

TOWARD A PLURALISTIC
UNDERSTANDING OF THE QUR'ĀNIC
MESSAGE: RECONCILING INCLUSIVISM
AND TRADITION IN ISLAMIC EXEGESIS

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the concept of tolerance and pluralism in the Qur'an, particularly through the lens of verses that advocate for an inclusive approach to people of different faiths. Verses such as 2:62 and 5:69 emphasize that belief in God and righteous deeds are the key to salvation, regardless of one's specific religious identity. However, these inclusive messages have often been overshadowed in Islamic scholarship by more exclusivist interpretations, such as those found in verses like 3:85 and 5:3, which are traditionally understood to affirm the superiority of Islam and its exclusive path to salvation. The majority of Muslim scholars throughout history have favored an exclusivist reading of the Qur'an, interpreting universalist verses in light of theological traditions that emphasize Islam's finality. This interpretation is supported by a well-established exegetical tradition and reinforced by hadith, such as the one asserting that non-Muslims who reject the Prophet Muhammad's message will be condemned to hell. In contrast, this paper suggests that a more pluralistic and universalist understanding of the Qur'anic message can be achieved by remaining faithful to traditional Islamic methodologies, but differing in the application of their interpretations. This approach highlights that the Qur'an presents a continuity of revelation, acknowledging the legitimacy of previous prophets and religious communities, as seen in verses such as 4:163-164 and 42:13. These verses imply that Islam is part of a broader tradition of submission (*islām*) to God, a way of life shared by all prophets and their followers throughout history. Moreover, the paper contends that the exclusivist interpretations have often strained philology and neglected the original linguistic meanings of key terms, such as "*islām*," which in the Qur'anic context refers more broadly to submission to God's will, rather than a specific historical religion. By revisiting the original meanings of these terms and engaging with the Qur'an's inclusive messages, it is possible to foster a more pluralistic and tolerant interpretation of Islam, one that remains rooted in its foundational texts while acknowledging the diversity of human religious experience. This pluralism aligns with the Qur'anic ethos of reverence toward God and good deeds as the ultimate criteria for divine favor, as highlighted in 5:48 and 49:13.

What first drew me to the teachings of the Qur'ān, and even persuaded me that they were the teachings by which I wish to live my own life, are the verses that clearly advocate an attitude of tolerance and acceptance toward people of other faiths. Verses such as:

Verily those who believe and those who are Jews, and the Sabeans and the Christians are those who believe in God and the last day and do righteous deeds, so they have their recompense with God. They shall not fear nor shall they sorrow.
(2:62, 5:69)

rang true to my ear and seemed to transcend much of the religious bigotry to which human history bears witness in all too many forms. Other verses, such as, *and we have sent to every people a messenger, that they may worship God* (16:32); *and for every people there is a messenger* (10:48), seemed to speak of a universality of revelation and prophecy. I was somewhat surprised in later years to discover that the majority of Muslims have usually explained such verses in a manner that either dismisses them as abrogated (*mansūkh*) or employs complex philology to explain that the apparent, literal meaning is not the real meaning.

Despite a clear message of universality, tolerance and pluralism in the Qur'ān, the main line theological and hermeneutic traditions have almost always chosen to read the universal, inclusivist dimension of the Qur'ān, and of the sayings of the Prophet Muhammad in light of more exclusivist verses such as, *Verily the religion with God is Islam* (5:3), and *Who seeks other than Islam as a religion, it will not be accepted from him* (3:85). These are trumpeted in many quarters as incontrovertible evidence that only those who follow the Prophet Muhammad shall be saved. As Imām Yaḥyā al-Nawawī (d. 1277) has written:

Someone who does not believe that whoever follows another religion besides Islam in an unbeliever (like Christians), or doubts that such a person in an unbeliever, or considers their sect to be valid, is himself an unbeliever (*kāfir*) even if he manifests Islam and believes in it.¹

Indeed, the weight of “tradition” is undoubtedly on the side of one who prefers an exclusivist reading of the Qur'ān. This has brought many Muslims, such as Farid Esack, Ali Asghar Engineer,

Muhammad Arkoun and others to propose a radical break with the tradition in a favor of more pluralistic understanding of the Qur'anic message. Such figures all too often maintain that the traditional methodologies for understanding the Qur'ān need to be abandoned in the name of a new hermeneutic that accounts for the nature of the times in which we live.

