INTERRELIGIOUS RELATIONS

Living in a Religiously Plural Society
A Muslim Perspective on Being Inclusive Today
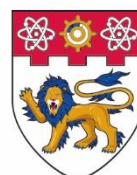
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**Occasional Papers of
The Studies in Inter-Religious Relations
in Plural Societies Programme**

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A Muslim Perspective on Being Inclusive Today

Abdullah Saeed

Abstract

In today's religiously plural societies, it is critical that people from different religions live together peacefully and cooperate and collaborate with each other. For religious traditions, this reality poses several challenges, not the least of which is whether it is possible to maintain irreconcilable religious differences, such as core beliefs and fundamental doctrines, while harmoniously coexisting with other religions. This paper argues that, from a Muslim perspective, it is possible to maintain religious harmony and good relations in a religiously plural society while still maintaining fundamental religious differences. It argues that inclusivism essentially involves being positive, non-judgmental, and accepting of the religious "other" and treating them with respect in accordance with their inherent human dignity. This way, exclusivist religious beliefs about God, the scriptures, life after death, and the validity of one's religion can exist at the level of a believer's conscience, but they are not necessarily conveyed in public in a way that damages relationships between members of different religions in contemporary societies. The paper argues that such an approach (holding exclusivist beliefs while adopting inclusivist attitudes towards the religious "other") is possible for Muslims, and that there is significant support in Islam's most important text, the Qur'ān, and among many prominent contemporary Muslim scholars for this approach. It also argues that exclusivist texts in the Qur'ān and theological positions that Muslims developed early on can be dealt with by adopting a contextualist approach to their interpretation.

Introduction

One of the main concerns for today's religiously plural societies is the extent to which people of different religions can peacefully coexist, cooperate, and collaborate with each other while still maintaining their religious differences. Some perspectives seem to suggest that people of different religions should modify their beliefs and minimise their differences as much as possible to enable coexistence. Others argue that all religions are essentially the same and share the same validity, despite the obvious differences between them, and that all people perhaps should adopt this point of view.[1] However, neither approach is very helpful or practical. Moreover, followers of various religions may reject these perspectives. Religious identity is an integral part of most people's lives. It is based upon deeply held beliefs, values, and views of the world and shaped by the certainty of one's own truth-claims, regardless of what others may think. Modifying this certainty, either by diluting one's own belief system or by putting it aside altogether, is an unlikely option for most people. At the same time, the fact that most people live in societies where they must coexist harmoniously with those from other religions means that the question of *how to achieve this* is crucial.

Religious Pluralism

Much of the discussion in the literature on interreligious relations falls under the broad umbrella of *religious pluralism*, which is a widely used term with multiple definitions. For instance, the Aga Khan Global Centre for Pluralism proposes that pluralism "rejects division as a necessary outcome of diversity, seeking instead to identify the qualities and experiences that unite rather than divide."[2] The Danish Pluralism Project defines religious pluralism as "a situation where patterns of engagement, interaction, and relationship between religious groups emerge."[3] Puett also notes that the phenomenon involves the "affirmation of plurality" and provides an ideal for "engaging religious diversity, negotiating religious differences, and fostering social cohesion."[4] One key element of most definitions of religious pluralism is the realisation that pluralism is a deliberate, not incidental process. Others emphasise that religious pluralism must be "envisioned, cultivated, shared, and practiced."[5] A key contemporary proponent of religious pluralism, Diana L. Eck, similarly describes pluralism as the "dynamic process through which we engage with one another."[6]

The growing emphasis on religious pluralism in the modern period has raised several theological issues for religious traditions. One question facing many religions is whether there is need of a theological basis for engagement with people of other religions, also referred to as the religious "other". Do religious traditions need to find common ground to accept one another and work together for the good of society? Religious traditions usually have different understandings about the nature of God, salvation, life after death, creation, and human purpose, not to mention "different and various dogmas, rites, and rituals."[7] Mundra articulates this dilemma: "The diversity of religions poses deep problems for religious truth-claims. Divergent religions purvey belief systems that contradict one another and, furthermore, lack any common ground."[8] Do these need to be reconciled to achieve the ideal of pluralism, or is it possible to achieve this while still recognising religious differences? Goodman argues:

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[1] See for example, John Hick, *The Rainbow of Faiths: Critical Dialogues on Religious Pluralism*, London: SCM Press, 1995.

[2] Aga Khan Global Centre for Pluralism, "Defining Pluralism," *Pluralism Papers* 1 (January 2012): 1-14, 1.

[3] Lars Ahlin, Jørn Borup, Marianne Qvortrup Fibiger, Lene Kühle, Viggo Mortensen and René Dybdal Pedersen, "Religious Diversity and Pluralism: Empirical Data and Theoretical Reflections from the Danish Pluralism Project," *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 27 (2012): 403-408, 405.

[4] Tiffany Puett, "Managing Religion: Religious Pluralism, Liberalism, and Governmentality," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 48 (2013): 317-327, 319.

