared that Jesus is the son of God (as quoted above). The conversation strongly implies that the Christ was not John, but the ‘son of God’—in other words, Jesus. This shows that ‘son of God’ is equivalent to “anointed” (messiah, Christ in Greek), the one who is designated as heir from the royal Davidic line (Collins & Collins 2008, p. 181).⁸

The epithet ‘the son of God’ was also used in 1:49 by Nathanael who declared, “Rabbi, you are the Son of God; you are the King of Israel.” This was Nathanael’s response to Jesus stating that he already knew him, even though they had never met before. Although Nathanael did not use ‘Christ’ to refer to Jesus here, he used two synonymous titles; hence, Nathanael was implicitly confessing that Jesus was the Christ. For John as the author, this conversation revealed the identity of Jesus as the fulfilment of Jewish messianic expectation (Fitzmyer 2007).

Two passages in the Gospel of John which explicitly indicate that ‘son of God’ is synonymous with Christ are the author’s statement of his purpose in writing this Gospel (20:31, mentioned previously) and Martha’s response to Jesus’ declaring himself to be the resurrection and the life, when she confessed, “I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who was to come into the world” (11:27). The juxtaposition of the term ‘son of God’ with Christ/Messiah in the two passages implies that ‘son of God’ is used for the Messiah in an adaptation of the traditional royal epithet found in Ps 2:7 and 2 Samuel 7:12–16 (Collins & Collins 2008). By saying Jesus is the Messiah, Martha asserted her dignity as an anointed child who had received the salvation of God (Brodie 1811).

Furthermore, Jesus’ statement that he is the Son (of God), as stated in 5:18–20 is one of the most important aspects to examine whether the ‘son of God’ is equal to God or not:

For this reason the Jews tried all the harder to kill him; not only was he breaking the Sabbath, but he was even calling God his own Father, making himself equal with

⁶ Some Greek manuscripts contain variants: e.g., “God” in John 1:18 and “God’s Chosen One” in 1:34.

⁷ Some Greek manuscripts have the variant reading “God’s Chosen One” (which the NIV prefers).

⁸ After David was “anointed” by the prophet Samuel, years passed before he ascended to the throne.

God. Jesus gave them this answer: “I tell you the truth, the Son can do nothing by himself; he can do only what he sees his Father doing, because whatever the Father does the Son also does. For the Father loves the Son and shows him all he does. Yes, to your amazement he will show him even greater things than these” (NIV).

One important question raised from these verses is, in what sense is the ‘son of God’ equal to God? It seems that the equality between the ‘son of God’ and God in this respect should be seen from the perspective of the ‘sender’ and the ‘sent’ or the ‘authority’ and ‘agent.’ Indeed, the sent or agent has full authority to execute a task based on the command of the sender. However, if the sender does not give any order to the agent, then the agent must not/cannot do anything on his own desire (Witherington 1995). So, the equality between the ‘son of God’ with God in this sense is that the authority held by the ‘son of God’ is equal to the authority owned by God since God has given the authority to the Son.⁹ This is comparable to an ambassador from a certain country having equal authority and position to the president of that country at the time he brings a message from him to another nation. When he is not bringing a particular message from his president, the position of the ambassador is lower than that of his president, since he is an assistant to the president. Similarly in our case, if God does not give any order to the son, then in this regard, the son does not have any equality with God because he does not possess the authority (Witherington 1995). This is emphasized by Jesus when he says, “the Son can do nothing by himself.” Thus, it seems that John tells the audience that Jesus presented himself as God’s unique agent who had full authority from God (Witherington 1995).

Though the agency of Jesus is not mentioned explicitly in the Gospel of John, Jesus’ testimony in 13:16 demonstrates it: “I tell you the truth, no servant is greater than his master, nor is a messenger (*apostolos*) greater than the one who sent him.” The word *apostolos* in the Greek tradition was not solely used in religious terms, but also employed in general to mean “an agent” (Witherington 1995, p. 141).