As Jane McAuliffe has demonstrated in *Qur'anic Christians* and more recently Yohanan Friedmann in *Tolerance and Coercion in Islam*,² the majority of Muslim scholars throughout history have interpreted the exclusivist verses of the Qur'ān more literally than the inclusivist verses. Indeed, this is the common interpretation one finds on the street and in the Mosque, where verses such as: *Verily the religion with God is Islam* (5:3), and *Who seeks other than Islam as a religion, it will not be accepted from him* (3:85) are trumpeted as incontrovertible evidence that only those who follow the Prophet Muhammad shall be saved. This is then supported by the oft-cited *hadith*,

By Him in whose hand is the soul of Muhammad, there is no Christian or Jew of this community who hears of me and then dies without believing in that with which I was sent but that he is among the companions of the fire.³

Nonetheless, many verses clearly indicate that the new revelation brought by Muhammad is but a continuation of previous ways:

Verily We have revealed to you as We revealed to Noah and the prophets after him. And We revealed to Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac and the tribes and Jesus, Job, Jonas, Aaron, and Solomon, and We gave David the Psalms; and messengers regarding whom We have told you stories and messengers regarding whom We have not told you stories (4:163-4);

God has laid down for you as religion that with which He charged Noah, and what we have revealed to thee, and that with which We charged Abraham, Moses, and Jesus: "Establish the religion, and scatter not regarding it." (42:13);

And We never sent a messenger before thee save that We revealed to him, saying, "There is no God but I, so worship Me." (21:25);

Some verses even imply that the content of all revealed messages is one and the same: *Nothing has been said to you save what was said to the messengers before you* (41:43). But one who wishes to substantiate the claim that all such verses allude to the validity of other faiths will often find himself thwarted by the exegetical tradition, which almost always opts for exclusivist interpretations of the Qur'ān, even when philology must be strained in order to substantiate such claims. One obvious example of straining

philology is found on the interpretation of *And We have sent to every people a messenger, that they may worship God* (16:32), and 10:48: *And for every people there is a messenger. When their messenger comes, they are judged with equity and are not wronged.* At face value these affirm the validity of all religions prior to Islam. But rather than being read as affirmations of the universality of revelation, they are usually presented as declarations that the Prophet Muhammad is God's Messenger sent to all humankind in every land, such that all other religions are now abrogated. But were the reference to the Prophet Muhammad alone the proper Arabic would say "the Messenger" rather than "a messenger." Though this is a very subtle and even debatable philological point, other verses which make very literal inclusivist and even universalist statements are explained away, not only through philology, but through the trump card of "tradition"—*taqlid*. Those who take such verses as confirming the validity of other religions must therefore, as Jane McAuliffe puts it, "be compelled by the exegetical tradition to acknowledge that they are creating new interpretive strategies."⁴

The universalist verses of the Qur'ān are either explained away through creative and clever philology or are claimed to have been abrogated by later revelations. Rarely are they allowed to stand alone as the unencumbered word of God. In response to this, some Muslim authors have attempted to address this question anew in recent years, privileging the "pluralistic" and universalist dimension of the Qur'ān, while explaining away or even dismissing the more exclusivist verses. While such an effort gives hope for a more tolerant mode of Islamic theology and Qur'ānic exegesis, works such as Farid Esack's *Qur'ān Liberation and Pluralism* have demonstrated such blatant disregard for traditional Islamic scholarship that they have no hope of any influence beyond a select group of Western and Westernized Muslims. The fact is that we have yet to find a way to emphasize the universalist element of the Qur'ān and the Prophet's message without estranging the majority of Muslims and breaking completely from tradition.

