

Other Religions

People of the Book

by Dr. Hamid Mavani

(*Ahl al-Kitab*)

“Say, ‘People of the Book, let us arrive at a statement that is common to us all: we worship God alone, we ascribe no partner to Him, and none of us takes others beside God as lords.’”

(Qur’an, 3:64)

The word ‘islam’ is derived from the root S L M which connotes surrender, submission, peace, security, safety, serenity, wholeness, healing and restoration. It is employed in the Qur’an and in the hadith literature in its etymological sense such that the entire creation of God is rendered to have submitted to God, or have become ‘muslims’ (the active participle of ‘islam’) with the exception of human beings who have been afforded the privilege of choosing to be or not to be ‘muslims.’ In this sense, anyone who attempts to live his/her life in accordance with the Divine Will would be entitled to be called a ‘muslim’ with a small ‘m.’ Thus, at one level all the believers in God constitute one community without being constrained by the categories that entered into the Muslim literature to distinguish between believers who had embraced the religion of Islam that was promulgated in the seventh century by Muhammad and those who opted not to accept his message or regard him as the seal of all prophets. It is critical to make a distinction between reified and non-reified usage of the term ‘islam’ and ‘muslim’ in Muslim foundational sources comprising the Qur’an and the hadith literature.

The Qur’an distinguishes between those who verbally affirm their commitment to the institutionalized Islam of the seventh century by pronouncing the dual testimony of belief in God and His messenger (*shahadah*), and those who give credence to their verbal profession by translating their sound belief in God to performance of righteous deeds and devotion to Him. The former are referred to as “*muslims*” and the latter as “*mu’min*” comprising the higher category of believers whose actions are in harmony with their belief system: “The desert Arabs say, ‘We have faith.’ [Prophet], tell them, ‘You do not have faith (i.e. not a *mu’min*). What you should say instead is, “We have submitted,” (i.e. become *muslims*) for faith has not yet entered your hearts’ (Q. 49:14).

In addition to the categories of ‘*muslim*’ and ‘*mu’min*,’ the Qur’an employs the phrase ‘*ahl al-kitab*’ to designate both Jews and Christians, recipients of the earlier revealed Scriptures. The scope of this term was expanded to include the Sabeans, Zoroastrians and, in India, even the idol worshippers.

The Qur'an confirms the truth and the validity of the previous divine scriptures but argues that with the passage of time, distortion and interpolation have crept into the textual sources: "We sent to you [Muhammad] the Scripture with the truth, confirming the Scriptures that came before it, and with final authority over them" (Q. 5:48). The Qur'an views itself as the arbiter in matters of dispute because, it is argued, it has been preserved in its original form and has not been subject to adulteration. What is often forgotten by the Muslims is that textual authenticity does not insulate the Qur'an from interpolation and alteration when it comes to interpretation and manipulation of the text for ulterior motives, in power dynamics and negotiation.

The position of the Qur'an and its attitude towards the Jews was very much a function of the hostile relationship in the political and economic domains that existed between the nascent and fragile Muslim community and some Jewish tribes of Medina. Such verses in the Qur'an are particularistic in nature and do not carry universal applicability but are, at times, misused to demonize and dehumanize the Jews. The particularistic nature of these verses is confirmed by many other verses in the Qur'an that single out the children of Israel as a favored community and the party to a covenant between them and God, but it does not accept the notion of chosenness or a special privileged class of people with exclusive claims. In the estimation of God, all human beings are equal and the characteristics that elevate the status of one over another are piety, performance of righteous deeds, social responsibility and God-awareness. This is all encapsulated in one of the most important ethical term in the Qur'an—*Taqwa*: "People, We created you all from a single man and a single woman, and made you into nations and tribes so that you should get to know one another. In God's eyes, the most honored of you are the ones most aware of Him" (Q. 49:13).

At different points of Muslim history, selective retrieval of exclusivistic verses from the Qur'an have been misappropriated to coerce and force the People of the Book to convert to Islam. However the "no compulsion" verse in the Qur'an is unconditional and retains its universal applicability, affording every person autonomy and freedom in the matter of faith: "There is no compulsion in religion" (Q. 2:256). By and large, religious minorities fared well under the rubric of an Islamic state although they were never accorded the same status as Muslims. Their inferior status was confirmed by the Qur'an, 9:29 that demands payment of a poll tax (*jizyah*) from the protected religious minorities and their acknowledgment of the supremacy of the Islamic state.