[5] Ibid.

[6] Diana L Eck, "American Religious Pluralism: Civic and Theological Discourse," in *Democracy and the New Religious Pluralism*, edited by Thomas Banchoff, New York: Oxford University Press, 2007: 244-270, 266.

[7] Seyed Hassan Hosseini, "Religious Pluralism and Pluralistic Religion: John Hick's Epistemological Foundation of Religious Pluralism and an Explanation of Islamic Epistemology toward Diversity of Unique Religion," *The Pluralist* 5 (2010): 94-109, 94.

[8] Anil Mundra, "From Plurality to Pluralism: A Philosophical Defense of Religious Relationship against Relativism," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 48 (2013): 276-288, 276.

It is not inconsistent, I argue, to hold fast to one's religious convictions and practices while respecting and learning from other religious (and non-religious) traditions.... Social harmony does not require unanimity or consensus. The… reduction of all religious commitments to an imagined common core is unhelpful and often rightfully unwelcome.[9]

This is the approach adopted in this paper. It is argued that, from a Muslim perspective, it is possible to maintain one's own beliefs without dilution, while also living harmoniously with people of other religions. While some scholars have used the term "pluralism" in this sense, this paper uses the term "inclusivism" because the heart of inclusivism is about being "all-embracing"[10] towards people from other religions, not in the theological sense (in terms of adopting the beliefs of other religions) but in terms of one's attitudes towards the religious "other" in society, and in social relationships. This is the key idea being conveyed in this paper, and the term inclusivism captures this more succinctly.

The other key term to which I refer in this paper is "exclusivism". I argue that it is possible for a Muslim to be both inclusivist and exclusivist at the same time. Moreover, there are resources within Islamic tradition that support a Muslim's use of an inclusivist approach towards other religions and their followers. I avoid the term "pluralism" in what follows because of the many controversies, particularly among Muslims, about the meaning of this term and whether it considers all religions to be essentially "equal", as has been claimed in fatwas issued by the highest religious authorities in countries like Indonesia and Malaysia. These authorities have declared "pluralism" to be totally unacceptable in Islam.[11]

Defining Inclusivism and Exclusivism

Over the past two decades in Islamic thought there has been much discussion about inclusivism and exclusivism, particularly regarding Muslim minorities. Governments have been interested in these terms as they relate to policy considerations concerning harmonious relations between people of different religions, while Muslim thinkers and theologians have also been actively exploring the feasibility of the inclusivism project theologically.

While the terms inclusivism and exclusivism are undoubtedly familiar to many due to this discourse, there is still debate about what they mean for Muslims. Many of us are familiar with the typology developed by Alan Race in 1983 in a Christian context: exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism. As Paul Hedges argues, this typology has been used "to describe theological stances concerning whether other religions are considered untrue [i.e., exclusivist], partially true [i.e., inclusivist], or more than one is true [i.e., pluralist]."[12] Generally speaking, "exclusivists" tend to believe that there is only "one true religion" and that all other religions are false or a form of corruption.[13] On the other hand, "inclusivists" will generally see other religions as "leading towards God in some way."[14] Pluralists see many possible truths and many paths to God.[15] However, as Hedges argues, the typology can also be employed heuristically, to "describe, rather than prescribe, the kind of answers different thinkers have given." In this way the typology represents not only theological positions but also certain "tendencies or tones in the way the religious other is viewed."[16]

In the following I adapt the terms inclusivism and exclusivism to a Muslim context. For me, inclusivism and exclusivism reflect attitudes towards either (i) other religions or (ii) people of other religions (the "religious other"). Attitudes that are antagonistic, apprehensive, or negative towards other religions or the religious "other"

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[9] Lenn Evan Goodman, "Religious Pluralism," *Political Theology* 13.4 (2012): 458-485, 458.

[10] Oxford University Press, "Synonyms of Inclusive in English," *oxforddictionaries.com*, (n.d.), accessed 3 April 2018, https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/thesaurus/inclusive.

[11] Majelis Ulama Indonesia, MUI, "Index Fatwa," (n.d.), accessed 12 February 2019, https://mui.or.id/fatwa/.

[12] Paul Hedges, "Interreligious Engagement and Identity Theory: Assessing the Theology of Religions Typology as a Model for Dialogue and Encounter," *Journal for the Academic Study of Religion* 27 (2014): 198-221, 200.

[13] Ibid, 201.

[14] Ibid.

[15] Ibid.

[16] Paul Hedges, "The Theology of Religions Typology Redefined: Openness and Tendencies," in *Twenty-First Century Theologies of Religions: Retrospection and Future Prospects*, edited by Elizabeth Harris, Paul Hedges, and Shanthikumar Hettiarachchi, Leiden: Brill-Rodopi, 2016: 76-92, 80.

can be considered exclusivist in nature. Conversely, those attitudes that are positive or at least neutral towards other religions or the religious "other" can be considered inclusivist.

