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MORE THAN TOLERANCE: THE ISLAMIC CALL FOR INTERRELIGIOUS REVERENCE

“Call upon thy Lord with wisdom and goodly exhortation. And dispute with them in the most virtuous manner” (Qur’ān 16:125).

Tarik Quadir

Abstract

What is the Qur’ān’s stance towards religions other than Islam? May non-Muslims find salvation? If they do, as the Qur’ān seems to suggest in verses 2:62 and 5:69 explicitly, how does that make sense in light of verses which seem to deny this possibility for those who subscribe to any understanding of God which differs from that of Islam? We look for the answers mostly in the verses that are related to Judaism, Christianity, their adherents, religious diversity, and the ultimate criterion for salvation. We conclude that the Qur’ān takes a generous stance towards the other two Abrahamic traditions and their adherents; moreover, verses 2:62 and 5:69 are fully justified in view of the nature and function of the primordial human nature (fitrah), the heart, and the true meaning of submission to God. In short, the Qur’ān’s stance towards other religions goes well beyond mere tolerance.

Keywords: Divine Unity (*tawhīd*), Primordial Human Nature (*fitrah*), *Hanīf*, Heart, Submission.

Introduction

Since the dawn of the colonial period, unfortunately, Muslim traditional respect for non-Muslims and their religions have been gradually undermined by several factors: rise of scientism, materialism, nationalism, a puritanical reform movement in Arabia, military conquest followed by political domination, economic exploitation by the religious others, and the consequent suppression of the once prevalent inner dimension of Islam.¹ Further in recent years, certain self-styled Muslim groups have emerged who engage in cruel and abominable activities in the name of Islam.²

But the foundations of Islam are the same as they were before, and it is important that we do not forget what inspired Islamic civilization to establish a hitherto unprecedented tradition of religious tolerance until well into early modern times, though not without exceptions to that general rule. The present essay seeks to establish the premises for the revival of that tradition of religious tolerance. As we will see, for Muslims reverence for other religions is a religious imperative, a fact that is sadly ignored by many Muslims today as well as by all anti-Islamic polemicists.

¹ For a concise historical record of Muslim treatments of the religious others until the 19th century, see Reza Shah-Kazemi, *The Spirit of Tolerance in Islam*, (London: I.B. Tauris Publishers, 2012), 21-74; Muhammad Hasihim Kamali, *The Middle Path of Tolerance in Islam: The Qur'anic Principle of Wasatiyyah*, (New York: Oxford University Press), 16-58. As for the Prophet Muhammad's own example, see Muhammad ibn 'Abd Allah, *Six Covenants of the Prophet Muhammad with the Christians of his Time: The Primary Documents*, Edited by John Andrew Morrow (Covenants Press, 2015). For a classic account of how Islam spread across the world until the 17th century, see Thomas Arnold, *The Preaching of Islam: The History of the Propagation of the Muslim Faith* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1913).

² We have in mind Al-Qaeda which was formed in the 1980s to resist the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, followed by other similar groups which emerged after the "shock and awe" style attack against Iraqi forces in 1991 and the invasion of the country in 2003. As to the question why these militant groups use the language of Islam today, we might say that in countries where they fight and seek their recruits for the most part, Islam still has a powerful hold on the masses, and hence, these groups know that if their political ideologies are expressed in religious terms, however emptied of their traditional meanings, the ideologies cannot be suppressed easily. See Kamali, *Middle Path*, 165.

The foundational doctrine of the religion of Islam is Divine Unity (*tawhīd*), the Oneness of God/Truth/Reality beyond all forms or limitations.³ The ramifications of the Divine Unity in Islam offer a refreshing picture of the underlying Unity in Divine origin in the seeming multiplicity we observe in the universe. As we will see, the Qur'ān's portrayal of religious pluralism exemplifies this picture of Unity in diversity. Here 'Unity' does not necessarily imply that all religions are equally true as they exist today, but that all true religions originate in the One and the same God/Truth and have the same essential purpose, despite their differences. I argue that in conformity to that picture of Unity in diversity, Islam recognizes continuing validity of other religious paths that were established before it, or that non-Muslims can find salvation if not judged strictly by their adherence to the Islamic doctrine of God. This essay focuses on Islam's relationships with the other two Abrahamic religions, which the primary Islamic sources discuss extensively, but suggests that certain paths within Hinduism, Buddhism and many primal traditions may also fit into the picture of Unity in diversity.

This essay presents first the various unambiguous statements made in the Qur'ān and *Hadīth* regarding the existence of diversity in the universe and an underlying Unity, a conclusion that is largely uncontested. Next, I present what I have termed as the summary verses of the Qur'ān (5:48; 22:67; 2:62; 5:69) on the question of religious diversity which have been contested by many Muslim and non-Muslim detractors in the past and in modern times. We will see that the apparent meanings of the summary verses can be justified by many other corroborating verses. Finally, we discuss how perceived differences between Islam and other religions may be reconciled ultimately only by delving into the role of the *fitrah* (primordial human nature), the heart and the deepest meaning of 'submission' (*islām*), and thereby reaffirm the apparent meaning of the summary verses that promise salvation to non-Muslims.

³ Here I refer to 'Allah' as 'God' in the Islamic sense of the Creator (*al-Khāliq*), the Preserver (*al-Hāfiẓ*), the Truth/Reality (*Al-Haqq*), the One (*al-Wāhid/al-Ahad*), and the source of every virtuous qualities as indicated by His ninety-nine names revealed in the Qur'ān: the Just (*al-'Adl*), the Loving (*al-Wadūd*), the Peace (*al-Salām*), and so forth.

Universality of revelation and the essential message of Divine Unity

To begin with, diversity is an essential feature of God's creation. No two creations even within the same species are exactly the same. The Qur'ān stresses this point especially with regards to human beings and declares this feature as one of His signs: "*And among His signs is the creation of the heavens and the earth and the diversity of your tongues and colors. Indeed there are signs in this for those who know.*" (30:22) And again: "*O mankind behold, We have created you into nations and tribes so that you might come to know one another*" (49:13). At the same time: "*your creation and resurrection are as naught but a single soul*" (31:28) reminds us of the underlying unity.

Diversity reveals God's infinitude, His infinite creativity, which as God's signs – each known by distinctive contrast to all others – reveal His qualities. Uniformity in creation would limit our knowledge of God. This diversity also strengthens the position of each by preventing the dominance of any one type: "*And were it not for God's repelling people, some by means of others, the earth would have been corrupted.*" (2:251) That this balancing act prevents "corruption" is yet another affirmation that God intends diversity even in religions, as a means for His mercy.⁴

The Qur'ān declares that God has sent His messengers to every nation on earth, with messages in the language of the people they were sent to.⁵ Messengers sent for non-Abrahamic religions which have not been mentioned in the Qur'ān, such as Hinduism, Buddhism and the primal traditions cannot be excluded: "*Indeed We have sent messengers before thee. Among them are those whom We have recounted unto thee before, and messengers We have not recounted unto thee.*"⁶ (40:78; 4:164)

⁴ Even at the material, intellectual, and emotional levels, we can see the value of diversity in our own lives and in the natural world. We are dependent in numerous ways on other human and non-human entities found in the world. Likewise, countless ecological studies have made it irrefutable that diversity of species and variety within each of them makes the earth more resilient for the benefit of all lives.