To be sure, many Christian theologians rely on other New Testament scriptures, such as Hebrews 1 and Colossians 1, in holding that Jesus the Messiah is the personification of deity (Bauckham 2009). However, others have understood those same passages somewhat differently. Dunn (1996) interprets these passages as personified wisdom language. Christ embodies God’s wisdom which created all things. Believers came to see Christ as the expression of God’s wisdom, power, and fullness, revealing it to and in his creation. Thus, what was said about wisdom could likewise be said of Christ. Nonetheless, our discussion here is bounded by a Jewish understanding of the meaning of ‘son of God’ in the Gospel of John. I conclude that the term means that Jesus is the anointed king (messiah) who, in a special relationship with God, acts as his agent with the full

⁹ Michaels (2010, pp. 304–305, 317) affirms the emphasis here on the Son as agent, but alleges that readers of John’s Gospel would have seen it as Jesus’ claim to be “a divine being” as they recalled what was predicated of him in John’s prologue (1:1, 18). Our dialog proposes an alternative understanding. There are two audiences to keep in mind. The first are the readers of John who would have known from the Prologue that Jesus is divine (the meaning of which is a focus of our dialogue). The second are the actual participants in the story for whom the Prologue has not yet been revealed and who are hearing and using the terminology with their own understanding.

authority of God. However, the term ‘son of God’ does not carry the connotation that he himself is God.

A Christian Reading and Response

In section three of this article, Mark Harlan provides a Christian response to the Muslim reading. He first affirms Rashid’s study though it raises a question of apparent conflict with Christian theology. Second, he explains the notions of ‘God’ and ‘son of God’ in the Jewish scriptures. His final section explores the significance of Jesus as the ‘son of God’ in the Gospel of John.

Agreement and the Question of Conflict with Christian Theology

Rashid carefully examines the Gospel of John’s references to Jesus as the ‘son of God’ in light of the term’s usage in the Jewish scriptures. He concludes that it is synonymous with Messiah/Christ, God’s anointed king and agent who is authorized to exercise divine authority. To the surprise of the average Christian, his analysis is essentially correct. The eminent Jewish scholar, Daniel Boyarin (2012, pp. 25–26) observes that most Christians think that “son of God” indicates Jesus’ divinity. However, he shows that the title actually refers to a human Messiah, king of Israel. On the other hand, Boyarin (2012, pp. 25–26) notes that Christians commonly understand the phrase “son of Man” as a reference to Jesus’ human nature; however, in light of Daniel 7, it ultimately points to a heavenly or divine figure (who resembles a human). Jewish traditions developed after Daniel and before the Gospels that combined the hope of a king descended from David ruling over Israel with Daniel’s ‘Son of Man’ who would be given dominion over the world. This divine/human redeemer was later called Messiah. Jewish views on nature of the humanity and divinity of this son of Man varied widely in the period before Christ. Yet, Boyarin (2012) holds that the Gospel only makes sense if both Jews and Jesus held that the Messiah was a ‘divine man.’ While we may interpret the nature of divinity as either functional or ontological, Boyarin (2012, p. 55) explains, “It is that former sense to which I refer throughout this book, as I believe that the very distinction between ‘functional’ and ‘ontological’ is a product of later Greek reflection on the Gospels.” This view is akin to Rashid’s emphasis on a representative agent carrying divine authority or his fulfilling divine activities.

If this is the case, then Rashid’s study leads to the question: Are not Christians then misinterpreting the term ‘son of God’ as an indication that Jesus Christ is equal in deity with God as the second hypostasis of the Trinity? I will endeavor to provide support for Rashid’s thesis but examine other aspects of divinity as it relates to Jesus Christ and trace developments from John’s usage to those in later Christian theology. Christians have various views on these issues, so my views do not represent the views of all other Christians. Nor do I expect that most of them will adopt my position. However, I trust that it will become evident that a faithful reader of John’s Gospel may arrive at some conclusions which differ from those of other interpreters.¹⁰

¹⁰ My dialogue partner, Rashid, will attest to this reality. He informed me that he once led two groups, one Christian and the other Muslim, in an inductive study of the Gospel of Mark. After reaching the end of the Gospel, he asked each group what they understood it to reveal about Jesus’ identity. The Christians enthusiastically replied, “Jesus is God!” With similar conviction the Muslim group declared, “Jesus is *not* God!”

'God' and 'son of God' in the Jewish Scriptures

First, additional discussion of Jewish monotheism may be instructive. Modern Jews, Christians and Muslims consider themselves to be monotheists, by which they mean that there is only one deity and that all other so-called gods are idols or imagined, angelic or demonic beings. However, many scholars affirm that the early Hebrews were not monotheists in the same way as moderns. Rather they were henotheists—their worship was monolatrous, offered to a single, supreme god while not denying the existence or possible existence of other 'gods' (*elohim*). Hence, by reciting the Shema, Jews proclaimed the LORD (YHWH) as supreme above all other supernatural beings and they were offering their worship and allegiance exclusively to him (Heiser 2015).