Inclusivism can be summarised as being publicly non-judgmental about another person's religion; not saying hurtful things about another religion in public; and recognising that others follow different religions that are important to them. In addition, it holds that other religions should not be targeted for aggressive proselytisation; and that people from other religions should be treated with respect, recognising their human dignity and the potential for cooperation and collaboration with them for the common good. Inclusivism in this sense, with reference to the religious "other", is also about including other human beings who do not follow my own religion in my circle of human family, considering them brothers, sisters or neighbours. Exclusivism, however, is the opposite.

Both terms can manifest themselves theologically and can be on a continuum. Theological inclusivism, at the *extreme* end of the continuum, can mean that all religions, by and large, offer salvation and that there are many "right" paths to get there, all of which are equally valid. Conversely, theological exclusivism at the *extreme* end of the continuum can refer to the belief that there is only *one* right way. In Islamic theology, for example, an exclusivist approach might argue that Islam is the one and only true path to salvation. By extension, those people who do not follow Islam may be considered *less* worthy or unworthy of proper respect or understanding, simply because they do not follow the religion of Islam.

Yet, while the followers of a religion may believe that their own religion is the only true religion or superior to others, there is no reason why it is not possible to accept at the same time that all human beings are equal and worthy of respect. Thus, it is possible for religious traditions to legitimately hold certain very exclusivist views at the theological level, on the one hand, while still treating members of other religions respectfully on the other. This form of inclusivism, which is manifested at the attitudinal level, can occur without reducing all religions to a set of common beliefs for the sake of having respectful relationships with others. Here, I am making a clear distinction between the attitudes that a person may hold towards the religious "other" (as a human being) and exclusivist theological or doctrinal views that religions may hold with respect to other religions.

Most people would probably acknowledge that it is appropriate for followers of a religion to hold some exclusivist theological beliefs. Inclusivism, at the level of one's attitude towards others, does not mean giving up what makes one's religion distinct from others in terms of the nature of God, the purpose of life, the path to salvation, or life after death. Exclusivist doctrines, beliefs or tenets are a fundamental aspect of most religions. In other words, believers may legitimately hold all kinds of exclusivist beliefs, but as long as they do not express or manifest them in a way that is hurtful to others, particularly in public, and focus on showing positive attitudes towards the religious "other", they are adopting what can be called an exclusivist and inclusivist position at the same time. Indeed, the right to hold exclusivist beliefs is even affirmed by international human rights law.[17]

The problem then is not so much holding exclusivist beliefs but how those exclusivist beliefs are expressed, particularly in public. If they are expressed in a negative or hostile fashion, there is the possibility of hurting the followers of other religions, subsequently causing division in the community. Indeed, people from all religions can be themselves and hold on to their own religious convictions while still working together to create a harmonious society, recognising the human dignity of all. However, some might see this form of inclusivism as no more than religious hypocrisy — in other words, believing something theologically but acting differently. Yet this may not necessarily be the case. Most of us recognise that different religions have very different ideas about fundamental issues. It may simply not be possible to reconcile such competing belief systems in order to arrive at one common understanding. It is possible, however, to recognise and respect such differences, just as other differences are acknowledged and respected in society, such as distinctions between peoples' ethnicity, spoken language, skin colour, gender, IQ, or even vocation.

Inclusivism and Exclusivism in Islamic Tradition

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[17] UN General Assembly, *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (10 December 1948), 217 A (III), accessed 12 February 2009, https://www.refworld.org/docid/3ae6b3712c.html, Article 18. It elaborates the right to freedom of religion, stating: "Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion*."* It also recognises freedom of thought and conscience "on all matters" including "personal conviction[s]," as an essential part of the freedom of religion.

Islam, like most other religions, is highly diverse, with many schools of thought, trends, movements, and traditions. This diversity means that, at some level, Muslims have different views about what it means to be a follower of Islam. It also means that on any important issue, there will always be different voices among Muslims, which is the case concerning inclusivism and exclusivism. While some Muslims favour exclusivist positions, others are more inclusivist in their approach to other religions and the religious "other".

Like many other issues over which there is significant disagreement, Muslims who support inclusivism, be it in relation to other religions or the religious "other", look to Islam's most authoritative text — the Qur'ān — to see whether there is sufficient support for their position. As many scholars have noted, there is much support in the Qur'ān for inclusivism, both at the theological and social/attitudinal levels. Many texts in the Qur'ān relate to interreligious relations, some of which can be interpreted as exclusivist, while others can be interpreted from an inclusivist perspective. Indeed, Muslims have historically done both.