In this paper, I propose that there is a way in which a universalist and pluralistic understanding of the Qur'ānic message can be attained through a methodology that remains true to the basic principles or roots (*uṣūl*) of Islamic scholarship and even to the methodologies, but differs in the branches (*furū'*) and fruits that are nourished and sustained through those roots. This will not necessarily be a new reading, as many (mostly Sufis) have alluded to

it throughout Islamic history. But in an age of globalization when everything overlaps and interpenetrates we have reached a point that it needs to be part of mainstream Islam.

To substantiate such a procedure within the context of traditional Islamic scholarship, one can call upon a famous saying of the tradition: “The divergence of the scholars is a mercy.” As Frithjof Schuon remarks in commenting upon this saying:

... if ‘the divergences of theologians are a blessing’ as Moslems say, this means that the total doctrine, contained more or less synthetically in the Revelation, is rendered explicit only by ‘fragments’ which are outwardly divergent, although fundamentally concordant.⁵

The outward divergence of such doctrines is what lies in the branches. Here the tree of tradition can be seen as one whose various branches produce different kinds of fruit. The fundamental concordance is the fact that they all derive from the same roots. This is to say that within Islam “orthodoxy” is not so much a body of conclusions as it is a methodology and more importantly sincere engagement with the Qur’ān and the sayings of the Prophet Muhammad— and of the teachings of the Imams for Shī’ite Muslims.

In failing to observe this when we seek to emphasize the pluralist and inclusive message of the Qur’ān, we risk a fall into an iconoclastic confrontation with tradition, rather than a methodical accounting and development of its teachings. This will benefit no one, for the new conclusions attained, however true they may be, will have no soil in which to take root. As Frithjof Schuon has written:

Dogmatic form is transcended by fathoming its depths and contemplating its universal content, and not by denying it in the name of a pretentious and iconoclastic ideal of ‘pure truth’.⁶

Now, from a Qur’ānic perspective, *We have sent no messenger save with the tongue of his people* (14:4). Read literally, this has important implications for how we read and understand the Qur’ān. Over time Muslims have come to read the Qur’ān not necessarily in the language in which it was revealed, but by applying institutionalized definitions that are far from the literal meaning many of the Arabic words had in the time of the Prophet himself. These institutional definitions often become of greater concern than the literal meaning of the words themselves, leading to what Walid Saleh has

referred to as the conflict between tradition and philology in the exegetical tradition. If we do not always keep the philology in mind and look to the meaning of the Arabic words in the historical context in which they were used, we quickly become victims of our own cultural and denominational limitations. Here tradition becomes *taqlīd* rather than *sunna*.

This phenomena is very clear in the most widespread interpretation of the last two lines of Surat al-Fātiḥa: *Lead us on the straight path; the path of those whom You have blessed, unlike those upon whom is Your anger, nor those who are astray* (1:6-7). As Tafsīr al-Jalālayn maintains, the Muslims are those on the straight path, the Christians are those who are astray and the Jews are the ones subject to God's anger. From this perspective, Judaism and Christianity are intermediary stages on the way to Islam at best. But uncritical allegiance to corrupted beliefs and practices prevents Jews and Christians from embracing the fullness of revelation that is the Qur'ān.

The most straightforward example of tradition trumping philology is the interpretation of the word "*islām*." Today, as for the past 1200 years or more, the word "*islām*" is taken to indicate a particular set of beliefs and practices adhered to by a certain segment of humanity. But when the Qur'ān was first revealed what did this word mean? As Toshiko Izutsu has demonstrated in his masterful books *God and Man in the Koran* and *Ethico-Religious Concepts in the Qur'ān*, the original meaning of this word in pre-Islamic poetry is not only "to submit," but moreover to give over something that is particularly precious to oneself and which it is painful to abandon, to somebody who demands it.⁷ So when the Prophet Muhammad first presented a "message" that claimed to be "*islām*," the words would have been understood far differently than what we understand today. Moreover, the way this word is used in the Qur'ān actually provides the raw material for a very eloquent understanding of religious pluralism, one wherein all revelations throughout history are seen as different ways of giving to God that which is most difficult to give—our very selves.