In addition, we must recognize the unusual semantic range of this Hebrew word *elohim*. It referred to Israel's deity (typically translated as God with upper case g), to lower supernatural beings and deities, whether good or evil (translated as god or gods with lower case g), as well as to humans, prophets, princes, rulers and kings. All were named *elohim* and *bene elohim* (sons of God). Thus, Abraham (Gen. 23:6, usually translated as "mighty prince"), Moses before Pharaoh (Exod. 7:1), judges (Exod. 22:8–9; 1 Sam 2:25), the prophet Samuel (1 Sam. 28:13–14 appearing to the witch of Endor), kings and rulers (Ps. 138:1; 95:3; 82:6) are all called *elohim* in the Hebrew scriptures. Rashid correctly points out that calling the king *elohim* does not suggest that he has a divine nature. Rather, he is *elohim* functionally, ruling as God's representative with his authority. We see this in 1 Chron. 29:20 where after David commands all Israel to praise the LORD, they bow down to the LORD *and the king* (David's son, Solomon) who at his second coronation is seated on the throne of the LORD (v. 23). But the sacrifices were offered only to the LORD (v. 21).

Furthermore, Jews believed that the supreme God alone was creator of heaven and earth and that he had chosen Israel for a special purpose by identifying them as his people. The God of the Hebrews, though transcendent, maintained an intimate and active involvement with creation. N.T. Wright (1998) presents five primary ways that the Hebrews expressed God's activity in the world without compromising his transcendence: (1) God's *Spirit* hovering over the waters, (2) his *Word* generating life, (3) his *Law* directing his people; (4) his *Presence* (or *Glory*) dwelling among them (in the pillar of fire and cloud, in the tabernacle and then the temple); and (5) his *Wisdom* through which he created everything (Proverbs 1–8). The early Jewish followers of Jesus utilized these terms and images to express the relationship of Jesus and the Spirit to God, as in John's prologue: "In the beginning was the *Word*, the *Word* was with God and the *Word* was God... all things were created by him (1:4); The *Word* became flesh, and *tabernacled* in our midst; we saw his *Glory*, *Glory* as of God's one and only" (1:14); The *Law* was given through Moses, but grace & truth came through Jesus Christ (1:17)." Accordingly, these early Jewish Jesus followers began to use the term *Son of God* as one more description of God's inimitable activity in and through Jesus the Messiah. It became, a new way to express "the one God present, personal, active, saving, and rescuing, while still being able to speak of the one God sovereign, creating, sustaining, sending, and remaining beyond" (Wright 1998, pp. 42–56).

Regarding 2 Samuel 7, Wright (2019, p. 131) says that the Jewish scriptures expect both “the fulfilment of Davidic promises (of a coming individual son of God)” and “new exodus promises (of a people who would be the corporate divine son).”¹¹ The New Testament then portrays Jesus as the fulfilment of the former and his followers as the latter (those who follow Jesus become sons of God, spiritual siblings of their elder brother)

Jesus as the ‘son of God’ in the Gospel of John

Rashid states that in “Christianity, the term ‘son of God,’ refers to Jesus, the Christ, God who became human.” This is true of many Christians; however, others would express the incarnation with greater nuance. The Gospel of John begins its prologue with “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God” (1:1). In the beginning the Word (of God) was “with” God (*ho theos*, a noun with the definite article in Greek) and “was” God (*theos*), a predicate (1:1). The Word was distinct from “the God”—yet still called God.¹² Then the Word of God (not “the God,” became “flesh.” God’s Word came not as a verbal message, but as a human being, Jesus the Messiah who revealed the glory of God like an only son (1:14).¹³ Agreeing with Cullman that v.1 must be understood in light of v. 14, Barrett (1978, p. 152) sees the Christology of John as principally functional, for “salvation has priority over cosmology.” Moreover, when the New Testament applies *theos* to Jesus, it is primarily in the context of his roles—for example, in John, as creative Word (1:2-3), revealer of God (1:18), and Lord (20:28). Hence, more probably, the point is to indicate that God’s actions have been accomplished through his agency (Parsons 2013).¹⁴