The development of exclusivism in Islamic tradition

In the past, Muslim theologians often emphasised exclusivist positions. In the early history of Islam Muslims developed a range of ideas about other religions and the religious "other" that may have impeded positive social interactions in certain cases. For example, historically, Muslims believed that Islam was superior to other religions;[18] that Islam, as taught by the Prophet Muhammad, was the only religion worth following; that there could not be equality between Muslims and people of other religions;[19] that certain non-Muslim practices were potentially dangerous to Muslims' identity; that Muslims should restrict their interaction with people of other religions to a minimum, except when absolutely necessary; that non-Muslims should not have freedom to encourage Muslims to convert to their religions;[20] and that Muslims should not share certain things in society with others.

These positions often appear to have developed in early Islam; in part, as a way of fostering a specific sense of Muslim identity in comparison to the other religions and cultures that already existed in Arabia when Islam arrived. Still, this does not mean that there were no inclusivist voices within Islam. They existed, but they were not the mainstream position. On the other hand, not all the exclusivist positions that were asserted in early Islam and continued into the modern period necessarily came directly from the Qur'ān. Many were derived through the interpretation of specific Qur'ānic texts and/or traditions of the Prophet Muhammad,[21] or were based on what Muslims considered to be appropriate practices, particularly during the period of expansion of Islam outside Arabia in the first two centuries of Islam. The fact that these positions developed through the process of interpretation and were based on Muslim practices means that there is great potential for new interpretations to be developed, keeping in mind the new context of today.

Examples of Muslim practices in the past that can today be considered discriminatory towards people of other religions include *jizya* (the poll tax, imposed on non-Muslims under Muslim rule);[22] the doctrine of *dhimma*;[23] inequality between Muslims and non-Muslims in Muslim societies;[24] and restrictions on building places of worship or on the manifestation of non-Islamic religions.[25] However, it can be argued that these practices and ideas should be considered state policies that were appropriate for their time. Many were based on specific needs and functioned as part of the public administration of the Muslim state and the maintenance

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[18] Lewis E Winkler, *Contemporary Muslim and Christian Responses to Religious Plurality*, Cambridge: James Clarke & Co, 2011, 132-133.

[19] See examples of inequality in Charles H. Parker, "Paying for the Privilege: The Management of Public Order and Religious Pluralism in Two Early Modern Societies," *Journal of World History* 17.3 (2006): 267-296, 278.

[20] Ibid.

[21] For instance, Abdel Haleem discusses early interpretations of Q. 9:29 that are inconsistent with the Qur'ān itself which developed in the post-prophetic period. See Abdel Haleem, M.A.S., "The Jizya Verse (Q. 9:29): Tax Enforcement on Non-Muslims in the First Muslim State," *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 14 (2012): 72-89.

[22] Anver M Emon, "Religious Minorities and Islamic Law: Accommodation and the Limits of Tolerance," in *Islamic Law and International Human Rights Law*, edited by Anver M. Emon, Mark S. Ellis, and Benjamin Glahn, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012: 323-343, 323.

[23] Ibid.

[24] Amr Osman, "Equality" in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Islam and Politics*, edited by Emad Shahin, Oxford Islamic Studies Online, accessed 28 March 2018, http://www.oxfordislamicstudies.com/article/opr/t342/e0157?_hi=0&_pos=2225.

[25] Parker, "Paying for the Privilege", 278.

of law and order. For example, *jizya* can be understood as a tax that non-Muslims had to pay, just as Muslims had to pay *zakāt*.[26] Similarly, restrictions on the ringing of church bells in areas where Muslims lived side by side with Christians can be considered a form of local noise management. Such practices were part of the public administration and governance in Muslim states. The context today is obviously different, with notions of equality for all and equal citizenship more prevalent.

Returning to Islam's most important textual sources, it is clear that a significant part of the discriminatory practices that Muslims adopted early on were not necessarily supported by the most important sacred text of Islam: the Qur'ān. In fact, there are many texts that support the converse, including positive social interactions; truthfulness and honesty in dealing with the religious "other"; engaging with the religious "other" gently; and cooperating with others in the pursuit of good deeds. This provides Muslim scholars today with much flexibility to modify practices or positions that might appear negative in the context of interreligious relations. The rules and regulations that governed Muslim/ non-Muslim relations in the past can be rethought today because many were largely based on historical practice.

Indeed, because of the significant differences between the past and present contexts I argue that inclusivist texts, interpretations, and theological positions may need to be emphasised today without necessarily diluting some of the most fundamental beliefs of Islam, such as the belief in the One God, life after death, and the like, which Muslims around the world almost universally agree are fundamentally important. Indeed, the basic differences that exist between religions, including between Islam and other religions, need to be maintained, acknowledged, and respected, while emphasising inclusivist attitudes towards the religious "other".