To illustrate this, I will mention several of the Qur'ānic verses regarding Islam which can be taken to present every previous revelation as a way of submitting—*islām*, rather than the historical religion of Islam. Such verses present *islām* as a way of life, not a particular creed. The first to declare himself a Muslim in the

Qur'ān is the Prophet Noah: *I was commanded to be among the submitters (Muslims) (10:72)*. Regarding Abraham, the forefather of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, the Qur'ān states, *Abraham was not a Jew or a Christian, rather he was a pious follower, a submitter (Muslim) (3:67)*. According to the Qur'ān, *His Lord said to him (Abraham), "Submit!" He said, "I submit to the Lord of the worlds" (2:131)*. After Abraham and his son Ishmael erected the Ka'aba they prayed, *Our Lord, make us submitters unto You and make our offspring a nation submitting unto You. Show us our religious rites and turn unto us . . . (2:128)*. A few verses later, it is said that both Abraham and Jacob advised their sons, *O my sons, God has chosen the way for you. So do not die but that you are submitters (2:132)*. From this perspective, every prophet of the Judeo-Christian-Islamic tradition has taught a different mode of submission to God. The creeds, laws and languages differ, but the essential message is the same. Thus the Qur'ān tells us of Jews and Christians:

And when the Qur'ān is recited to them, they say, "We believe in it. Truly it is the truth from our Lord. Truly before it [was revealed] we were submitters (28:52).

The Apostles also implored Jesus, *We are the helpers of God! We believe! Bear witness that we are submitters (3:52)*. Confirming the inner substance of these various forms of submission, the Prophet Muhammad has said: "The Prophets are half-brothers, their mothers differ and their way (*din*) is one."⁸

At face value such verses very clearly state that *islām* is a universal and perennial way of life practiced by the great founders of all previous religions/ways (*dins*) and their followers. But once "*islām*" becomes Islam, an institutional definition or conception is formed and such verses become more problematic. Rather than resorting to philology to clarify the institutional interpretation of these verses, the majority of Muslim exegetes have provided historical explanations, telling us that those who say *Truly before it [was revealed] we were submitters* are in fact those Christians and Jews who had read the verses in their scriptures that spoke of the coming of Muhammad and thus believed in him. But the exegetes are not able to provide textual substantiations from the Bible for such assertions. Perhaps this is because, as the Qur'ān itself states, previous revelations have been "altered." But this leaves us wondering how these exegetes knew this to be true. Unfortunately, the logic is quite circular: the Qur'ān tells us that they are Muslims, Muslims are the people who follow the message of the Prophet Muhammad, therefore, they believed in the Prophet Muhammad.

In other words, the institutionalized meaning of “*islām*” has trumped the linguistic meaning.

Examples of such exegetical slight of hand abound, and often involve far more subtle maneuvering to achieve the desired end— or to make the Qur’ān conform to “tradition.” But to examine them in detail would require an extensive study. As with the interpretation of the word *islām* one often finds that a reading of the Qur’ān that accounts for its most literal meaning yields meanings that are in conflict with the traditional Muslim understanding of other religions.

Perhaps the Qur’ān itself warns that this will some day occur. For a passage that is often read as a condemnation of Judaism and Christianity by Muslims is actually a condemnation of religious condemnation:

*They say, “None will enter the garden but those who were Jews and Christians.” These are their desires (amani). Say, “Bring your proof if your are veracious.” Rather one who submits his face to God and does what is beautiful, he has his reward with God. No fear is upon them and they shall not sorrow. The Jews claim the Christians are based upon nothing, and the Christians claim the Jews are based upon nothing, yet they recite the book. **Likewise, those who do not know, claim the like of their claim.** Then God judges between you on the Day of Judgment regarding that wherein you differed. (2:111-113, Emphasis added)*