Church councils debated the Word’s relation to God in John 1:1 within the framework of Greek philosophy. But Hebrew worldview, observes Kraus (1990, pp. 99–101), views God’s Word as “a dynamic act and not a divine being.” Jewish writings associate Wisdom with Law and consider it “a preexistent hypostasis, or personification and it was even called the ‘daughter of God.’” Read Hebraically (cf. Proverbs 8:22), John 1:1–14 says that as God’s Wisdom (daughter) was expressed in the Law of Moses, so his Word (son) was “embodied” in Jesus. “The Word [rather than Wisdom] was in the beginning with God... it was truly the expression of God

¹¹ The image of corporate sonship seems to arise from the nation of Israel becoming God’s “firstborn” son (Exod. 4:22–24) when he reaches into the nation (womb) of Egypt and “delivers” his son by taking “a nation from within a nation” (Deut. 4:34); also Exod. 6:6–7) (Feinberg, personal communication, March 1, 2022).

¹² Haenchen (1984, p. 109) notes the significant difference in meaning, citing Philo’s statement that the Word (*logos*) is not strictly the same as God, and observing that both Philo and Origin refer to the Word (which is *theos*) as ‘divine,’ but *ho theos* they identify as ‘God.’ Michaels (2010, p. 48) acknowledges that *theos* ‘is virtually an attribute of the Word’ (like light, love or spirit) but that it carries greater force, just as saying ‘God is Spirit’ means more than ‘God is spiritual.’ He judges ‘divine’ as too weak and ‘deity’ too abstract. Keener (2003, p. 379) sees ‘the Word was God’ as meaning ‘fully deity.’

¹³ The incarnation personifies the promise of the Davidic covenant that David would never lack a descendent to sit on his throne (2 Sam 7:12–16). Jeffrey Feinberg’s study of *’emet* (2020) demonstrates that *hesed wē ’emet* (lovingkindness and truth) is the universal principle that operates exclusively in covenant relationships, including God’s oath to David which is fulfilled in Jesus the Messiah (Psalm 110).

¹⁴ Similarly, Beasley-Murray (1999, p. 11) holds that the divine nature of the Word is evident in his role in creating, revealing and redeeming, “yet without exhausting the being of God” for John did not say “and God was the Word.”

himself... [what] we see in Jesus already existed in the creation. It is the same creative, salvific word spoken at the beginning” (Kraus, 1990, pp. 99–101).

Rashid correctly observes that statements in John equating Jesus with God are not indicating identity of being, but rather his being invested with God’s authority. James McGrath (2010, p. 14) agrees, observing that in ancient Jewish rabbinic literature “the one sent is like the one who sent him.”¹⁵ God’s duly appointed agent carried full authority in representing Him. Hence, God’s agent could at times share in the “divine identity.” He could “not only carry out divine functions, but also be depicted in divine language, sit on God’s throne or alongside God, and even bear the divine name” (2010, p. 14). Related to this, was the use of “son of God” in Roman imperial theology. Michael Peppard asserts, “Jesus’s acclaimed status as ‘son of god’ was a direct challenge to the emperor’s claim to that title” (this is why Pilate acquiesced to Jewish demands for his execution) (McGrath 2019, p. 147).

John’s Gospel includes another important meaning of ‘son of God.’ Kraus (1992, p. 88) states, “Jesus’ sonship is to be understood as a relation of complete reliance on and obedience to the Father.” Likewise, Dodd (1963, pp. 254–257) affirms, “Entire obedience to the Father is the inseparable condition of the mission of the Son” (4:34) which in turn reveals the words and works of God. The focus on this obedience, says Dunn (1996, p. xxvii), is not subordination, but “a way of expressing the authority and validity of the Son’s revelation of the Father, the continuity between the Father and the Son (5.17; 10.28–29, 58; 14.10).” Carson (1991) adds:

Although Son of God can serve as a rough synonym for “Messiah,” it is enriched by the unique manner in which Jesus as God’s Son relates to his Father. He is functionally subordinate to him, and does only those things that the Father gives him to say and do, but he does *everything* that the Father does, since the Father shows him everything that he himself does. The perfection of Jesus’ obedience and the unqualified nature of his dependence thereby become the loci in which Jesus discloses nothing less than the words and deeds of God (*italics his*) (p. 96).