Qur'ānic support for inclusivism

Many Qur'ānic principles and ideas are essential for an inclusivist perspective. For instance, the Qur'ān is very critical of certain beliefs, religions, and practices in Mecca. Yet, it also advises Muslims not to speak negatively about other religions, even about the idols of Mecca's polytheists (Q.6:108). The Qur'ān also asks Muslims to enter into dialogue with people of other religions gently and kindly. It commands Muslims not to "argue with the People of the Scripture unless it be in a way that is better" (Q. 29:46) and asks Muslims to "invite [others] to the way of your Lord with wisdom and good instruction, and argue with them in a way that is best" (Q. 16:125). From a Qur'ānic point of view, for social relations to work properly, Muslims should be fair, just, nice, gentle, and kind-hearted when dealing with people (Q. 2:178, 3:159, 16:91; 55:60).

Alongside this general advice to Muslims are many Qur'ānic verses that emphasise ideas that can be used to form the foundations of inclusivism in Islam. The Qur'ānic conception of God is that He is the God of the entire universe and of all creation, including all human beings. Regardless of their religion and background, all human beings are covered by the compassion and mercy of God. The Qur'ān also indicates that all people, regardless of their colour, language, ethnic origin, or religion, are part of one family (Q. 49:13). They are referred to as "children of Adam" (Q. 17:70). In this sense, human beings are brothers and sisters in one big human family. The Qur'ān also says that God's revealed religion has been based on one key idea throughout history: that human beings should recognise and submit to the One God (Q. 2:136). This idea exists in many religions, but it has been expressed in different ways. The Qur'ān recognises, at a basic level, that there is truth in many religions. For instance, Qur'ān 2:62 says:

> Surely, those who believe, those who are Jewish, the Christians, and the Sabians; anyone who believes in God, and believes in the Last Day, and leads a righteous life, will receive their recompense from their Lord. They have nothing to fear, nor will they grieve.

The Qur'ān also says that it was God's plan to have different religions and ways. Religious differences have always been part of God's plan. According to Qur'ān 5:48:

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[26] Islam Online, "Jizyah and Non-Muslim Minorities" (n.d.), accessed 25 January 2019. https://archive.islamonline.net/?p=1009.

For each [community] we have prescribed a law and a way. Had God willed, He could have made you one community...

The Qur'ān recognises that people who surrender to the One God, believe in the One God and the Last Day, and do good deeds will all be saved, as emphasised in Q. 5:69, which is *almost* identical to Q.2:62 cited above as Mahmoud Ayoub notes, emphasising its importance.[27] It is one of the most inclusive texts in the Qur'ān.

The Qur'ān also makes it very clear that all human beings can follow whatever religion they choose, but they will bear the consequences of that decision. It firmly declares that there is no coercion in matters of faith. The Qur'ān says in 109:6, "To you is your path [religion]; to me mine."

Scholarly Support for Inclusivism

Like other religions, Muslim scholars, thinkers, and religious institutions are grappling with the question of what it means to live in a religiously diverse world today. However, this discourse is not new. Islam emerged in a multi-religious environment. As Fazlur Rahman notes:

The awareness of the diversity of religions, despite the unity of their origin, sets Muhammad (PBUH) a theological problem of the first order. It so persistently and painfully pressed itself on his mind that from the beginning of this awareness until well into the last phase of his life, the Qur'ān treats this question at various levels.[28]

Indeed, Fred Donner has argued that the earliest community that followed Prophet Muhammad was an inclusive one. Donner refers to it as a "community of believers", and he argues convincingly that this community of believers most likely would have included at the time non-trinitarian Christians and Jews. His analysis of the terms "*Islam*" and "*Muslim*", as used in the Qur'ān, also supports this understanding.[29] If Donner's analysis is correct, the theological inclusivism of the earliest Muslim community and of the Qur'ān should be taken as a key argument in favour of inclusivism today.

Asma Uddin also acknowledges the long tradition of engagement among Muslims with questions of how to frame relations and respond to the religious "other": "For some, the core of this discourse lies in the definition of the "People of the Book", a Qur'ānic term that refers to those to whom Muslims must extend full religious tolerance."[30]

Today, there are a variety of responses among Muslims to the religious "other". Some are negative and hostile, perceiving those from other religions as "the enemy,"[31] while others are more inclusivist, advocating tolerance, acceptance, mutual respect or common goals between Muslims and those from other religions.

One Muslim scholar who advocates an inclusivist approach to the religious "other" is Tariq Ramadan. His approach draws from the Qur'ān's acknowledgement that God deliberately created religious diversity: "You must respect the diversity of people because it is God's will. This is why tolerance is not enough."[32] He further affirms: "God's will was to create diversity for one reason – knowledge of the other. While diversity brings with it the risk of conflict, it brings the opportunity for knowledge...."[33] For him, there are clear benefits that come from actively engaging with the religious "other", including broader benefits for society as a whole, such as "the emergence of a new "We"' that is able to work together to address all offenses against human dignity."[34]

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[27] Mahmoud M Ayoub, "Islam and the Challenge of Religious Pluralism," *Global Dialogue* 2.1 (2000): 1-14, 9.

[28] Fazlur Rahman, *Major Themes of the Qur'an,* Chicago, Il: The University of Chicago Press, 2009, 113

[29] Fred M Donner, *Muhammad and the Believers: At the Origins of Islam*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010.