In this vein, it may be wiser to read Qur’ānic condemnations of people of other faiths, not as condemnations of their faiths as such, but as a condemnation of hardness of heart that causes people to read the Qur’ān in accord with their own desires. We must be aware that those who follow the Prophet Muhammad are also susceptible to forgetting *a portion of what they were reminded of* (5:13). Indeed, that Muslims would fail to follow the fundamental precepts of the Qur’ān was foreseen by the Prophet Muhammad. Many a *ḥadīth* tell us that Muslims will follow their religious predecessors, by selling God’s verses for a small price and believing in some of the book and disbelieving in some of it. On one occasion, a companion asked him how knowledge could vanish when Muslims will continue to teach the Qur’ān generation after generation. The Prophet replied, “May your mother weep for you! Do you not see these Jews and these Christians? They read the Torah and the Gospels and do not act in accord with them.”⁹⁹ Another famous *Ḥadīth* states:

There will soon come upon the people a time in which nothing of the Qur'ān remains save its trace and nothing of Islam remains save its name; their mosques will be full, though they are devoid of guidance. Their scholars are the worst people under the sky, from them strife emerges and spreads.¹⁰

A well-known Qur'ānic verse contends that the multiple means by which human beings worship God is part of the test that they confront in this world:

And for each we have made among them a law and a creed; and if God wanted He would have made you a single community, but to try you regarding what has come to you, so vie in good deeds; to God is your return all of you, so we inform of that wherein you differed. (5:48).

This reveals that there are different ways of understanding God and the relationship with God for different human collectivities. God has not revealed one law, but many laws. To each law corresponds a particular creed. Other passages confirm this by revealing that God has also revealed different rites of worship for different human collectivities:

For every community (umma) We have made a rite that they practice with devotion. So let them not contend with you in this matter. And call to your Lord; truly you are upon a straight guidance. And if they dispute you, then say, "God knows best what you do. God judges between you on the day of resurrection regarding that wherein you differ." (22:67-69)

The reason for these differences in creed and practice is revealed in the following verse:

*O Mankind! We have created you of a male and a female, **and have made you peoples and tribes that you may know one another**; surely the most honorable of you with God is the most reverent; surely God is Knowing, Aware. (49:13, Emphasis added)*

From this perspective, what is most important is not whether or not one follows a particular creed or practice, but that one is reverent toward God in adhering to one of the particular modes of submission that God has revealed. In this light, the revelations of many different religions could be seen as a test—the test alluded to in 5:48. The changing face of our world has put Muslims in a position where they must ask themselves anew whether or not they have passed that test.

Notes and References

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- ¹ Imām Yaḥyā al-Nawawī, *Rawḍa al-tālibīn wa ‘umda al-muftīn* (Beirut, al-Maktab al-Islami, 1412/1991), vol. 10, p. 70. The translation and citation is taken from Nuh Ha Mim Keller, “On the validity of all religions in the thought of Ibn al-‘Arabī and Emir ‘Abd al-Qādir, a letter to ‘Abd al-Matīn” at www.masud.co.uk
 - ² Yohanan Friedmann, *Tolerance and Coercion in Islam: Interfaith Relation sin the Muslim Tradition*, (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2003).
 - ³ Sahih Muslim, *Kitāb al-Iman*, 72.
 - ⁴ Jane Dammen McAuliffe, *Qur’anic Christians: An Analysis of Classical and Modern Exegesis* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 290.
 - ⁵ Frithjof Schuon, *Stations of Wisdom* (Bloomington, IN, World Wisdom Books, 1995), repr. Lahore: Suhail Academy, 2004,p, 4.
 - ⁶ *Stations of Wisdom*, p. 4.
 - ⁷ Toshiko Izutsu, *God and Man in the Koran* (Salem, NC, Ayer Publishing Co., 1987), p. 199. For an extensive treatment of the over semantic field of the word *islām* see Chapter 8 “Jahiliyyah and Islam.”
 - ⁸ Bukhārī, *Kitāb al-Anbiya’*, 48, Ibn Māja, *Kitāb al-Fitan*, 26.
 - ⁹ Sunan Ibn Māja, *Kitāb al-Fitan*, 26.
 - ¹⁰ Al-Bayhaqī, *Sha‘b al-imān* (Beirut, Dar al-kutub al-‘ilmi, 1410/1990), vol. 2, p. 311.