⁵ For every community there is a messenger [from God]. (10:47) We have sent no messenger, save in the language of his people. (14:4)

⁶ According to a widely known *hadīth*, God had sent no less than 124,000 prophets

Not surprisingly, there are Qur'ānic verses which suggest that there is a foundational doctrine of Divine Unity contained in every authentic religion such that no religion deserves to be called a religion without that foundation: “*We sent no messenger before thee [O Muhammad], save that We revealed unto him, “Verily, there is no God but I; so worship Me!”* (21:25) And again: “*Naught has been said unto thee [O Muhammad] save that which has been said to messengers before thee.*” (41:43) The central importance of faith in the oneness of God and submission to Him was highlighted again when the Prophet Muhammad said, “Whosoever will meet God without associating anything in worship with Him will go to Paradise.”⁷ While following the example of the Prophet Muhammad is an indispensable element of the Islamic path, the Prophet’s statement here points to the ultimate goal of all authentic religions, despite their differences.

Faith in the Oneness of God or the Reality (*Al-Haqq*) in the ultimate sense has profound implications in every aspect of human life and thought. Whether one understands God as the Supreme Power or Being, or as the underlying all-encompassing Reality, Divine Unity implies that everyone and everything in all time and space is intimately related to every other. That understanding, at every degree of acceptance or experience, has a positive impact on how we interact with others – Muslims, non-Muslims, animals, plants, and all other things and beings. As the great Sufi poet and master Shaykh Mahmud Shabestari (d.1340) urged, “See One, say One, and know One; this summarizes the root and branch of True Faith.”⁸

No essential distinctions between God’s messengers, various revelations, and the religious paths

Immediately after recounting stories about the prophets Abraham, Lot, Issac, Jacob, Noah, David, Solomon, Ismael, Idris, Dhu’l-Kifl, Zacharia, John, Mary and Jesus in twenty-three consecutive verses

or messengers of God to the earth.

⁷ *Sahih Bukhari*, vol 1, Book 3, no. 131.

⁸ Mahmud Shabestari, *Gulshan-i raz*, trans. Robert Darr (Sausalito: Real Impressions, 1998), 879.

(21:69-91), the Qur'ān reminds us that as believers in the One and the same God, the followers of all these prophets form just one community: *“Truly this community of yours is one community, and I am your Lord. So worship Me [alone]!”* (21:92) In the same vein, in at least four verses revealed on different occasions (3:84; 2:136; 2:285; 4:152) the Qur'ān asserts that Muslims should make no distinction between God's messengers with regards to their spiritual perfection and with regards to the essential message of the revelations given to them. The Prophet Muhammad himself said, *“Do not give a prophet superiority over another [prophet];”* and again *“Say not I am better than Jonah.”*⁹ As Mawlana Jalāluddīn Rumī (d.1273) observes, *“Every prophet and every saint has his own method, But it all leads to God: All are one.”*¹⁰

Further, as countless Islamic scholars have observed, believing in all the “prophets” or “messengers” and the “Books” (Revelations) is an essential article of faith in Islam. Indeed, according to one frequently quoted tradition, when the Archangel Gabriel asked the Prophet what faith (*īmān*) was, he answered, *“Faith means that you have faith in God, His angels, His books, His messengers, and the Last Day...”*¹¹ Mere mention of the reality of the scriptures of other religions as God's revelations in numerous verses would be convincing enough of their great importance, but as if to emphasize their ongoing role, as the just cited *hadīth* does, the Qur'ān too highlights the need to believe in those former scriptures as an article of faith for Muslims: *“The Messenger believes in what was sent down to him from his Lord, as do believers. Each believes in God, His angels, His Books, and His messengers.”*(2:285); *“Whosoever does not believe in God and His angels and His Books and His messengers and the Last Day has wandered far astray.”* (4:136)

⁹ *Sahih Bukhari*, Book 41, no. 595; and Book 55, no. 624.

¹⁰ Jalāluddīn Rumī, *Mathnawī*, v. I, 3085-86, trans. William Chittick in *The Sufi Path of Love: The Spiritual Teachings of Rumi* (New York: SUNY Press, 1983), 136.

¹¹ The *hadīth* is quoted in Sachiko Murata and William Chittick, *The Vision of Islam* (St. Paul, MN: Paragon House, 1994), xxv.

The Qurʾān teaches not only that we have a common God who sent all the prophets and revelations with the same essential message, but also that every path is essentially about submission to God/Truth. For this reason, the Arabic terms *islām* and *muslim* are mostly used in the Qurʾān in the universal sense of ‘submission to God’ and ‘submitters to God’ respectively.¹² Today, the general import of the term ‘Islam’ to refer exclusively to the particular religion taught by the Prophet Muhammad would be alien in the context of the Qurʾān when it was revealed. To this day, the Islamic tradition sees all the prophets and their true followers prior to the advent of the Prophet Muhammad as *muslims*.¹³ Furthermore, whereas the Qurʾān uses the term *muslim* about seventy times, the sacred text uses the terms *muʾmin* (believer in God) or *muʾminūn* (believers) about a thousand times, and in numerous instances refers to other prophets and their followers as believers.¹⁴ The above discussion strongly suggests that the formal religion of Islam was the latest version of the only acceptable path of ‘*islām*’ (submission) to God/Truth; all true religions were united in their essential goal of recognizing Divine Unity and a path of submission (*islām*) to the Divine.¹⁵

¹² The term ‘*islām*’ derived from the Arabic root-verb ‘*aslama*’ (“he or she submitted”) means “submission”. One of the relatively rare instances in the Qurʾān where the term ‘*islām*’ is used in the specific sense of Islam, the religion taught and exemplified by Prophet Muhammad, is in verse 5:3: “*This day I have perfected for you your religion, and completed My Blessing upon you, and have approved for you as religion, Submission (Islām).*”

¹³ Enough of them are described as such in the Qurʾān (3:67; 5:111; 2:132; 2:128; 27:44; 5:44) to conclude that the scripture is referring to all of them. The terms used in translation to indicate that someone is a ‘*muslim*’ are ‘submitter’, or for I/we/they who ‘submit’ or ‘submitted’.

¹⁴ This phenomenon and many other verses and archeological evidences from the seventh century have led a most distinguished scholar such as Fredrick Donner to conclude that “Later Muslim tradition, beginning about a century after Muhammad’s time, came to emphasize the identity of Muhammad’s followers as Muslims and attempted to neutralize the importance of the many passages in which they are called Believers by portraying the two terms [Muslims and Believers] as synonymous and interchangeable.” Fredrick Donner, *Muhammad and the Believers: At the Origins of Islam* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010), 57.

