Islam's Cosmopolitan Vision: Historical Engagement with World Religions and the Qur'ānic Doctrine of Religious Universality

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ABSTRACT

This article explores Islam's unique historical engagement with nearly all major world religions and its cosmopolitan, pluralistic religious perspective, which was grounded in the Qurʾānic doctrine of religious universality. Before modern times, Islam interacted directly with Judaism, Christianity, Zoroastrianism, Hinduism, Buddhism, and African and Chinese religions, among others. This engagement fostered a global religious worldview that contrasted with the narrower scope of medieval European thinkers. Islam, as the third Abrahamic faith, shares theological and ethical bonds with Judaism and Christianity, acknowledging the sacred figures of both religions, including the prophets and the Virgin Mary. The article emphasizes Islam's rejection of exclusivism, affirming that the Abrahamic traditions share common values, such as monotheism, eschatology, and ethical principles, while recognizing the differences between the religions as divinely ordained. Furthermore, the article discusses the Qurʾānic categorization of believers and non-believers, challenging simplistic interpretations of "infidels" and highlighting Islam's inclusive understanding of faith. It also examines how modern issues, such as Christian missionary activity and the legacy of colonialism, have complicated interfaith relations. Despite the rise of fundamentalism and exclusivism in some circles, the article underscores that the majority of Muslims maintain a deep commitment to the universal vision of revelation and the plurality of prophets. This view is further supported by contemporary interest in religious pluralism and interfaith dialogue across the Islamic world, particularly in countries like Iran, Turkey, and Malaysia. Ultimately, the article argues that Islam's relationship with other religions is characterized by a fundamental respect for shared divine truths and a recognition of religious diversity as part of God's plan.

In light of what has been said of the Islamic conception of revelation and religious diversity, it is important to mention that before modern times Islam was the only revealed religion to have had direct contact with nearly all the major religions of the world. It had met Judaism and Christianity in its birthplace in Arabia and afterward in Palestine, Syria, and Egypt; the Iranian religions such as Zoroastrianism and Manichaeism after its conquest of Persia in the seventh century; Hinduism and Buddhism in eastern Persia and India shortly thereafter; the Chinese religions through the Silk Route as well as through Muslim merchants who traveled to Canton and other Chinese ports; the African religions soon after the spread of Islam into Black Africa some four-teen hundred years ago; and Siberian Shamanism in the form of the archaic religions of the Turkic and Mongolian peoples as they descended into the Islamic world. Centuries ago Zoroaster and the Buddha were common household names among Muslims of the eastern lands of the Islamic world, especially Persia. Indian Muslims had come to know of Krishna and Rama a thousand years ago. The Persian polymath al-Biruni had composed a major work on India in the eleventh century, one that is still a valuable source of knowledge for medieval Hinduism. Furthermore, numerous works of classical Hinduism and some of Buddhism were translated into Persian centuries ago, including the Upanishads and the Bhagavad Gita. Chinese Muslim scholars knew the Confucian classics and many considered Confucius and Lao-Tze prophets.

The global nature of the religious knowledge of a learned Muslim sitting in Isfahan in the fourteenth century was very different from that of a scholastic thinker in Paris or Bologna of the same period. On the basis of the Qurʾānic doctrine of religious universality and the vast historical experiences of a global nature, Islamic civilization developed a cosmopolitan and worldwide religious perspective unmatched before the modern period in any other religion. This global vision is still part and parcel of the worldview of traditional Muslims, of those who have not abandoned their universal vision as a result of the onslaught of modernism or reactions to this onslaught in the form of what has come to be called "fundamentalism."

Within this global religious context, it is, of course, the Jewish and Christian traditions with which Islam has the greatest affinity. The Hebrew prophets and Christ are deeply respected by Muslims. The Virgin Mary is considered by the Qurʾān to hold the most exalted spiritual position among women. A chapter of the Qurʾān is named after her, and she is the only woman mentioned by name in Islam's sacred scripture. Moreover, the miraculous birth of Christ from a virgin mother is recognized in the Qurʾān. Respect for such teachings is so strong among Muslims thattoday, in interreligious dialogues with Christians and Jews, Muslims are often left defending traditional Jewish and Christian doctrines such as the miraculous birth of Christ before modernist interpreters who would reduce them to metaphors and the sacred history of the Hebrew prophets to at best inspired stories.