[30] Asma T Uddin, "Religious Pluralism in Today's Muslim World," Sailan Muslim Foundation (28 July 2009), accessed 12 February 2019, https://www.sailanmuslim.com/muslim-issues/religious-pluralism-in-todays-muslim-world-by-asma-t-uddin.

[31] Ibid.

[32] Tariq Ramadan, "Beyond Tolerance: Islam and Pluralism" (2010), accessed 25 January 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Igxdcl2dDm0.

[33] Ibid.

[34] Diana L Eck, "Prospects for Pluralism: Voice and Vision in the Study of Religion," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 75.4 (2007): 743–776, 766, citing Tariq Ramadan, "Manifesto for a New We" (2006), accessed 29 January 2019, https://tariqramadan.com/arabic/2006/07/07/manifesto-for-a-new-we/.

Similar to Ramadan's approach, the inclusivist approach of Iranian thinker Abdolkarim Soroush stems from his understanding of religious diversity. For him, religious diversity was not only created by God, but comes from two other sources, "the plurality of textual interpretation" and people's different "religious experience."[35] How can all these divergent religious positions and views be reconciled? Is it possible for such diversity to exist peacefully in society? Soroush explains:

> But can you have inconsistent truths at the same time? Yes, this is absolutely possible, because we do not have the problem of logical truth. We can claim that once you think a particular religion is valid then it is your duty to subscribe to it. Now somebody else might come to the conclusion that a different religion is valid, and then it is his duty to subscribe to that particular religion. These different duties can live together, a kind of co-existence of inconsistent duties towards different religions.[36]

In line with the Qur'ān's approach to inclusivism, a growing number of prominent Muslim scholars and authoritative Islamic institutions have expressed their support for an inclusivist approach to the religious "other" while still maintaining theologically exclusivist views. For instance, the Grand Mufti of Egypt, Sheikh Shawki Allam, in his 2015 speech before the Majlis Ugama Islam Singapura, articulated his understanding of interfaith relations in the modern world:

> We must also be good citizens, since a true believer must necessarily be a good and righteous individual in the society in which he lives. This does not mean forfeiting our Muslim identity and completely dissolving in the society in which we are a minority. I do not advocate this. We must hold fast to what distinguishes us as a community, and at the same time comprehend the existence of other aspects which are common among all mankind and which we cannot neglect. It is our duty to hold firmly to our roots, as we possess strong faith in ourselves as Muslims. We must nevertheless open up to the other to show this spirit.[37]

He emphasises that despite differences that may seem to divide people from different religions, there are "ties, remote as they may seem, that connect all mankind, necessitating treating non-Muslims like we do to Muslims."[38] In a similar spirit, a joint statement issued by the Al-Azhar Center for Dialogue and the Vatican's Pontifical Council for Inter-Religious Dialogue emphasised that "difference doesn't mean negating peaceful coexistence."[39] Rather, it is important to respect religious diversity and put into practice "the values of mercy, love and other moral values."[40]

Recognising people's God-given freedom to choose their own religious path, the Grand Mufti of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Husein Kavazović, affirms that despite religious differences, all human beings can work towards understanding and cooperation for the "common good":

> The Merciful God gave us the task to get to know each other and join efforts in the pursuit of common good. Starting from these truths and principles, we commit ourselves to engage

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[35] Abdolkarim Soroush, "Islam and Pluralism, University of London" (14 January 1999), accessed 25 January 2019, http://www.drsoroush.com/Lectures-English.htm.

[36] Ibid.

[37] Shawki Allam, "Speech by Grand Mufti of Egypt Sheikh Dr Shawki Allam (English translation)," Majlis Ugama Islam Singapura Fourth Distinguished Visitor Programme (26 January 2015), accessed 16 January 2018, https://www.muis.gov.sg/Media/Speeches/Speech-by-Grand-Mufti-of-Egypt-Sheikh-English.

[38] Ibid.

[39] Joint Statement of Al-Azhar Center for Dialogue and the Pontifical Council for Inter-Religious Dialogue, "The Role of Al-Azhar Al-Sharif and Vatican in Confronting the Phenomena of Fanaticism, Extremism and Violence" (23 February 2017), accessed 25 January 2019, https://www.lpj.org/post-vatican-and-al-azhar-symposium-what-is-the-role-of-the-faithful-in-interreligious-dialogue.