¹⁵ The realization of the general import of the terms ‘*islām*’ and ‘*muslim*’ in the Qurʾān easily refutes any narrow sectarian meaning for verses 3:19 and 3:85 to suggest that the particular religion of Islam taught by the Prophet was the only true

Religious differences are essentially God ordained

While the Qur’ān emphasizes the essential underlying unity of religions, it acknowledges also that there are differences between religions, and then suggests how we should deal with the differences. Verse 5:48 revealed no earlier than 631 or later during the Prophet’s Farewell Pilgrimage in 632, summarizes the Qur’ān’s position on the question of religious diversity:

“And We sent down unto thee the Book in Truth, confirming the Book that came before it, and as a protector over it. So judge between them in accordance with what God has sent down and follow not their caprices away from the truth that has come unto thee. For each among you We have appointed a law and a way. And had God willed, He would have made you one community: but [He willed otherwise], that He might try you in that He has given you. So vie with one another in good deeds. Unto God shall be your return all together, and He will inform you of that wherein you differ.”

The verse starts out by declaring the Qur’ān’s role as the “protector” of the validity of essential messages of the previous scriptures. The Qur’ān’s role as the “protector” can be attributed immediately to the relevant context of several verses preceding 5:48. For instance, when some Jews had come to the Prophet hoping for more lenient judgment than what the Torah had prescribed for adultery because the guilty individuals were of high social standing, the Prophet opted for the Torah’s ruling.¹⁶ Further, the Qur’ān reminds that Jews ought to be mindful of what God had revealed in the Torah regarding bribery and retributions.¹⁷ Elsewhere, as though to preserve their

religion. Notably, devout Muslims and great scholars of Arabic, namely Muhammad Pickthal, Muhammad Asad, and Abdel Haleem have translated the term ‘*islām*’ in these two verses in English as ‘submission’ or ‘self-surrender’ only.

¹⁶ Maria Dakake, *The Study Qur’ān: A New Translation and Commentary*, eds. S.H. Nasr, C.K. Dagli, M.M. Dakake, J.E.B. Lumbard, and M. Rustom (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2015), Commentary for Qur’ān 5:40, 297. Henceforth, I will cite *The Study Qur’ān* as SQ only.

¹⁷ See Maria Dakake commentaries for 5:42-48 in SQ.

veracity, Islam confirms what Moses, Jesus and other prophets said and did in the Qur'ān and the *Hadīth*.¹⁸ Not surprisingly, verse 5:43 asks, “*How is it they (Jews) come to you [oh Muhammad] for judgment, when they have the Torah, wherein is God’s Judgment?*” In other words, Islam’s role was not to alter legal rulings for Jews but to confirm what God had revealed in the Torah for them. In the same vein, verses 5:44-45 speak of the Torah still as “a guidance and a light” and verses 5:46-47 repeat the same about the Gospel. Further, verse 5:47 states, “*Let the people of the Gospel judge by what God has sent down therein.*”

Then in verse 48:29 we find how Muslims themselves are likened to the image of believers in the Torah and the Gospel: “*You see them [Muslims] kneeling and prostrating, seeking God’s bounty and His good pleasure...This is how they are pictured in the Torah and the Gospel: Like a seed that puts forth its shoot, becomes strong, grows thick, and rises on its stem to the delight of its sowers.*” The verses cited above suggest strongly that according to the Qur'ān, the Torah and the Gospel continue to have much to offer and that the Jews and Christians should be judged according to their respective scriptures unless they become followers of the Prophet Muhammad.

The apparent meaning of the rest of verse 5:48 is inescapable: God has *willed* different religions – with different laws and ways – to exist in the world simultaneously.¹⁹ One of His rationales for the diversity is to test different segments of mankind according to what He has given them: their respective religions and circumstances, for instance. Towards the end of the verse, there is an implicit acknowledgement that it would not be easy for mankind to reconcile differences between religions. Hence, God promises to make us understand the differences when we return to Him. This promise may be interpreted to mean that religions cannot be one in this material domain, but they can be so only in Him, whether by our realizing in

¹⁸ The list includes, prominently, the miracles of Moses vis a vis the Pharaoh (7:107-133; 26:61-68;), the tablets given to Moses (7:145), many of Jesus’s miracles including his virgin birth (19:19), and the food sent down as a Divine sign for the event of the Last Supper (5:112-115).

¹⁹ For a particularly insightful contemporary commentary on verse 5:48, please see Osman Bakar, *Islamic Civilization and the Modern World: Thematic Essays* (Brunei: ubd Press, 2014), 41-49.

this life through spiritual progress the depth of God's infinitude and inscrutably diverse ways, or in our being with Him who is the Real (*al-Haqq*) in the Hereafter. In the meantime, God urges us "to vie with one another in doing good deeds."

That God has ordained different paths that were still capable of guiding is further confirmed by other verses with other nuances. For instance, verse 22:67 states: "*For every community We have appointed a rite (mansak) they are to perform; so let them not argue with thee over the matter. And call to thy Lord. Truly thou art following straight guidance.*" What was left implicit in 5:48, that is, not to dispute over the outer differences between religions, is made explicit in 22:67. God's urging of the Prophet to call people to God was likely to do with his being an extraordinary example of human perfection; but that would not negate the capacity of prior revelations and prophets also to guide one to God. Similarly, verse 2:148 states: "*Everyone has a direction toward which he turns. So vie with one another in good deeds. Wheresoever you are, God will bring you all together.*" This last verse contains a reminder of a message given in 5:48, and more explicitly in 22:67, that is, it would be more fruitful for us to invest our time and energy in doing "good deeds" than to enter into disputes over differences in religions, which may seem irreconcilable in the eyes of the vast majority. God promises to bring us all together, or help us realize the underlying purpose of the differences, no matter how far apart we might be in our understanding or realization. As we have done above, verses 5:48, 22:67 and 2:148 can be related to Judaism and Christianity by inference, but two other verses acknowledge the efficacy of these religions quite explicitly, and raise important questions.

Jews, Christians and others who believe in God and are righteous have nothing to fear

In two quite unambiguous and almost identical verses the Qur'an declares that not only the true adherents of all three monotheistic Abrahamic religions, but also "*whosoever believes in God and the Last Day and works righteousness*" will attain salvation.²⁰ The first

²⁰ If we see God as the Truth or the Real (*Al-Haqq*), 'the Last Day' as 'true justice'

verse (2:62) was revealed early in the Madinan period of the Prophet's mission, but in 622 even before the revelation of 2:62, the Prophet had drawn up what has been known as the Constitution of Madinah (*dustur al-Madinah*), a constitution for a society consisting of Jews, Muslims and polytheists. One of the articles of this constitution was as follows: "The Jews of the Bani 'Awf (the largest Jewish tribe of Madinah) are one community with the believers. The Jews have their religion and the Muslims have theirs."²¹ The next article in the constitution gives the same rights to the remaining eight Jewish tribes of Madinah. Shortly thereafter, verse 2:62 was revealed as if to affirm in part this model of a multi-religious society. Verse 2:62 states:

"Truly those who believe, and those who are Jews, and the Christians, and the Sabians— whosoever believes in God and the Last Day and works righteousness shall have their reward with their Lord. No fear shall come upon them, nor shall they grieve."