Muslim men are permitted to marry women from the People of the Book even if the latter choose to remain steadfast to her faith. Muslim women, according to the majority of the jurists, are not allowed to marry a Christian or a Jewish man unless he first voluntarily converts to Islam.

In the final analysis, the Qur'an does not lay much emphasis on labels and identifications that are adopted by the followers of various religious traditions. The criterion of a good believer is sound belief and performance of righteous deeds:

“...We shall admit those who believe and do good deeds into Gardens graced with flowing streams, there to remain forever—a true promise from God. Who speaks more truly than God? It will not be according to your hopes or those of the People of the Book: anyone who does wrong will be requited for it and will find no one to protect or help him against God; anyone, male or female, who does good deeds and is a believer, will enter Paradise and will not be wronged by as much as the dip in a date stone”

(Q. 4:122-24)

Prophet Muhammad: “He who wrongs a Jew or a Christian will have me [the Prophet] as his indicter on the Day of Judgment.”

Christian Theology of Non-Christian Religions

Peter Feldmeier

The Patristic Period

All religions make absolute claims about truth and reality, and these are foundational for a given religion. Such claims, while they are specific to the religion, have universal implications. So the Buddhist belief that all living things have a Buddha-nature must include by definition non-Buddhists, regardless of what they themselves might believe. Two central, absolute, and universal claims that Christians have historically made is that God desires all people to be saved, and that Jesus is the savior and sole mediator of this salvation (1 Tim 2:4-5; Heb 5.9). Jesus says, “I am the way, the truth and the life, and no one comes to the Father except through me” (Jn 14:6).

Because these claims are not merely about Christians but also implicate all people, the church has from the beginning wrestled with the question of whether and how non-Christians can be saved. Broadly, church fathers believed that both Jews and Gentiles who lived before Christ and were pious were saved by Christ’s grace. Prior to the incarnation, the pre-existent Word (*Logos*) spoke to them in the depths of their souls. Justin Martyr (100-165 CE) spoke of the seeds of the word (*Logos spermatikos*) planted in the hearts of these pious souls. It was also believed by some that Christ’s sacrifice could transcend time, since it involved God’s eternity. Belief in the salvation of non-Christians who lived before Christ included such wide ranging thinkers as Justin, Irenaeus, Origen, Clement, Cyprian, Gregory of Nyssa, and John Chrysostom. Thus the fathers had an optimistic view of the possibility of salvation for generally *God fearing* people who lived prior to Christ. They presumed that God was benevolent and that in choosing Israel, God did not reject others. Indeed, since the sixth century BCE, Jews had already widely assumed this to be true.

The greatest challenge to the church regarding God’s universal salvific will and needing to be saved by Christ came about only after the church was formed. Did one *now* need

to have explicit membership in the church? Since Christ's coming, the fathers' optimism regarding non-Christians was more mixed. Once the gospel had been fundamentally preached, it was assumed that not believing in Christ was an intentional choice to reject God's explicit offer of salvation, or part of God's predestined will. Cyprian, for example, who believed in salvation for non-Christians *prior* to Christ also believed that once the church formed, belonging to the church and having explicit faith in Christ was necessary. Perhaps the greatest articulator of this position was Augustine (354-430). While Augustine believed in free will, he also believed in predestination. And those not in the church were, he assumed, not predestined to heaven. Augustine also believed that without God's saving grace one simply could not help but sinning, thus, deserving hell. Surely too, it was assumed that most had the chance to be saved and simply chose not to. A closer scrutiny of the writings of the church fathers suggests ambivalence in this position. Nonetheless, Augustine's position influenced the Medieval church.

The Medieval Period

Several crucial teachings by the Western church strengthened the church's understanding the God's saving grace was restricted to those inside the church. In 1208 Pope Innocent III forced reconciling separatists (Waldensians) to declare that "There is only one church constituted by the apostles, outside of which there is no salvation." The Fourth Lateran Council (1215) demanded the same from the Albigensians. In 1302 Pope Boniface VIII issued a papal bull asserting that salvation was not possible without being both a member of the church and subject to the bishop of Rome. In 1442 the Council of Florence issued a profession of faith that read: "All of those outside the [Roman] Catholic Church, Jews, heretics, schismatics, pagans, unless joined to the Church, are damned to hell."