The sacred figures of Judaism and Christianity are often mentioned in the Qurʾān and even in prayers said on various occasions. The tombs of the Hebrew prophets, who are also Islamic prophets, are revered and visited in pilgrimage by Muslims to this day. One need only recall the holiness for Muslims of the tomb of Abraham in al-Khalil, or Hebron, in Palestine, of that of Joshua in Jordan, and of Moses' resting place on Mt. Nebo, also in Jordan. Some Muslims have occasionally criticized intellectually and also engaged militarily Jews and Christians, but they have not criticized the Jewish prophets or Christ (even if certain theological differences with followers of Judaism and Christianity did exist), at least not those who have heeded the call of the Qurʾān and understood its message. Islam sees itself as the third of the Abrahamic religions, which are bound together by countless theological, ethical, and eschatological beliefs even though they are marked by differences willed by God.

To speak of the Judeo-Christian tradition against which Islam is pitted as the "other" is an injustice to the message of Abraham and also theologically false, no matter how convenient it might be for some people. There is as much difference between Judaism and Christianity as there is between Christianity and Islam. In certain domains Judaism is closer to Islam than it is to Christianity: it has a sacred language, Hebrew, like Arabic in Islam, and it has a sacred law, the *Halakhah*, corresponding to the *Sharīʿah*.

Furthermore, they share an opposition to all forms of idolatry and to the creation of iconic sacred art, which would allow an image of the Divinity to be painted or sculpted. In certain other

ways Islam is closer to Christianity: both emphasize the immortality of the soul, eschatological realities, and the accent on the inner life. Then there are those basic principles upon which all three religions agree: the Oneness of God, prophecy, sacred scripture, much of sacred history, and basic ethical norms such as the sanctity of life, reverence for the laws of God, humane treatment of others, honesty in all human dealings, kindness toward the neighbor, the application of justice, and so forth. Islam is an inalienable and inseparable part of the Abrahamic family of religions and considers itself to be closely linked with the two monotheistic religions that preceded it. Islam envisages itself the complement of those religions and the final expression of Abrahamic monotheism, confirming the teachings of Judaism and Christianity, but rejecting any form of exclusivism.

Who Is A Believer And Who Is An Infidel?

With this framework in mind, it will be easier to understand the categorization in Islam of people into believers (*muʾmins*) and what has been translated in the West as "infidels" or "nonbelievers" (*kāfirs*), which means literally "those who cover over the truth." Every religion has a way of distinguishing itself from the other religions. Judaism speaks of Jews and Gentiles, and Christianity of the faithful and the heathens or pagans. Each of these categorizations has both a theological and a popular and historical root related to the self-understanding as well as the history of that religion. In the case of Islam, the distinction is based more on the question of faith, or *īmān*, and less on the more general term *islām*. In the Qurʾān faith implies a higher level of participation in the religion, and even today only those who take their religion very seriously and are virtuous are called *muʾmin* (or possessors of *īmān*). And yet the Qurʾān does not limit the term *muʾmin* only to those who follow the Islamic religion; it includes the faithful of Islam along with followers of other religions, as is evidenced by the Qurʾānic assertion, "Verily, those who have faith [in what is revealed to the Prophet] and those who are Jews and Christians and Sabaeans–whosoever has faith in God and the Last Day and does right–surely their reward is with their Lord, and no fear shall overcome them and neither shall they grieve" (2:62). In this verse as well as verse 69 of Surah 5 ("The Table Spread"), which nearly repeats the same message, recognition of other religions is extended even beyond Judaism, Christianity, and Sabaeanism to include "whosoever has faith in God," and the possibility of salvation is also made explicitly universal. Likewise, the boundary between the

Muslim faithful and the faithful of other religions is lifted. One could therefore say that in the most universal sense whoever has faith and accepts the One God, nor the Supreme Principle, is a believer, or *muʾmin*, and whoever does not is an infidel, or a *kāfir*, whatever the nominal and external ethnic and even religious identification of that person might be.