Being a divine promise and not a legal ruling or command, the above verse could not have been abrogated at a later date. Commenting on verse 2:62, the renowned Sunni scholar Abu'l Qāsim al-Qushayrī (d.1072) wrote, "The difference in paths, with the oneness of the origin, does not hinder the beauty of acceptance. Whoever affirms [God] the Real in His Signs, and believes in the truth and His Qualities of which He informs them –namely, the Truth and His Qualities –then the differences in religious paths [or laws, *shar'*] and the differences in the appellations of names do not impinge on the realization of the good pleasure [of God]."²² The most influential Shi'ite Qur'ānic commentator of the twentieth-century, Allāmah Tabātabā'ī (d.1981) held essentially the same view, as have

or 'final accountability', and 'righteous deeds' as deeds according to our inherent ability to discern the good and the bad (91:9), the scope of salvation can be extended to many religions beyond the Abrahamic ones.

²¹ Prophet Muhammad, "Constitution of Madinah" trans. A. Guillaume in *The Life of Muhammad – A Translation of Ishaq's Sirat Rasul Allah* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 1955), 231.

²² Abu'l Qāsim al-Qushayrī, *Lata'if al-Ishārāt*, quoted in Caner Dagli commentary of 2:62 in SQ, 31.

numerous other Sunni and Shiite scholars, especially those who were mystically inclined, throughout the last fourteen hundred years.²³

Verse 5:69 was revealed nearly ten years later and shortly before the Prophet's death. The timing of these revelations proves that during the most formative period of the first Islamic community, the often-contentious relationship with the Jewish tribes, including two attempts by them to kill the Prophet and at least one military conflict with Christian Byzantine forces and their allies at Mu'tah near the Syrian region towards the end the Prophet's mission, did not alter Islam's attitude towards the adherents of these and other religions that believed in one God and were righteous.²⁴

As in the case for verse 5:48, several verses immediately preceding 5:69 further appear to suggest that the Torah and the Gospel continue to possess the necessary guidance for the Jews and Christians respectively, even though they are invited to believe in the Qur'ān as well. Verse 5:66 states: *"If they [the People of the Book] had upheld the Torah and the Gospel and what was sent down to them from their Lord, they would have been given abundance from above and from below: Some of them are on the right course, but many of them do evil!"* That *"many of them [Jews and Christians] do evil"* is not a condemnation of the Torah or the Gospel because those that *"upheld the Torah and the Gospel and what was sent down to them....would have been given abundance from above..."* Some Islamic commentators believe that *"what was sent to them"* refers to some other books in the Old Testament besides the main book of Torah. The verse 5:67 urges the Prophet to convey to the People of the Book the messages that he has received. There does not seem to be any contradiction between 5:66 and 5:67 because if a prophet of God was at hand, it would certainly be a tremendous grace to be instructed directly by such a blessed one. Then verse 5:68 urges the Prophet to remind the People of the Book that the least that was

²³ See Allāmah Tabātabā'ī's commentary on verse 2:62: <https://www.al-islam.org/al-mizan-exegesis-quran-vol-1-allamah-tabatabai/suratul-baqarah-verses-62> [accessed on 14 June 2019]

²⁴ Regarding Jewish attempts to undermine the Muslims or to kill the Prophet, see Lings, *Muhammad*, pp 126-27, 160-61, 203-4, 215, 221-22, 261, 268. As for the cause of the conflict with Christian tribes at the Syrian border and consequently with the Byzantine forces, see *Ibid.*, 286-89.

expected of them was to believe in their own scriptures as many of them would rebel against what the Qur'ān urges people to believe: *"Say [O Muhammad] 'O people of the Book! You stand on naught till you observe the Torah and the Gospel, and that which has been sent down unto you from your Lord.' Surely that which has been sent down unto thee will increase many of them in rebellion and disbelief"* (5:68). My understanding of 5:68 is justified by the next verse (5:69) which is almost identical to 2:62: *"Truly those who believe, and those who are Jews, and the Sabeans, and the Christians – whosoever believes in God and the Last Day and works righteousness, no fear shall come upon them, nor shall they grieve (5:69)." In fact, verse 4:124 too supports in essence the promise of 2:62 and 5:69 with explicit reference to females as well as males: "And whosoever performs righteous deeds, whether male or female, and is a believer, such shall enter the Garden."* The term "believer" in this verse need not refer to Muslims alone as the very next verse reveals the universal import in the sense that Abraham was a *hanīf*, who followed the call of his primordial human nature: *"Who could be better in religion than those who direct themselves wholly to God, do good, and follow the religion of Abraham, who was true in faith?"* (4:125)

Many commentators now and in the past have tried to limit the application of verses 2:62 and 5:69 to a select group of Jews and Christians such as Salman al-Farsi, who converted to Islam from Christianity after he met the Prophet.²⁵ But if that were true, the verses in question would not mention believers (in the Qur'ān and the Prophet) and then list Jews, Christians and Sabeans, etc., as among the acceptable groups, because anyone who converts to Islam can no longer be called a follower of his or her previous faith. In fact, verses 3:113-114 convey essentially the same message as 2:62 and 5:69: *"There are some among the People of the Book who are upright, who recite God's revelations during the night...who believe in God and the Last Day, who order what is right and forbid what is wrong, who are quick to do the good deeds."* If in the just cited two verses the People of the Book are those who already converted to Islam then it

²⁵ Mahmoud M. Ayoub, *The Qur'ān and Its Interpreters* vol.1 (Albany: SUNY Press, 1984), 110-111.

is not possible that the Qur'ān would refer to them as the People of the Book.²⁶ But if those in question understood the truth of the Islam preached by the Prophet Muhammad but nevertheless continued to follow the way of Torah and Gospel which they possessed, then this verse also confirms the efficacy of those earlier scriptures. As for those Muslims who question if most Christians and Jews today can be compared with those whom the Qur'ān and the Prophet praise highly, they would do well to ponder the fact that most Muslims fall far short of the standard set by the Prophet or the Qur'ān.