[40] Ibid.

together with others in building bridges of understanding and cooperation. We jointly raise our voices against self-isolation and self-sufficiency that distance us from each other.[41]

Likewise, Egypt's Dār al-Iftā' encourages Muslims to engage in "acts of goodness." These can even be as specific as "maintaining ties, giving gifts, visitation, and congratulating non-Muslims."[42] Indeed, the teachings of Dār al-Iftā' emphasise that "the relationship between Muslims and non-Muslims is in essence one of co-existence rather than confrontation and enmity."[43]

Other notable Muslim authorities have pointed out the risks of not taking an inclusivist approach to the religious "other". For instance, the letter *A Common Word*, representing, initially, the views of more than 100 Muslim scholars and intellectuals, explains the importance of peaceful relations between Muslims and Christians:

Finding common ground between Muslims and Christians is not simply a matter for polite ecumenical dialogue between selected religious leaders. Christians and Muslims reportedly make up over a third and over a fifth of humanity respectively. Together they make up more than 55 per cent of the world's population, making the relationship between these two religious communities the most important factor in contributing to meaningful peace around the world.[44]

Speaking of the state of interfaith relations in Egypt, former Egyptian Grand Mufti Ali Gomaa also decried, "In light of the current circumstances, we need [to promote] brotherly feelings, solidarity and national unity to drive out discord and disagreement."[45] Further, he stated, "The future of Egypt depends on the cooperation and goodwill of all its citizens."[46]

Dealing with Exclusivist Texts, Attitudes and Practices in Islamic Tradition

However, there are also some Qur'ānic texts that have been used to support strongly exclusivist positions. For example, "True religion with God is Islam" (Q. 3:19); "Whoever seeks a religion other than Islam, it will not be accepted from him [or her]" (Q. 3:85); and "Today I have perfected your religion . . . and have chosen Islam to be your religion" (Q. 5:3).[47] Muslim exegetes of the Qur'ān and theologians generally understand "Islam" in these verses to mean the religion taught by Prophet Muhammad, while ignoring the more inclusivist understanding of "Islam" as surrendering to God.

Other texts that seem to suggest that Muslims should not be allies of the religious "other", should adopt attitudes of enmity and hatred towards them, or should engage in violence against them also exist in the Qur'ān. If such texts are taken in isolation, simply in a literal sense or used out of context, they might give the impression that Muslims should not develop good social relations with non-Muslims; that Muslims should develop feelings of hatred towards people of other religions; that Muslims should keep themselves separate from others; and that Muslims should be in constant conflict with people of other religions. How then should such texts be approached from an inclusivist perspective?

It is possible to examine such texts closely and to interpret them in a way that does justice to the greater number of inclusivist texts in the Qur'ān. Indeed, exclusivist texts must be read keeping in mind their original

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[41] Husein Kavazović and Gottfried Locher, "A Common Word About Our Common Good" (Sarajevo Message) (n.d.), accessed 25 July 2018, https://www.kirchenbund.ch/sites/default/files/media/pdf/pm_2017_16_-_sarajevo_message.pdf.

[42] Dar al-Iftā' Al-Misriyya, "Muslims Greeting Non-Muslims in Holidays and Exchanging Gifts: Is It Permissible?" (n.d.), accessed 25 January 2019, http://www.dar-alifta.org/Foreign/ViewFatwa.aspx?ID=5952.

[43] Albawaba, "Egyptians Bemused by Fatwa Allowing Muslim-Christian Friendships" (19 December 2016), accessed 25 January 2019, https://www.albawaba.com/loop/egyptians-bemused-fatwa-allowing-muslim-christian-friendships-916658.

[44] A Common Word, "A Common Word Between Us and You" (2007), accessed 25 January 2019, http://www.acommonword.com/the-acw-document.

[45] Al-Masry Al-Youm, "Grand Mufti Encourages 'Brotherly Warmth' on Christmas," *Egypt Independent* (27 December 2012), accessed 12 February 2019, https://ww.egyptindependent.com/grand-mufti-encourages-brotherly-warmth-christmas.

[46] Ali Gomaa, "Christian-Muslim Clash: We Must Build a Sectarian-Free Egypt," *OnFaith* (12 March 2011), accessed 12 February 2019, http://www.onfaith.co/onfaith/2011/03/12/christian-muslim-clash-we-must-built-a-sectaraian-free-egypt/651.

[47] Mohammad Hassan Khalil, "Salvation and the 'Other' in Islamic Thought: The Contemporary Pluralism Debate," *Religion Compass* 5 (2011): 511-519, 514.

context to obtain a sense of how they were understood and applied in the past and what the purpose behind each text might be. In today's context, such texts may need to be applied differently than they were previously. This essentially involves interpretation.

There are many approaches to interpretation; however, a contextualist approach is probably the most appropriate for developing an inclusivist attitude towards the religious "other". This approach recognises that some teachings of the Qur'ān are contextual in nature, meaning that there is a close relationship between such texts and the context of the original revelation (the early seventh century CE). A contextualist approach takes into account the social, political, economic, cultural, and intellectual contexts of early seventh century Arabia, in particular Mecca and Medina, which is the original context of the revelation of the Qur'ān. It also considers current contexts when interpreting Qur'ānic texts. The approach recognises that great Muslim scholars, theologians and jurists also lived in specific socio-historical contexts that influenced their understanding of a range of matters related to law and theology. In other words, they were heavily influenced by the contexts in which they lived.[48] Following this line of thinking, those who argue for a contextualist approach to Qur'ānic interpretation say that some teachings that may have been relevant to the early seventh century (and even subsequent periods) may be difficult and problematic today. For instance, they argue that significant changes have occurred in how society understands the notion of the equality of all, including people who follow different religions, today.