As a result of this explicit universality of the Qurʾānic text, the use of the terms "believer" or "faithful" and "infidel" or "nonbeliever" is much more complicated than what we find in Christianity. In Islam there is, first of all, the Sufi meta-physical view of absolute Truth, which is seen to be beyond all duality, even beyond the dichotomy of *īmān* and *kufr*, or faith and infidelity; yet, to reach that transcendent Truth beyond all duality one must begin with faith and start from the formal foundations of Islam, which distinguishes itself clearly from *kufr*. The esoteric understanding of *kufr* and *īmān*, so prevalent in classical Sufi poetry, especially among the Persian poets such as Rūmī, Shabistarī, and Ḥāfiẓ must not, therefore, be confused with the prevalent idea in certain Western circles that one can reach the absolute Truth by simply avoiding the world of faith as well as infidelity. On the levels of external religious forms, *īmān* has to do with truth and *kufr* with falsehood. This dichotomy is not destroyed by the exhortation of the Sufis to go beyond *kufr* and *īmān*, which means to reach *tawḥīd*, or oneness beyond all oppositions and dichotomies.

On the formal and popular plane, traditional Muslims have often used the category of "believer" or "faithful" for Muslims as well as followers of other religions, especially Christians and Jews. But there have been also historical periods in which the term "faithful" was reserved for Muslims and *kāfir*, or "infidel," was used for non-Muslims, as in the Ottoman Empire, where Europeans were called *kuffār*, infidels. The situation is, however, made even more complicated by the fact that throughout Islamic history certain Muslim groups have called other Muslim groups infidels, some even going to the extent of treating them in practice as enemies. For example, during early Islamic history the Khawārij, who opposed both the Sunnis and Shiites as infidels, attacked both groups physically and militarily. Later, Ismāʿīlis were considered *kuffār* by many Sunni scholars, and even in mainstream Islam over the centuries some Sunni and Twelve-Imam Shiite scholars have called each other *kāfir*. In the eighteenth century the Wahhabi movment, which began in Najd in Arabia, considered orthodox Sunnis and Shiites both not to be genuine Muslims, and often cast

the anathema of being infidels, or what is called *takfir*, upon them, while many Ottoman Hanafi scholars considered the Wahhabis themselves to be *kuffār*.

The prevalent image in the West that all Muslims are united as the faithful against the infidels– even if some well-known Christian preachers repeat to their flocks this assertion made by some extremists within the Islamic world– is simply not true. There have always been those who have spoken of the necessity of the unity of Muslims as the faithful, and in a certain sense that unity has been always there despite diversity on many levels. But the whole question of who is a believer, or a person of faith, and who is an unbeliever, or infidel, requires a much more nuanced answer than is usually given in generally available sources.

Moreover, the term *kāfir* has both a theological and judicial definition and a popular political and social definition, and the two should not be confused. In the conscience of many devout Muslims, a pious Christian or Jew is still seen as a believer, while an agnostic with an Arabic or Persian name is seen as a *kāfir*. And the anathema of *kufr*, far from involving only outsiders, has also concerned various groups within the Islamic world itself. Today, even while some Muslims hold "infidels" responsible for the onslaught of a secularist culture from the West, they also use the same characterization for those within the Islamic world itself who, while still formally Muslim, accept and preach secularist ideas that negate the very foundations of the Islamic rev-elation. As a matter of fact, secularism is the common enemy of all the Abrahamic traditions, and the erosion of moral authority in secular societies that we observe today, poses as many problems for Jews and Christians as it does for Muslims.