In light of all the arguments presented above, it would seem impossible to deny that God has ordained several or even many religions, however different, with the same essential message of God's oneness; and that whosoever believes in God and does righteous deeds will attain salvation. However, many of the prominent classical commentators of the Qur'ān, especially those who were not mystically oriented, chose to deny the apparent meanings of the summary verses (2:62; 5:69, 5:48; 22:67) as we have presented above. Perhaps in a far less globalized and interdependent world when most religious communities lived in relative isolation from the others, their exclusivism was motivated in part by their perception that Islamic teachings and doctrines were extraordinarily persuasive, the religion's apparent success in providing meaning and purpose for most of its adherents, the emergence of its numerous saintly individuals, the unprecedented flowering of its mystical, intellectual, scientific and artistic traditions, and the rapid expansion of Islam's sphere of influence in all directions. If these classical commentators are to be questioned for their apparent disparagement of non-Islamic religions, their absolute confidence in Islam's exclusive privilege is also a kind of evidence of the tradition's validity as a way to God/Truth/Reality. However, such is the make-up of ordinary human nature that we witness the phenomenon of religious exclusivism within all classical traditions, as though it is an instrument of God's design meant to preserve the uniqueness of any given path. Yet, when compared with other major traditions,

²⁶ "The Qur'ān and *Hadīth* do not directly refer to a Muslim (i.e. follower of Muhammad) as one of the People of the Book or vice versa." See Caner Dagli commentary of 3:110 in SQ, 162.

Islam is able to provide more arguments against religious exclusivism from its foundational scripture itself, and the Islamic civilization has been relatively successful in dealing with religious diversity for most of its history. There is no doubt, however, that the exclusivist perspective has been strengthened by many verses in the Qur'ān which appear to cast doubt on the picture of Unity in diversity portrayed by other verses. Given the limitations of ordinary human perceptions and powerful social, political and cultural forces in all human societies, it is not difficult to misunderstand these 'contrary' verses, and hence the value of wisdom and enlightened guidance.

To begin with, a number of these so-called contrary verses reject the doctrine of Trinity and condemn the Christian view of Jesus as God or the 'Son of God,' and there is no way of denying these rejections. However, if all the relevant statements are considered, the Qur'ān does not reject Christianity as a whole; and incidentally, there are almost no criticisms in the sacred text of Judaism itself. But there are verses that are critical of certain Jewish or Christian tribes, including some that urge Muslims to fight back if gravely betrayed or mistreated by these tribes, and not because they were Jewish or Christian. I contend that these verses seem 'contrary' to the spirit of respect for other religions for lack of contextual analysis, ignorance of nuances, or due to mistranslations.²⁷ However, it is beyond the scope of this essay to respond to each of these issues adequately, though it would help to follow the basic guidelines outlined below in one's attempt to appreciate the Qur'ān's message on religious diversity.

General guidelines for interpreting the 'contrary' verses

In our attempt to understand the meaning of the other so-called contrary verses, we ought to know not only the original context and connotations of the words, but also keep in mind that any criticism of any group or individual in the Qur'ān is not just to inform the reader

²⁷ See footnotes 15, 24, and 36 for clarifications of some issues. *The Study Qur'ān* cited earlier provides great insights from forty-one classical commentaries for every verse of the Qur'ān. On the question of apostasy, please see Mohammad Hashim Kamali, *Shariah Law: Questions and Answers* (London: Oneworld Publications, 2017).

of a certain history of the past but also a pedagogical tool for teaching the right course of action for comparable thoughts, entities, emotions and circumstances in the present. The tales related in the Qur'ān are for the believers to reflect on and take the appropriate lessons from: “*So recount the stories, that haply they may reflect. Evil is the parable of the people who denied Our signs and wronged themselves.*” (7:176-177) Being aware of this pedagogic value of storytelling calls for the reader's introspection such that he or she takes the responsibility to rectify himself or herself of human tendencies criticized in any given tale, rather than use references to certain groups or individuals from another time and place, to unwisely discriminate against those who share similar religious or ethnic identity in the present. Again, as Rūmī (d.1273) warns:

“The mention of Moses has become a shackle on men's minds –

they think these stories happened long ago.

The mention of Moses serves as a mask: Moses' light is your own coin, oh good man!

Moses and Pharaoh are in your own existence –

You must seek these two adversaries in yourself.”²⁸

As it happens much too often, most people have only superficial knowledge of what the followers of other religions actually believe or practice. This situation often leads to gross simplification of the others' beliefs and practices, and engenders prejudices. As Muslims, we are entitled to trust the Qur'ān over the Torah and the Gospel on common concerns. But Muslims should note that in some cases, what the Qur'ān criticizes about Judaism and Christianity is not necessarily what *most* Jews or Christians believe or practice, but are perhaps meant as warnings against the potential for the development of particular deviant attitudes, however marginal in any era, in those communities or even among Muslims themselves. For instance, except for certain marginal and very small sects in the past,

²⁸ Rūmī, *Mathnawī* III, verses 1251-53, in William Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Love* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1983), 274.

Christians themselves have rejected the idea of God as “*the third of the three*,” an idea that the Qur’ān warns against (5:73). Likewise, very few Jews had ever seen Ezra as a ‘son of God’, a practice that the Qur’ān condemns (9:30).

With regards to all the verses where misunderstanding of the meanings can have serious consequences, it is imperative that we seek to understand their import from the wisest and most widely respected sages of the tradition such as the most celebrated of Islamic theologians, Abū Hāmid Al-Ghazzālī (d. 1111), or Rūmī, who not only had an outstanding textual and contextual understanding of the Qur’ān, but also possessed a higher faculty of perception through spiritual unveiling. In the same vein, the Qur’ān advises: “*Give glad tidings to My servants, who listen to the Word, then follow what is most beautiful of it, it is they whom God has guided, it is they who are the possessors of intellect.*” (39:17-18) In other words, to “*follow what is most beautiful of it*” is to practice the most virtuous of options availed in the Qur’ānic guidance as explained or exemplified by the “*possessors of intellect*,” the most perceptive and wise amongst us. We need the “*possessors of intellect*” because some of the greatest secrets of the Holy (*al-Quddūs*), the Inward (*al-Bātin*), and the Subtle (*al-Latīf*) are necessarily only *implicit* in His words: “*Vision comprehends Him not, but He comprehends all visions. And He is the Subtle, the Aware.*” (6:103) By the same token, we should bear in mind that what we say in this essay about Islam may not often match what an average Muslim says or thinks about particular issues discussed here, because neither Islam nor any other religion can be defined by the average adherent’s opinions, least of all those of the extremist militants. Islam must be understood in terms of what the Qur’ān and *Hadīth* say and how they have been interpreted over generations by the most respected sages of the community.²⁹ If we

²⁹ One incident which illustrates the need for wise interpreters is related to Ali ibn Abī Tālib (d. 661), the Prophet’s cousin and for all Muslims one of the greatest role models after Muhammad himself. When Ali was the Caliph and the Khārijite extremists argued against him by citing the Qur’ān, he famously said, “The Qur’ān is a book, covered between two flaps, and it does not speak. It should therefore necessarily have an interpreter [who is most qualified].” See ‘Alī ibn Abu Talib, *Nahjul Balagha: The Peak of Eloquence*, trans. Syed Ali Reza (New York: Tahrike Tarsile Qur’ān, 1996), 278.

do not understand the Qur’ān through the wise, we risk understanding many verses through the lenses of our own prejudices and thus go astray. As Rūmī warned:

“Many people have gone astray because of the Qur’ān:

With that saving rope, one group fell into the well.

The rope has no sin, oh quarrelsome man!