For contextualists, the relevant texts of the Qur'ān concerning relationships with the religious "other" need to be examined holistically today, rather than by taking specific verses in isolation from the rest of the Qur'ān. Asma Afsaruddin uses this approach, for example, in her interpretation of Qur'ān 2:143 and Qur'ān 5:66. The first verse refers to Muslims as a "middle" or "moderate" community, while the second verse describes certain Jews and Christians as "balanced" or "moderate." Drawing a connection between the terminology used in both verses, she concludes that, "[i]n these two verses taken together, the Qur'ān thus suggests that it is subscription to a common standard of righteousness and upright conduct that determines the salvific nature of a religious community"[49] Therefore, it is possible for certain groups of Jews and Christians to be "saved" in an Islamic sense, despite not following the religion of Islam.

Texts such as these (Q. 2:143 and Q. 5:66), for example, can be read "generously", keeping in mind fundamental Qur'ānic values like the common humanity of human beings, their unity in diversity, and the importance of respect for difference. Therefore, Muslims today may need to adopt interpretative strategies that help apply such principles. Emphasising verses that are more inclusivist will also help to dismantle some of the strongly exclusivist theological positions that developed early in Islamic tradition. For instance, Khalil argues that Qur'ān 3:19 and Qur'ān 3:85 (quoted previously) can be interpreted in a non-exclusive way by looking at the meaning of the terms "Islam" and "Muslims." While traditionally it has been assumed that these verses refer to the "religion of Muhammad" when they mention "Islam", the term can also be interpreted to mean the "universal surrender to God that characterises multiple religious traditions."[50] These verses can therefore be understood more inclusively. This will allow Muslims to adopt a softer position regarding other religions.

Given the wide variety of texts in the Qur'ān in relation to other religions and the religious "other", this kind of interpretative flexibility is important. The Qur'ān often does not provide black and white positions on such matters, which is precisely why Muslim theologians differ when it comes to these kinds of theological questions. The Qur'ān includes texts that can be used in an exclusive or inclusive manner. For instance, while it emphasises that there is no god but God, there is room to understand God in different ways. In fact, within Muslim schools of thought there are a range of different understandings of God. Some theologians emphasise God's transcendence; while others emphasise God's immanence. Some emphasise certain attributes of God; while others emphasise different ones. The point here is that the Qur'ān includes texts on many aspects of Muslims' beliefs that can be understood exclusively or inclusively. It is not appropriate to say categorically that only one reading is possible through the process of interpretation.

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[48] See, in particular, Abdullah Saeed, *Reading the Qur'ān in the Twenty-First Century: A Contextualist Approach,* London and New York, NY: Routledge, 2014 for further explanation.
[49] Asma Afsaruddin, "Exegesis of 'Moderation': Negotiating the Boundaries of Pluralism and Exclusion," *The Good Society* 16 (2007): 1-9, 3.
[50] Khalil, "Salvation and the 'Other' in Islamic Thought," 514.

However, while many peripheral issues may be negotiable, core beliefs are not, such as the belief that God is One (not two); that there is life after death; that Muhammad is God's final messenger; and that Islam, as submission or surrender to God, is the basis of religion. These are non-negotiable Islamic tenets for a Muslim. Therefore, Muslims may need to make a clear distinction between what can be diverged from and what cannot, despite the difficulties involved in distinguishing the two.

Conclusion

Most major religions have ideas, memories, texts, interpretations, and other resources that can be used to support an exclusivist or inclusivist view of other religions or people of other religions. Islam is no different. However, given our context today, discriminatory practices against people of other religions are no longer appropriate or practical in the modern world. Such practices will only lead to more tension and conflict within societies, some of which may eventually be highly destructive. The move to a more inclusivist view of the religious "other" is probably necessary for all societies that seek civil harmony and peaceful progress. Religious leaders and policy makers alike may have to emphasise that religious discrimination and oppression have no place in the modern world and that social cohesion requires moving beyond intolerant attitudes towards the religious "other", who must be considered part of the human family, and worthy of respect and of religious freedom. Such an inclusive view of the religious "other" does not necessarily mean ignoring the distinctions between religions, nor that exclusivist beliefs should be eliminated from religions. Adopting inclusivist views towards the religious "other" does not necessarily require believers to dilute their religious tenets or beliefs. Rather, it involves developing an ethic of interreligious engagement and relations that is inclusive in nature. For Muslims, such an approach is possible today, despite the dominant exclusivist positions developed in Islamic tradition. In fact, there is a wealth of resources in the Qur'ān that can be used to support such an approach, and there is a growing body of scholarship to support inclusivity.

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