What does one make of such a seemingly clear and severe restriction to God's saving grace? These claims need to be interpreted in light of their historical context and the assumptions for not being in the church. The context for every statement mentioned above was some form of schism. This constituted, in the medieval mind, a break in love, communion, and the authority Christ vested in bishops as successors of the apostles, and in particular the bishop of Rome. To break from the body of Christ was to break from Christ. What then can we say about non-Christians who appear to be drawn into the same condemnations? Again, the medieval mind assumed that non-Christians *chose* to reject God's grace in Christ.

The presumption of God's universal will was never really challenged. Thomas Aquinas argued that no one could be damned for what they could not avoid and that anyone seeking God's salvation would receive the grace for it. Finally, he argued that there can be a kind of implicit desire for baptism if one desires God in the depths of one's heart (*De Veritate*, 14; *Summa Contra Gentiles* III.159; *Summa Theologiae*, III.69.2, 4). From the sixteenth century on, from such central figures as Robert Bellarmine and Francisco Suarez in Rome to Francis Xavier in the Orient, implicit baptism of desire became

fundamentally the theological rule. Thus, non-Christians could know Christ's saving grace even without converting.

The Reformation and Modern Period

The Protestant response prior to the modern period widely corresponded to the medieval Catholic magisterial texts, cited above, but for different reasons. For reformers, such as Martin Luther and John Calvin, the revelation of Christ was a word of judgment against sinful humanity. While Thomas Aquinas and others focused on God's universal will to salvation as well as human cooperation with that grace, the reformers focused on humanity's antagonism against God, and the lack of human freedom to affect salvation. Reformer John Calvin, for example, taught that the fact that God predestined those without faith (or chance for faith) to hell demonstrated God's inscrutable will, which is unassailable by human logic. The Protestant reformers' position that one had to be explicitly Christian to live in God's grace and be saved continues to represent an *exclusivist* position held by most Evangelical Christians. There have been, however, recent attempts to try to solve the problem of God's justice and the exclusive quality of salvation. One version, for example, speculates that at the moment of death the soul is offered a chance to choose Christ.

A current modern position among some Christians is that salvation is larger than the Christianity. This so-called *pluralist* position typically asserts various versions of the following: all or many religions are actually worshiping the same God under different expressions; all or many religions facilitate the same spiritual transformation; all or many lead to the same salvation. Some pluralists, however, argue against these blanket assumptions about other religions and simply argue that God's transcendence demands that no religion can claim an absolute or superior revelation. There are no denominations that formally hold the pluralist position, but it is held by many theologians and even by many of the Christian faithful in Protestant and Catholic circles.

The modern Roman Catholic position serves as a good example of the *inclusivist* position. Vatican II's *Constitution on the Church* expressed four principles and applied them to non-Christians. First, God wished and made it possible that all people be saved. Second, God makes this possible because God works in the depths of every person's soul. Third, we are saved only by Christ's grace, even if this is implicitly embraced. And fourth, every person who cooperates with the grace of Christ is implicitly associated to his church, which is the body of Christ (13, 16). This position, while the formal teaching of the Roman Catholic Church, also broadly represents the teaching of the Anglican Communion, Eastern Orthodox churches, the World Council of Churches, and most mainline Protestant churches.

There are two important themes related to an *inclusivist* approach to other religious faiths. The first is that religious traditions themselves have authentic expressions of God's grace in various ways. So Catholicism, for example, does not only consider that a

given non-Christian may be saved by the grace of Christ, but also that that person's religious tradition itself embodies something of that grace. Thus the church is called not only to evangelize, which is an ongoing demand of the Gospel, but also to be in dialogue with other religious traditions. Dialogue suggests that Christians have something to learn from others.