But you are unconcerned with traveling upward.”³⁰

Today, misinformation about Islam and Muslims at large, a great deal of which is politically motivated propaganda, abound. Under these circumstances, it would be unfair to label ordinary non-Muslims as “disbelievers” if they are not curious to know Islam and the Prophet Muhammad in depth or reject them outright. At a time before the Turks turned to Islam, and even when the Islamic civilization enjoyed great prestige and power, al-Ghazzālī was reluctant to call non-Muslims “disbelievers” unless they rejected the Prophet Muhammad after knowing him, his message and his miracles well.³¹ Even in our time, the famous Salafī scholars like Rashid Rida (d. 1935), Muqbil al-Wadī’i (d. 2001), the most widely influential contemporary Sunni Arab scholar Yusuf al-Qaradawi, and many others hold essentially the same view as al-Ghazzālī regarding non-Muslims who have not known about the Prophet Muhammad, his message and his miracles clearly and adequately.

By analogy of the theological doctrines of Christianity rejected by the Qur’ān, Islamic tradition may also reject parallels in other religious traditions such as in Hinduism, Buddhism and the primal traditions. However, we need to keep in mind that these traditions are not monolithic, and some of the paths within each of them subscribe to the existence of one ultimate and eternal formless Reality such as the *Brhman*, *Nirvāna* and the *Wakan Tanka* of the Sioux Native American Tribe. We are not by any means suggesting that Muslims should ignore the differences between *tawhīd* and theological

³⁰ Rūmī, *Mathnawī* III, verses 4188-89, in Chittick, *The Sufi Path*, 82.

³¹ Abū Hāmid al-Ghazzālī, *On the Boundaries of Theological Tolerance in Islam* (Faysal al-Tafriqa), trans. Sherman A. Jackson, ed. Nomanul Haq (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 126.

doctrines of other religions. From the Islamic perspective, faith in *tawhīd* is not comparable to that in the Trinity, Jesus, Buddha, Rama, or Krishna. However, the summary verses (5:48; 22:67; 2:62; 5:69) and numerous other supportive verses cited above, especially those that praise some Jews and Christians for their piety and goodness, and of God's promise of salvation for "*whosoever believes in God and the Last Day and works righteousness*" (2:62; 5:69; 4:122-4), suggest that when it comes to ultimate salvation, God looks at something more than the accuracy of the theological doctrines one subscribes to. This leads us to delve deep into those aspects of human reality that ordinary logic does not fully comprehend: our primordial nature (*fitrah*) and the non-physical aspect of the human heart.

The *fitrah* (primordial human nature), the Heart, and the Salvific Power of any Believer's Good Works

The stress in the Qur'ān and the *Hadīth* on cultivating the proper inner attitude – faith, God-consciousness (*taqwā*), or whole-hearted submission (*Islām*) – over outer activities is apparent in several verses. For instance: "*Neither their flesh nor their blood [of sacrificial animals] will reach God, but the reverence from you reaches Him.*"³² (22:37)

Furthermore, the Qur'ān declares: "*Only he will prosper who comes to God with a pure heart.*" (26:89). Indeed, we will see that if one's faith is defined primarily by the Godward orientation or the purity of one's *heart* as the Qur'ān suggests above, we can find a way to appreciate how in verses 2:62 and 5:69 God promises felicity even to 'non-Muslims'.

It is not difficult to imagine why God will judge each by the quality of his or her heart. Of all human features, the heart's potential for either corruption or nobility is the greatest. It is the heart where all the signs of God are manifest (41:53), it was the heart of the Prophet Muhammad where the Qur'ān was first revealed (2:97; 26:194), it was his heart that could perceive God's most exalted secret (53:11), it is to the heart of any believer that God may send tranquillity (48:4), and when one disbelieves it is a sign that his or

³² See also Qur'ān 9:19; 2:189; 2:177.

her heart has gone blind (22:46). The Prophet affirms this further in saying, “God does not look at your bodies or faces but He looks at your hearts only.”³³ In other words, salvation in Islam may not be determined by the *doctrine* of God one professes in words or by mouth, but by the state of a heart’s purity, awareness, or orientation.

The heart’s decisive status becomes apparent when we take a close look at what the Qur’ān says about our primordial nature (*fitrah*) and how this nature is the very essence of what we mean by a pure soul or heart. All Muslims are urged by God to submit themselves to Him, like the *hunafa* (*hanīf*, sing.), prime example of which was the Prophet Abraham who rejected the idolatry of his society and submitted to the one God of the heaven and the earth: “*Follow the creed of Abraham, a hanīf, and he was not one of the idolaters.*” (3:95) And again: “*Who could be better in religion than those who direct themselves wholly to God, do good, and follow the religion of Abraham, who was true in faith?*” (4:125)

Now, to be a *hanīf* is also to act according to our primordial or true human nature (*fitrah*), the innate true disposition of man, which is never altered but can only be shadowed by the corruption of the heart: “*Set thy face to religion as a hanīf, in the primordial nature (fitrah) from God upon which He originated mankind – there is no altering the creation of God; – that is the upright religion, but most of mankind know not.*”(30:30)

Accordingly, in the essential universal sense, the path of Islam is also referred to variously as *din al- hanīf* (religion of the *hanīf*), *din al-fitrah* (primordial religion), and *din al-haqq* (religion of truth).³⁴ Then we have another verse that beautifully portrays the covenant of all human souls with God prior to Adam’s descent to the earth, irrespective of the religion they choose later in their earthly sojourn:

“When your Lord took out the offspring from the loins of the children of Adam and made them bear witness about themselves, He said, “Am I not your Lord?” and they

³³ *Sahih Muslim*, Book 32, no. 6220.

³⁴ This understanding is the key to refuting any exclusivist understanding of verse 9:33 where many Muslims are inclined to understand the term ‘religion of truth’ (*din al-haqq*) in the exclusive sense of ‘Islam’ taught by the Prophet Muhammad. Also, see verse 6:161.

replied, "Yes, we bear witness." So you cannot say on the Day of Resurrection, "We were not aware of this." (7:172)

In light of the above, all human souls prior to their physical existence are in the state of their primordial nature (*fitrah*), or pure, in complete submission to God. The imprint of the *fitrah* continues in our souls during our journey in the world such that we cannot say at any point, "We were not aware of this." In the same vein, the Qur'ān declares that human beings know right actions from wrong ones innately: "By the soul and the One who fashioned it and inspired it as to what makes it iniquitous or reverent." (91:8-9)

The *fitrah* being the primordial human nature, is made in the image of God – as per the famous *hadīth* "God made Adam in His own image" – and thus it is the incorruptible fountain of the traces of divine qualities which are the roots of intelligence and virtues in the human.³⁵ By the same token, we must imagine the *fitrah* to be one in meaning as what al-Ghazzālī called "the real essence of man," "the subtle tenuous substance" of the soul or the non-physical inner heart.³⁶ When clouded by ignorance, the inner heart of an unbeliever is blind to spiritual realities and *tawhīd* known and transmitted by the *fitrah* (22:46).