This provides insight into Thomas’ declaration, “my Lord and my God” (20:28). In non-Christian Jewish literature, the application of divine titles to God’s agents was not controversial and the same is true of later Jewish-Christian writings. Pseudo-Clementine *Recognitions* 2:42 states: “The name God is applied in three ways: either because he to whom it is given is truly God, or because he is the servant of him who is truly; or for the honor of the sender, that his authority may be full, he that is sent is called by the name of him who sends” (cited in McGrath 2010, p. 67).¹⁶ Thus, Thomas’ declaration of his faith in Jesus as the Messiah, God’s ultimate agent, needs to be understood according to the Jewish monotheism of his time. Additionally, “Lord and God” was used to refer to the emperor; what was falsely claimed for the emperor was legitimately true of Jesus as God’s Messiah (Kraus 1990, p. 83).

¹⁵ Kostenberger (2004, p. 188) concurs that the Jewish view was “a man’s agent is like the man himself.”

¹⁶ Readers of John’s Gospel are to see Thomas as fulfilling Jesus’ words in 5:23, “that all may honor the Son just as they honor the Father” (Beasley-Murray, 1999, p. 386).

Similarly, theologian Colin Brown's (1991, p. 88) analysis "the title 'Son of God' is not in itself a designation of personal deity or an expression of metaphysical distinctions within the Godhead." He (1991, p. 88) agrees with Rashid that 'son of God' in the Gospels does not "mean that he himself is God." Brown states:

Indeed, to be a "Son of God" one has to be a being who is *not* God! It is a designation for a creature indicating a special relationship with God. In particular, it denotes God's representative, God's vice-regent. It is a designation of kingship, identifying the king as God's son... the term "Son of God" ultimately converges on the term "image of God," which is understood as God's representative, the one in whom God's Spirit dwells, and who is given stewardship and authority to act on God's behalf (p. 88).

N. T. Wright (2015, p. 107) states that during Second Temple times, "'son of God' functioned as a messianic title, it did not carry in and of itself the overtones of "divinity" that later Christian theology would hear in it.¹⁷ The question of whether or not he was the same being as God was simply not in view:

The early Christians had quietly but definitely discovered that they could say what they felt obliged to say about Jesus (and the Spirit) by telling the Jewish story of God, Israel and the world, in the Jewish language of Spirit, Word, Torah, Presence/Glory, Wisdom, and now Messiah/Son... It is as though they discovered Jesus within the Jewish monotheistic categories they already had. The categories seemed to have been made for him. They fitted him like a glove (Wright 1998, p. 107).

Likewise, Raymond Brown (1966, p. 407) discerns, "It would be the work of later theologians to take this Gospel material pertaining to the mission of the Son *ad extra* and draw from it a theology of the inner life of the Trinity." This occurred as the Gospel expanded beyond the Jewish world to the language, philosophic culture and worldview of the Greek world where Christian theologians approached the scriptures with different questions and concerns. In the Hellenistic world, followers of Christ employed concepts and categories from Greek philosophy, such as 'nature,' 'substance,' *hypostasis* (person) to understand the inner being of God in relationship to Jesus and the Spirit of God. Unlike Semitic believers, they could not but read the term 'son of God' through the lens of philosophy. Hellenistic Jews perceived the Word (of God) in terms of the Greek word *logos* and its metaphysical associations (Bruce 1954). Jewish

¹⁷ Others concur with caveats. Keener (2003, pp. 296–297) acknowledges, 'In none of the Jewish senses listed above does "son of God" imply "God the Son," nor necessarily divinity at all, nor biological relation to God (it is not biological even in Luke 1:35), those senses of the Christian term to which Islam, for example, so strenuously objects.' But when John wrote sixty years after Christ's ascension, 'Is it not possible that the association of the term with Jesus, who was identified as deity for other reasons, would eventually invest this term with new significance? The expression in the Fourth Gospel means far more than "Messiah," although the expression itself is never made to bear the weight of Christ's deity provided by other components of the narrative.' Michaels also acknowledges that in early Judaism the terms Christ, Messiah, and Son of God did not convey divinity, but he asserts 'in the world of John's Gospel it does'—to John (20:31), to believers (11:27) and perhaps to opponents of Jesus (5:18). But Carson (1991, pp. 87–95, 660–663) makes a strong case that the intended purpose for John's Gospel was evangelistic (20:31), most likely targeting, Jews and proselytes, along with God-fearers, who would have understood 'son of God' according to Jewish senses.

philosopher Philo spoke of the *logos* as God's "firstborn Word" and "firstborn Son."¹⁸ Athanasius called the Word the "Son" who is the "offspring of the Father," referring "to the very first utterance of God's creative Word" (Cardoza 2013, p. 457). Greek Christians, like Justin Martyr, understood *logos* as "reason" which guided the Greek philosophers (Bruce, 1954, p. 305)