Islam and Religious Pluralism Today

Muslims today continue to experience the presence of other 1 religions in their midst as they have done over the centuries. In the middle part of the Islamic world there are Christian minorities, the largest being in Egypt, and still some Jews, especially in Iran and Turkey, although most of the Jews ;' from Arab countries migrated to Israel after 1948. There are still Zoroastrians in Iran, and Muslims live with Hindus in India, of course, but also in Bangladesh, Nepal, Malaysia, and Indonesia, and with Buddhists in Sri Lanka, Thailand, Ladakh, Burma, China, and elsewhere. They also live with Confucians and Taoists not in only China, but also in Malaysia and Indonesia. By and large, through most periods of

Islamic history, the relation between Muslims and religious minorities living in their midst has been peaceful. Exceptions have arisen when severe political issues, such as the partition of Palestine or India, have altered ordinary relations between Muslims and followers of other religions. Today, despite some abuses here and there issuing from so-called fundamentalist currents in various Islamic countries, religious minorities in the Islamic world usually fare better than Muslim minorities do in other lands, except in America and some Western countries, where they have been able to practice their religion until now without manifest or hid-den restrictions. All one has to do is to compare the situation of the Christian minorities of Syria, Iraq, and Iran, three states not known for their leaning toward the West, with Muslim minorities in China, the Philippines, India, and the Russian Caucasus, not to speak of the Balkans, where the horror inflicted by Christian Serbs upon Muslim Bosnians and Kosovars is still fresh in everyone's memory.

The peaceful presence in the Islamic world of various religious minorities, especially Christians, has been upset to a large extent in recent times by Western missionary activity, which has caused severe reaction not only among Muslims, but also among Hindus, Buddhists, and others. This question of Christian missionary activity (of the Western churches, not Orthodoxy) is a complicated matter requiring an extensive separate treatment, but it must be mentioned briefly here. Suffice it to say that, as far as the Islamic world is concerned, this activity was from the be-ginning of the modern period combined with colonialism, and many Western Christian missionaries have preached as much secularized Western culture as Christianity. Many of them have tried and still try to propagate Christianity not through the teachings of Christ alone, but mostly by the appeal of material aid such as rice and medicine, given in the name of Christian charity, but with the goal of conversion. Many of their schools have been happy if they could wean the Muslim students away from firm belief in Islam, even if they could not make them Christian. It is not accidental that some of the most virulent anti-Western secularized Arab political leaders of the past decades have been graduates of American schools in the Middle East first established by missionaries, schools where these students were religiously and culturally uprooted.

To understand current Islamic reactions to Christian missionary activity in many countries, one should ask how the people of Texas and Oklahoma, where many American evangelists come from, would respond to the following scenario. Suppose that, with vast

oil money from the Islamic world, Islamic schools were to be established in those states. Because of their prestige, these schools attracted the children of the most powerful and well-to-do families, and these future leaders, in attending these schools, underwent a systematic process of cultural Arabization even if they did not participate in the encouraged formal conversion to Islam.

Western missionary activity is not like that of medieval Christian preachers of the Gospels, or like the Orthodox missionaries among the Inuits of Canada, who would adopt the language of the Inuits and even their dress. Most modern Western missionary activity throughout Asia and Africa has meant, above all, Westernization and globalization combined with the cult of consumerism, all in the name of Christianity. Were there not to be such a powerful political, economic, and even military pressure behind the presence of these missionaries, then their presence would be in a sense like that of Tibetan Buddhists or Muslims in Canada or the United States and would not pose a danger to the very existence of local religions and cultures. But the situation is otherwise, and therefore Christian missionary activity, especially in such places as Indonesia, Pakistan, and sub-Saharan Africa, plays a very important role in creating tension between Islam and Christianity and indirectly the West, which gives material and political support to these missionaries even if, as in France, the state is avowedly secularist.