In contrast to those whose hearts are made opaque by ignorance, those who can 'see' clearly are those who "believe and do righteous deeds" (40:58). Indeed, the Qur'ān usually defines true believers as those who not only believe, but also do righteous deeds (2:62; 5:69; 4:122; 4:124; 2:148; 3:114). For instance, the Qur'ān makes plain that the true believer is one who believes in God "and who gives wealth despite loving it, to kinsfolk, to orphans, the indigent, the traveler, beggars, and for the [ransom of] slaves; and performs the prayer and gives alms; and those who fulfill their oaths

³⁵ Qur'ānic verses that speak of the human being as God's vicegerent (2:30; 6:165; 10:14), as one who was taught all the names (2:31), and the one into whom God breathed of His spirit (15:29), all point to the same fundamental reality. Likewise, God who is Most Beautiful (23:14) created the human in the most beautiful form (95:4).

³⁶ Abū Hāmid al-Ghazzālī, *Marvels of the Heart*, trans. Walter J. Skellie (Louisville: Fons Vitae, 2010), 6-10, 39.

when they pledge them, and those who are patient in misfortune, hardship, and moments of peril....”(2:177)

Furthermore, if a believer must believe in the same God as Muslims do to warrant benefit from good works, the Qur’ān seems to suggest that non-Muslim believers already fulfill that criterion, even if their doctrine of God do not match what is meant by *tawhīd*: “*There are some among the People of the Book who are upright, who recite God’s revelations during the night...who believe in God and the Last Day, who order what is right and forbid what’s wrong, who are quick to do the good deeds.*” (3:113-114) Even though of the other two Abrahamic religions, the Qur’ān is mostly critical of the Christian doctrines regarding God, the sacred text states: “*thou wilt find the nearest of them in affection toward those who believe to be those who say, ‘We are Christians.’ That is because among them are priests and monks, and because they are not arrogant.*” (5:82) Obviously, the Qur’ān is praising “*priests and monks,*” the very leaders of Christians, for virtuous conduct even though their doctrine of God is quite flawed from the Islamic perspective. And again: “*If God did not repel some people by means of others, many monasteries, churches, synagogues, and mosques, where God’s name is much invoked, would have been destroyed.*” (22:39)

Then, obviously, there are numerous levels of faith in God, from very weak to very strong.³⁷ In fact, because of the unceasing function of the *fitrah* which forever inclines towards God/Truth, we can rarely find any human being who is completely devoid of any faith in God or in a Transcendent Reality. Fortunately, the Qur’ān promises reward even for “*a mote’s amount of good*” (99:7) and a famous *hadīth* affirms that “*anyone who has faith equal to even a*

³⁷ To begin with, there is a difference between believing with the mind and believing with the heart. The faith of the mind is not as deep as the faith of the heart; and nobody knows the heart except God (53:32). This is illustrated by the incident of a certain Bedouin tribe who after their formal declaration of faith in Islamic doctrine (There is no god but God, and Muhammad is the Messenger of God), wanted to be considered equal to those who had already followed the Prophet through all the hardships for years. God sent a new revelation pointing out that the new converts were missing the inner submission which was superior to the outer submission: The Bedouin say, “We believe.” Say, “You believe not. Rather, say, ‘We have submitted,’ for belief has not entered your hearts (49:14).

grain of barley will be taken out of Hell” eventually.³⁸ So we may assume that “*whosoever believes*” (2:62; 5:69), from the one with an atom of faith to the one with absolute certitude, include not only most Muslims but also most non-Muslims, and when such a human being engages in righteous deeds, he or she is rewarded.

It is universally true also that every righteous or virtuous deed brings at least some degree of inner satisfaction or peace to the doer. In religious terms, such deeds bring one closer to God who is Peace (*al-Salām*). If it is an act of justice, it brings one closer to God who is the Just (*al-‘Adl*). Righteous deeds are also often reciprocated with love from those who are relieved by them from various hardships; and directly, because “*God loves those who do good.*” (2:195) As the Qur’ān promises: “*On those who believe and work deeds of righteousness, God Most Gracious bestows Love.*” (19:96) After all, in the Qur’ānic perspective, God is the source of Love (*al-Wadūd*) (11:90; 85:14) as well as all other virtuous qualities. In other words, for the vast majority of Muslims and non-Muslims, righteous deeds incline their hearts to God who is the source of all virtues. Indeed, the Qur’ān concurs: “*Truly God is with the virtuous.*” (29:69) For one who performs virtuous deeds even with an atom of faith, this movement of the heart towards the qualities of God, even if one does not perceive it as such, must be the true measure of one’s faith. As Mawlana Rumī observed: “Prayer differs according to religion, but faith does not change by religion. Its states, its focus, and so forth, are unchanging.”³⁹ Obviously, by the term ‘faith’ Rumī here referred not to outward practices or utterances, but to the state of one’s heart or its inclination towards God.

The discussion above begs the question, “Do doctrinal differences not matter, especially if this involves a compromise of the all-important doctrine of *tawhīd* (God’s absolute oneness)?” Yes, it must matter so far as the correctness of a doctrine helps us draw closer to God, but the state and the intention of a heart must matter more because “*Only he will prosper who comes to God with a pure*

³⁸ *Sahih Bukhari*, Book 2, hadīth number 42.

³⁹ Jalaluddin Rumi, *Signs of the Unseen: The Discourses of Jalaluddin Rumi*, trans. W.M. Thackston (Boston: Shambala, 1999), 33.

heart.” (26:89) and as we have seen earlier, the Prophet affirmed that God looks at our hearts only.

To clarify our argument further, we need to see the distinction between the Reality of God/Truth and doctrines about Him/It in order to drive home the significance of the role of the *fitrah* and the heart. To be sure, the Reality of God is not a doctrine; the correct doctrine can do no more than point the way to the Reality of God. *Tawhīd* is not God; it points to the Reality of God in the Islamic view. It is the difference between knowing the direction to a destination and the destination itself.

Even though a perfect doctrine is of tremendous value for orienting the mind and the heart towards God, the emphasis on the correct doctrine alone raises several questions. How much do most Muslims understand the implications of the doctrine of *tawhīd*? Even if they understand them with their mind, how deeply have these entered their hearts? As Rumī observed: “Yes, one may be a “believer” and yet not know what one believes in, as a child believes in bread without knowing what it is he believes in.”⁴⁰

Furthermore, it is possible to imagine the faith of one’s heart and longing for God to be stronger than one’s clarity at the doctrinal level, because the *fitrah* – present in every human being irrespective of his/her professed path – with its inherent awareness and longing for the one and only God/Truth, can rarely be totally hidden from the heart by doctrinal flaws. By the same token, doctrinal clarity, while helpful, does not guarantee that the longing of one’s heart for God will be equally strong. If doctrinal perfection alone were sufficient, all who *profess* to follow the religion of Islam would be guaranteed salvation in Islam. On the contrary, the Qur’ān discourages the kind of group that privileges one religious group as a whole over another; God will judge each individual according to what is given to him or her (5:48), and none will suffer for the fault of another (53:18). The criterion for salvation is the submission of one’s self to God which is tantamount to purifying one’s heart or drawing as near as possible to the qualities of God. The Qur’ān makes this plain in refuting some People of the Book who had been insisting that one had to follow either Judaism or Christianity to find favor with God: *And they said,*

⁴⁰ Ibid, 32.