Christian thinking about the divinity of Christ then developed in connection with his identity as the Word of God, *by* which all things were created (Genesis 1; John 1:1, 3) and the Wisdom of God, *with* which God created (Proverbs 3:19–20). As noted, the Word and Wisdom of God were already called the Son of God in a metaphysical sense. Cardoza (2013, p. 457) observes, "Because they believed that Jesus is he whom the Word of God *became*, Jewish followers of Jesus began to speak about him in ways they would formerly only speak about God's Word." For example, the epistle to the Hebrews (1:8–9) merged the "Son as Divine Wisdom" (Heb 1:6–7) with the royal Messianic son of God from David's line (Ps. 2:7, 2 Sam. 7:14) (Bateman 1995, pp. 26–27).

Similarly, the Arabic expression *bint al-shafa* (daughter of the lips) personifies what comes out of the mouth as the speaker's offspring, originating from him and revealing him. In Christian theology God's Word originates in and from him eternally as his Son (versus daughter). Thus, for four centuries, Christians referred to Jesus as the Word (*logos*) but later used Son of God in place of Word of God (Brown 2000, p. 49). This replacement has been so complete that many Christians reading that Jesus is the son of God, see it as indicating his divinity, unaware of any reference to the anointed king of David's line.

James Dunn (1996) explains that the meaning of 'Son of God' in John's Gospel is not the same as in Christian creeds (e.g., the Nicene Creed); rather it expresses 'Word Christology':

It was only at Nicea that the hitherto dominant Logos-Christology gave way to the dominance of Son of God language. With Logos-Christology the emphasis is essentially the same as that in John's Gospel—on the *continuity* between Father and the Son, since the Son is the Word, the self-expression of God... an emphasis on Christ as the Son, independent of that earlier Logos Christology, can easily become in effect an expression of the very bitheism or tritheism of which Judaism and Islam accuse Christianity.... If the credal Son of God language is not understood as an expression of Logos-Christology it is misunderstood (1996, p. xxxi).

Christians commonly see the later developed metaphysical, Trinitarian conceptions of 'Son of God' in these creeds as the meaning of 'son of God' when they read the Gospels. But Colin Brown (1991) warns against taking statements about the Son and his relationship with the Father as expressions of relationships within the Trinity. Instead, they speak about "Jesus' relationship with the Father on earth." Brown (1991) cautions that we must not read John 1:1 as "In the beginning was the *Son*, and the *Son* was with God, and the Son was God" (1991, p. 89).¹⁹

¹⁸ For an argument of mere appropriation of the language of Hellenistic philosophy, not assimilation by it, see (Bauckham, 2009, 30–31)

¹⁹ Similarly, Haenchen (1984, pp. 109–110) states that to use 'son' here in place of 'logos' would have made no sense to readers, neither would 'messiah' or 'son of man' (for even though Jewish tradition held that they existed in the plan of God prior to creation, they did not materialize until after it).

Likewise, other elements in John's Gospel are often misinterpreted as demonstrating the metaphysical divinity of Jesus Christ. Central to the argument of the Gospel of John are eight signs (seven miracles plus the resurrection) that point to Jesus' true identity. But their purpose is not to show that Jesus was a supernatural being, but rather that "you might believe the Jesus is the Christ, the son of God" (20:31). Performing these works of God revealed Jesus' unique relationship to God. If they glorify God, then they validate his claims to represent him as his son (10:25, 37), says Kraus (1990):

However, if they are *his own* works issuing from some innate supernatural power, as the Pharisees assumed, then they are works of a 'law breaker' and 'sinner' (9:16, 24b), not the works of God. Thus on the assumption that the signs are wonders, the Pharisees could argue with some plausibility that such works are magic and have their source in the prince of demons (10:20). If Jesus' works are viewed as wonders, i.e., spectacular displays of his own supernatural power as a deity in disguise, they do not authenticate his relation to God as Son. He can claim sonship only as he can demonstrate complete obedience to the Father's authority and does only *his* works (5:19–20)... they do not glorify Jesus as a supernatural being; rather they glorify God his Father... and establish the genuineness of his relationship to that one. Second, they indicate that Jesus' sonship is to be understood as a relation of complete reliance on and obedience to the Father (pp. 87–88).²⁰