Of course, this identification with modern Western secularist and now consumerist culture has not always been the case with all missionaries. The French Catholic Pere de Foucault lived for a long time among Muslim North Africans as a humble witness to Christ and was greatly respected by his Muslim neighbours, as were a number of other monksand priests. There have also been humble Protestants who came to Muslims to represent a presence of Christ's message without aggressive proselytizing through material enticement of the poor. Such exceptions have certainly existed. Nevertheless, Western Christian missionary activity, supported as it is directly or indirectly by all the might of the West, poses a major problem for contemporary Muslims' dealings with Western Christianity, in contrast to local forms of Christianity with which Muslims have lived usually in peace for centuries. One need only recall in this con-text that while Baghdad was being bombed during the Persian Gulf War, no Iraqi Muslims attacked any local Iraqi Christians walking down the street, whereas the reverse has not been true since the tragic September 11 terrorist acts; a number of American and European Muslims have been attacked and harassed

as a result of the religious, racial, and ethnic xenophobia that has been created in certain circles by that great tragedy.

In speaking of missionary activity, it is necessary to say something about Islamic teachings concerning apostasy (*irtidād*), which has been criticized by missionary circles and others in the West. According to classical interpretations of the *Sharīʿah*, the punishment for apostasy for a Muslim is death, and this is interpreted by many Westerners to mean the lack of freedom of conscience in Islam. To clarify this issue, first of all, a few words about conversion. The Qurʾān says, "There is no compulsion in religion" (2:256), and in most periods of Islamic history there was no forced conversion of the "People of the Book." In fact, forced conversion is an affront to God and the dignity of the human conscience created by Him. Arabia at the time of the Qurʾānic revelation was an exception. There the pagan Arabs who practiced a most crass form of polytheism were given the choice of either becoming Muslims or battling against them. It was very similar to the choice offered by j Christian to European "pagans" once Christianity gained power on that continent. But even in Arabia, the Jews and Christians were not forced to become Muslims.

The *Sharīʿite* ruling on apostasy may therefore seem strange in light of Islam's attitude toward other heavenly inspired religions. The reason for such a ruling must be sought in the fact that attachment to Islam was related before modern times to being a member of the Islamic state as well as community, and therefore apostasy was seen as treason against the state, not just religious conversion. Today when the state is no longer Islamic in the traditional sense in most Islamic countries, many religious scholars have spoken against capital punishment for apostasy. More over, in practice, although the law is still "on the books," in many places it is hardly ever applied, as can be seen by the presence of several million Christians converted from Islam by Western missionaries in recent times in such countries as Indonesia, Pakistan, and several West African nations. In practice this law is somewhat like laws against adultery that are still "on the books" in England, but not applied. Sectarian fighting between Muslims and newly converted Christians still occurs in Indonesia, Pakistan, Nigeria, the Sudan, and a few other places, but these have more to do with local political, economic, and social issues than with the traditional *Sharīʿite* ruling about apostasy.

The traditional *Sharīʿite* ruling, which is now being amended by some legal authorities and for the most part ignored because of changed conditions, must be understood not in the context of the modern West, where religion has been to a large extent marginalized and pushed away from the public arena, but in the framework of the Christian West. One only has to think what would have happened to Christians in medieval France or seventeenth-century Spain if they had converted to Islam. In any case, the question of apostasy raised so often by those who ask about Islam's relation to other religions must be under-stood in both its classical context and the present-day situation, when it is largely overlooked because of changed conditions and is, in fact, being reinterpreted by a number of important Islamic legal experts.

Another issue often raised in the West when discussing Islam's relation to other religions is that Islam does not allow the presence of non-Muslims in a certain area around Mecca while Christianity allows non-Christians even into the Vatican. Now, it must be understood that each religion has its own regulations concerning sacred spaces. In Hinduism certain areas in Benares are closed to all non-Hindus, and Muslims respected those rules even when they ruled over that city and did not force their way into the Monkey Temple or other sacred sites. Like Hinduism and several other religions, Islam has a sacred space around Mecca whose boundaries were designated by the Prophet himself and where non-Muslims are not allowed.