“None will enter Paradise unless he be a Jew or a Christian.” Those are their hopes! Say, “Bring your proof, if you are truthful.” (2:111) Nay, whosoever submits his face to God, while being virtuous, shall have his reward with his Lord. No fear shall come upon them; nor shall they grieve.” (2:112) The above two verses do not repudiate Judaism or Christianity in favor of Islam. Rather, they are a warning against religious chauvinism because elsewhere the Qur’ān warns that salvation is not determined solely by one’s membership in the Muslim community, just as it is not attained merely by being a member of the People of the Book: “For those who believe and perform righteous deeds, We shall cause them to enter Paradise...It will not be according to your desires nor the desires of the People of the Book.” (4:122)

Even though the Prophet Muhammad saw Islam as a perfect religion, he warned Muslims of the hidden *shirk* that could bring their downfall:⁴¹ “The most frightening thing that I fear for my community is associating others with God. I do not mean to say that they will worship the sun, or the moon, or idols. I mean they will work for other than God with a hidden desire.”⁴² In other words, if a believer’s heart is preoccupied with worldly desires, God is not the sole object of his worship and the light of the *fitrah* in him remains relatively blocked. Not many Muslims can honestly say that they are free from any hidden *shirk*. In light of the strong possibilities of the hidden *shirk* and an imperfect understanding of *tawhīd*, the Qur’ān’s observation “they did not measure God with true measure” (22:74; 6:91; 39:67) applies not only to idolaters but to people of all faiths, including Muslims.

Even if the non-Islamic doctrines about the reality of God are flawed, it is possible to imagine a non-Muslim with a heart full of love for God and many Muslims who profess *tawhīd* but have hearts preoccupied with worldly ambitions (hidden *shirk*), and vice versa. The desire for worldly gains can make a huge difference, because ultimately it is the degree of purity of one’s heart that determines the outcome. Thus, Rumī observed that at the level of the heart religions

⁴¹ “Hidden *shirk*” (associating others with God in worship) is to follow one’s caprice (*hawā*) (25:43; 28:50) or to worship with the intention to please other than God.

⁴² Cited in *Vision of Islam*, 51; Ibn Maja, *Zuhud*, 21.

do not determine true affinity between people:

“With those with whom no intimacy exists, a man is in prison.

There are many Hindus and Turks with the same tongue [of intimacy],

And oh, many a pair of Turks, strangers to each other.

Hence the tongue of intimacy is something else,

It is better to be of one heart than of one tongue.

Without speech, without oath, without register,

A hundred thousand interpreters from the heart arise.”⁴³

The whole issue about the role of the heart beyond doctrines and rituals is brilliantly illustrated by the following episode in Rumi’s *Mathnawī*:

“Moses saw a shepherd on the way, who was saying, “O God who chooses whom Thou will

Where art Thou, that I may become Thy servant and sew Thy shoes and comb Thy head?

That I may kiss Thy little hand and rub Thy little foot...O Thou to whom all my goats be a sacrifice ...

“Hark!” said Moses, “you have become very depraved; indeed, you have not become a Muslim...

What babble is this? What blasphemy and raving? Stuff some cotton into your mouth!...

The shepherd said, “O Moses, thou has closed my mouth and thou has burned my soul with repentance.”

He rent his garment and heaved a sigh, and hastily turned his head towards the desert and went....

⁴³ Mawlana Rumi, *Mathnawī*, trans. S.H. Nasr, *The Pilgrimage of Life and the Wisdom of Rumi* (Oakton, VA: The Foundation of Traditional Studies, 2007), 96-97.

A revelation came to Moses from God – “Thou has parted My servant from Me

Did thou come as a prophet to unite [people with Me] or did thou come to sever?...

I have bestowed on every people a special way of acting: I have given to every people a peculiar form of expression.

In regard to him it is worthy of praise, and in regard to thee it is worthy of blame...

I look not at the tongue and speech; I look at the inward state

I gaze into the heart to see whether, it is lowly, though the words uttered are not

Because the heart is the substance, speech only the accident; ...

Light up a fire of love in thy soul, burn thought and expression away!”⁴⁴

The shepherd’s conception of God’s reality and his manner of worship definitely amounted to *shirk* from the Jewish and the Islamic perspectives, and yet God listened to him because his heart yearned for Him and worshipped Him as he knew best. Rumī gives preference, as the Qur’ān and the Prophet Muhammad do, to the “heart” over the “speech.” The heart may not be idolatrous even if the speech and outer action may be. In other words, one’s faith essentially refers to the degree of orientation of one’s heart to God/Truth without knowing precisely what That is, such that words and acts chosen to express the inner orientation can be erroneous.

Since the *fitrah* is the unchanging essence of the human reality, when the inner heart is purified and is thus transparent to the *fitrah*, the heart’s state takes precedence over any outer actions that may not conform to that essence. Outwardly, yes, “*Truly God forgives not*

⁴⁴ Jalaluddin Rumi, *Mathnawī*, Vol. II, verses 1720-1760, translated by Reynold Nicholson, ed. M. Birekul, H. Su, and A. Karadeniz (Konya Municipality, 2010).

that any partner be ascribed unto Him.” (4:48) which we can judge by our ears and eyes, but *“Judgment belongs to God alone, He relates the Truth, and He is the best of deciders,”* (6:57) because only God knows the actual state of the soul or the inner heart. Hence, *“Do not deem yourself purified, He knows best the God-conscious.”* (53:32) As another *hadīth* warns, *“Verily a man may seem to the people as if he were practising the deeds of the people of Paradise while in reality he is among the people of Hellfire, and another might seem to the people as if he were practising the deeds of the people of Hellfire while in reality he is among the people of Paradise.”*⁴⁵

Conclusion

The Qur’ān takes a very generous stance towards Judaism, Christianity, and their adherents. Furthermore, even if non-Islamic doctrines of God/Truth do not perfectly match the Islamic doctrine of *tawhīd*, a non-Muslim may still have a sufficiently pure heart inclined towards God/Truth to merit God’s Mercy and salvation. Based on our discussion, it would be reasonable to assume that on the basis of the possible relative purity of a non-Muslim’s heart and not by his or her professed doctrine of God/Truth, God promises his or her salvation in verses 2:62 and 5:69 of the Qur’ān:

*“Return to yourself, oh heart! For from the heart a hidden road can be found to the Beloved. If the world of the six directions has no door, then come to the heart – you can make a door.”*⁴⁶

⁴⁵ *Sahih Bukhari*, 2742.

⁴⁶ Rumi, *Diwan* 685-86, in Chittick, *Sufi Path*, 37.

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