Additionally, Kraus (1990, p. 81) maintains that passages such as John 17:5, 21, 24²¹ speak of "intimate communion rather than substantial union." Nor do statements of Jesus' oneness with God (John 10:30, 38) refer to essential equality with God, for the same language is applied to believers (14:20): "In that day you will know that I am in My Father, and you in Me, and I in you" and 17:21: "that they may all be one; even as You, Father, are in Me and I in You, that they also may be in Us, so that the world may believe that You sent Me"). As Dodd (1963, pp. 195–196) observes, "At every point the unity of the Father and Son is reproduced in the unity of Christ and believers... The triangle of relations is complete: the Father, the Son, and the disciples dwell in one another by virtue of a love which is the very life and the activity of God." This is a primary aspect of Jesus' sonship, as Bauckham (1978, pp. 248, 259.) states, "Jesus understood the Fatherhood of God as the eschatological relationship of God to men" and "It is the imperative of his filial mission (and therefore essential to his sonship) to mediate to others his own filial relation to God. His sonship means this."

To review, although many Christians derive their belief in the deity of Christ from John's Gospel, this study has argued that his being the 'son of God' is not the proof that he shares the divine nature or essence, nor is it necessarily a reference to the second *hypostasis* of the Trinity. This is evident in the controversies in three centuries before Nicaea when diverse interpretations

²⁰ Cf. Beasley-Murray (1999, pp. 75–76), concurring with Bultmann, notes the Jews misunderstand Jesus' claim of equality was as a revelation of God and not one of independence from him. The image of vv. 19–20 is that "of perpetual communion of the Son with the Father in his day-to-day life (*not* in his pre-existence)."

²¹ John 17:21 is quoted below; 17:5 "And now, Father, glorify me in your presence with the glory I had with you before the world began"; 17:24 "Father, I want those you have given me to be with me where I am, and to see my glory, the glory you have given me because you loved me before the creation of the world." (NIV)

of the phrase, though hotly contested, did not disqualify Adoptionists and Arians from membership in the spiritual body of Christ (Jenkins 2011). Credal formulations like Nicaea were the product of theologizing by monotheists who did not share the worldview of first century Jews and Christians. But McGrath (2010) insists that development of trinitarian thinking indicates neither proof of faithfulness to nor departure from the earlier theological heritage. Instead, it is evidence of life (what is inanimate or dead cannot respond to the needs of new environments or give them life). A religious tradition must adapt to manifest its life. McGrath (2010, p. 101) maintains that the idea of the Trinity was a “spectacularly helpful and inspiring development” that helps to explain how God’s nature is both eternal and one of love. But this was not part of either first century Judaism or Christianity.

Yet Christian theologizing that attributes metaphysical/ontological meanings to ‘Son of God’ in expressing the Trinity does not erect an insurmountable barrier to Islamic thinking about God. Some Muslim scholars see the Qur’an as interpreting the Bible in ways that may be compatible with such views (for example, Galadari 2016). Moreover, Christian Trinitarian theology actually has a great deal in common with Islamic scholastic discussion of God (*kalam*). This is an immense issue that is beyond the scope of our article, so I refer readers to Joseph Cumming’s (2020) dissertation at Yale which found a variety of views among Muslims and Christians over the centuries. Notwithstanding, Jewish, Christian, and Muslim scholars have observed many commonalities between the Christian doctrine of the Trinity and Islamic discussion of the *sifāt al-dhāt* (qualities of the divine Essence). Some see no difference between them; most see them as not identical, but with smaller differences than is commonly thought (Cumming 2020). Kaster (2001, para. 13) may be near the mark when he asserts, “the only difference between the Christian doctrine and the orthodox Muslim one is that Christians call these distinct persons or things God, while Muslims refuse to call God’s distinct attributes by that name.”

As a final word, I commend Rashid for his respectful and insightful engagement with the Gospel of John. He shows that we need not ignore or reject sacred scriptures because we disagree with another community’s doctrines that arise from their interpretations of those scriptures. Similarly, Jews and Christians revere and read the same Tanakh/Old Testament yet diverge in their interpretations in important areas. Yet Jewish interpretations which conflict with Christian teaching do not compel Christians to shun the Hebrew scriptures. Unfortunately, in the context of a long history of political, cultural and religious conflict, Islamic disagreements with Christian theological thinking have led to most Muslims to ignore or reject the Bible, despite the Qur’an’s high regard for it. As Abdullah Saeed (2002, p. 434) observes, “The wholesale dismissive attitude held by many Muslims in the modern period towards the scriptures of Judaism and Christianity does not seem have the support of either the Qur’an or the major figures of *tafsir*.” Saeed (2002, p. 435) declares, “If the texts have remained more or less as they were in the seventh century CE, the reverence the Qur’an has shown them at the time should be retained even today.” Even so, such reverence does not require Muslims to accept all Jewish and Christian interpretations of the scriptures, as Rashid has demonstrated.