A second interrelated theme is that all humans deserve religious liberty and indeed the primacy of conscience demands it. Catholicism argues it this way, although it is broadly embraced by mainstream Christianity: "All persons are bound to seek the truth...and to embrace it and hold on to it as they come to know it.... These obligations bind one's conscience" (Human Dignity 2). Thus, a Christian must be dedicated to advancing religious freedom in every society as a civil right as well as a religious imperative. The belief in religious liberty is not grounded in the idea of a pluralistic society, a secular government, or a separation between church and state. Rather it is theologically grounded in the nature of the soul's relationship to God.

One final question may emerge between the church and its relationship to Jews and Muslims. Because these are Abrahamic faiths and with Christians worship the same God—albeit understood in Christianity as triune—these traditions have a particular priority or filial bond. *The Constitution on the Church* reads: "There is first that people to which the covenants and promises were made...in view of the divine choice, they are a people most dear to God for the gifts of God are never withdrawn." Then, regarding Muslims: "But the plan of salvation also includes those who acknowledge the Creator, in the first place amongst whom are Muslims: these profess to hold the faith of Abraham" (16). Christians do not typically use the term *people of the Book* to refer to these three faiths—it is a Muslim term—but it does correspond to a general agreement that we are uniquely related under Abraham, our father in faith, and worship the same God.

Points of Agreement:

Mainline Christians and Muslims both hold that persons of other faiths can be saved. Vatican Council II, in its Document on the Church (*Lumen Gentium*) states:

Those also can attain to everlasting salvation who through no fault of their own do not know the gospel of Christ of His Church, yet sincerely seek God, and moved by grace, strive by their deeds to do His will as it is known to them through the dictates of conscience. Nor does divine providence deny the help necessary for salvation to those who, without blame on their part, have not yet arrived at an explicit knowledge of God, but who strive to live a good life, thanks to His grace.

(*Lumen Gentium*, # 16)

Similarly, the Qur'an states:

“...We shall admit those who believe and do good deeds into Gardens graced with flowing streams, there to remain forever—a true promise from God. Who speaks more truly than God? It will not be according to your hopes or those of the People of the Book: anyone who does wrong will be requited for it and will find no one to protect or help him against God; anyone, male or female, who does good deeds and is a believer, will enter Paradise and will not be wronged by as much as the dip in a date stone” (Q. 4:122-24—cited above in Mavani article)

Points of Disagreement:

Nonetheless, there is a substantial group within both Islam and Christianity who hold that members of other religions—or sometimes members of their own religions-- cannot be saved. This represents a disagreement within each religion, more than it represents a disagreement between the two religions themselves. We might call this the disagreement between those who are inclusivists (that is those who think that their religion--either Islam or Christianity-- is the most fully true, but that members of other religions can be saved) and exclusivists, that is, those who believe that their religion is the exclusive path to salvation.

Another point of disagreement is this: for mainline Muslims, those who believe in God and do righteous deeds can be saved. But for Christians, all those who are saved are saved through the grace of Christ (not just the grace of God). This represents a problem for Christians: how is it that all who are saved are saved through Christ, but that non-Christians, and even non-theists can still be saved? To be sure, there have been many answers to this problem within Christian theology, but it remains a problem. Perhaps the best solution is stated in the first letter of John” “Beloved, let us love one another, for love is of God, and he who loves (*agapein*) is born of God and knows God.” (I John 4:7).

Points for Further Discussion:

The tension within both Islam and Christianity between inclusivism and exclusivism is an obvious point for further discussion. If the exclusivists are correct, then members of other faiths will not be saved; if the inclusivists are correct, then at least some members of other faiths can be saved. The point for discussion is this: the exclusivists can claim a lot of support both from the New Testament and from the Qur’an. So how should the inclusivists argue against them? Or, put another way, what texts and what principles can the inclusivists cite to justify their position?

Another point for discussion is this: can anyone who believes in God and does good deeds be saved? What about those, who, through no fault of their own, do not know about God (animists in Africa, New Guinea, or areas of tribal religion, for example).

Finally, a question for Christians: Are all who are saved saved through the grace of Christ? This obviously poses a problem for those Christians who maintain that non-Christians can be saved. Put in another way, it would seem that those Christians who maintain that those who are saved are only saved through Christ are in effect saying that faith in God

is not enough; one also needs faith in Christ. This is Paul's position. But was that the position of Jesus himself?