That has never meant that the rest of the Islamic world has been closed to the presence of other religions and their houses of worship. Churches dot the skyline of Cairo, Beirut, Damascus, and many other cities, and synagogues are also found everywhere a Jewish community lives from Tehran to Fez. Within the Ottoman Empire in many places in the Balkans where Jews, Christians, and Muslims lived together, synagogues, churches, and mosques were built next to each other. To this day this harmonious presence of different houses of worship is visible in Istanbul itself. Outside of the *ḥarīm*, or sacred precinct, in Arabia, it is the duty of the Muslim state, according to the *Sharīʿah*, to' allow the building and maintenance of houses of worship of the "People of the Book," and any order to the contrary is against the tenets of Islamic Law and traditional practice, of course, during Islamic history there were occasions is when after a major triumph a church was converted into a mosque, as happened with the Hagia Sophia, but the reverse also took place often, as when the Grand Mosque of Cordova was

converted into a cathedral. Altogether for Islam, the general norm is the one established by `Umar, who, when he conquered Jerusalem, ordered the Church of the Holy Sepulchre to be honoured and protected as a church. Otherwise, most of the churches in the Islamic world that later became mosques were those abandoned by Christian worshipers, somewhat like what one sees in some cities in Great Britain these days.

On the intellectual plane, there is a great deal of interest in the Islamic world today in religious dialogue, the impetus for which originated in Christian circles mostly after World War II. In many countries, such as Morocco, Egypt, Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, Iran, Malaysia, and Indonesia, religious dialogue has even been encouraged by governments as well as by individuals and religious organizations. Numerous conferences have been held in many parts of the world with Protestants, Catholics, and more recently Orthodox Christians; with Hindus in India and Indonesia; and with Buddhists and Confucians in Malaysia. Because of the Palestinian-Israeli problem, the dialogue with Judaism has been somewhat more difficult, but even that has also continued to some extent in both the Middle East and the West. In these dialogues scholars from many different schools of thought have participated, both those within the Islamic world and those Muslims living in the West. There have been some exclusivists who have opposed such dialogues, as one sees also among Christians and Jews, but the activity of religious dialogue has gone on for decades in the Islamic world and is now an important part of the current Islamic religious and intellectual landscape.

Even on the more theoretical and philosophical level, what has come to be known as religious pluralism has become a matter of great interest and a major intellectual challenge in many Islamic countries today, including some of those called "fundamentalist" in the West. There is no country in the Islamic world in which there is greater interest in the theological and philosophical questions involved in the issue of religious pluralism than Iran. There works of such famous Protestant and Catholic writers on the subject as John Hick and Hans Kung have been translated and are being discussed even in the public media; there the views of traditionalist metaphysicians such as Frithjof Schuon, who speaks of the "transcendent unity of religions," a view that is also my own, are part and parcel of the general intellectual discourse. The same keen interest is also to be found in countries as different as Turkey, Pakistan, and Malaysia.

Faced with the danger of loss of identity and the enfeeblement of religion as a result of the onslaught of modernism with its secularist bias, some Muslims, many very active and vocal, espouse a radical exclusivist point of view when it comes to the question of the relation of Islam to other religions. But for the vast majority of Muslims, the Qurʾānic doctrine of the universality of revelation and the plurality of prophets under the One God still resonates deeply in their hearts and souls, and they remain ever mindful of the many verses of the Qurʾān concerning the reality of One God and the multiplicity of revelations sent by Him. When they think of their beloved Prophet, they are mindful of these words of God:

> We inspire thee [Muhammad] as We inspired Noah and the prophets after him, as We inspired Abraham and Ishmael and Isaac and Jacob and the tribes, and Jesus and Job and Jonah and Aaron and Solomon, and as We imparted unto David the Psalms;
> And messengers We have mentioned unto thee before and messengers We have not mentioned unto thee; and God spoke directly to Moses;
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> Messengers of good news and warning; in order that mankind might have no argument against God after the messengers. God is Mighty, and Wise. (4:163–65)