Concluding Synthesis and Implications for Interfaith Practice

We believe our joint study provides a model for constructive discussion. Not surprisingly, it accords with Cornille's (2008) five preconditions for fruitful interfaith dialog. Though space precludes a thorough explanation of these preconditions and their application, we affirm their validity and offer some examples of how our dialog reflects these characteristics.

1. **Empathy.** This attitude enables one to view another religion from the perspective of its believers. Rashid embodies this quality by examining the term 'son of God' in the Jewish scriptures and according to Jewish understanding. He then analyzes the term's usage in the Gospel of John citing sources that are respected by biblical and Christian scholars. Harlan, being sensitive to the strong Muslim concern to guard the unity of God, focuses on the concepts of 'God' and 'son of God' in the biblical scriptures to show how, despite worldview differences, they do not violate monotheism.
2. **Doctrinal humility.** This admits that, despite the differences, one can learn from another religious tradition, enabling respectful engagement with that religious tradition. Despite the prevailing Muslim prejudice against the Hebrew and Christian scriptures, Rashid humbly examines biblical scholarship, resulting in his elucidating the dominant meaning of 'son of God' to the benefit of both Muslim and Christian readers. Harlan embraces Rashid's critique and acknowledges that many Christians have misunderstood certain aspects of meaning of 'son of God' in the Gospel of John.
3. **Commitment.** Interfaith dialog does not demand compromise of one's commitment to their faith tradition to demonstrate tolerance of other faiths. Rashid's respectful engagement with John's Gospel enables Muslims to understand that the pagan notion of biological procreation is not what the term 'son of God' means in the Bible. Rather, it means that Jesus is al-Masih who is sent by God. Thus, a Muslim does not compromise Islamic teaching by accepting this as a reference to Jesus' messiahship. Rashid seriously engages with the biblical scriptures yet demonstrates that this does not oblige him to accept all Jewish and Christian interpretations of these scriptures. Harlan agrees with Rashid's emphasis on 'son of God' as the representative endowed with divine authority yet explains how this does not require Christians to disavow their theological tradition regarding the divinity of Christ, and the Trinity.
4. **Interconnection.** Some sense of commonality with another religious tradition and its relatedness and relevance to one's own is necessary precondition for dialog. Rashid's engagement with this topic conveys that the Jewish and Christian scriptures are relevant to and worthy of study by Muslims. Despite the widespread dismissal of these scriptures by modern Muslims, Rashid's attitude accords with that of the Qur'an and its leading interpreters. Harlan calls attention to the fact that there are substantial commonalities between the Christian doctrine of the Trinity and Islamic discussion of the "qualities of the divine Essence." His sense of Muslim-Christian interconnections is evident in other research (2013) and was the basis for his collaboration with Rashid.

5. **Hospitality.** This term expresses the need for “an attitude of generous openness to the (possible) presence of truth in the other religion” (Cornille 2008, p. 177). Sacred scriptures are not the possession of any one religion, but our reading of scripture is influenced by the teachings of our religious traditions. Outsiders to our tradition will read scripture through different lenses, sometimes questioning our community’s interpretations. Dialoging with outsider perspectives can benefit our own faith community. Rashid hospitably accepted the invitation to dialog over this topic and co-author this article. Harlan welcomed Rashid’s Muslim reading of the Gospel of John and affirmed his exegetical insights, even though some of them run counter to common Christian interpretations. A corollary is that Muslims might welcome and benefit from respectful readings of the Qur’an by non-Muslims (for example Reynolds 2010).

Reflecting the above characteristics, our dialog constructively discussed what has been a source of confusion and controversy in Muslim-Christian encounter. We trust that the result will be a lowering of the barriers between our faith communities and a growth in respect and understanding that is mutually beneficial to both. As was stated earlier, this study was limited to the significance of the title son of God as it applies to Jesus Christ in the Gospel of John. Though the other gospel accounts (Matthew, Mark and Luke) should present fewer challenges, joint Muslim-Christian studies of these, as well as the New Testament epistles, could prove useful.

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