

Religious Pluralism And The Qur'an

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Introductory Remarks

Religious diversity is as old as human history. From ancient cave dwellers to the societies of the great empires of China, India, Iran, Egypt and Babylon, religion as the human quest for the divine manifested itself in a variety of languages, devotional practices, myths and rituals. In reality, in these and myriad other cultures, religion has been the fountainhead of civilization.[2]

Religion may also be regarded, at least in its literary, artistic and philosophical manifestations, as the product of culture. Thus the plurality and diversity of religions is a reflection of the plurality and diversity of cultures and civilizations. In this essay, I will first define pluralism religiously and philosophically. I will then attempt to contextualize it within the history of the civilizations of the Middle East. I will finally discuss religious pluralism in the Qur'an. I am convinced that the Qur'anic worldview, with its emphasis on the diversity of human racial and cultural identities and man's innate capacity to know and have faith in God, recognizes the diverse religions of humankind as divinely preordained ways to this ultimate goal.[3]

What is Pluralism?

In its lexical usage, pluralism signifies plurality, as opposed to singularity. Plurality, moreover, implies difference, and hence diversity. Theologically, the expression religious pluralism must be distinguished from religious exclusivism on the one hand, and religious inclusivism on the other. While the proponents of these two rival ideologies to religious pluralism affirm it as a religious phenomenon, they in fact negate, or at least, seek to render it theologically meaningless.

Exclusivism denotes the view that the truth, and consequently the way to salvation, is only one. It is furthermore limited to only one true religion, and is the prerogative of one and only one faith-community. Exclusivism has moral, theological and philosophical implications. Philosophically, it confines the truth to one belief and value system; while morally and theologically, it ultimately condemns all other faith-communities to manifest error in this world and to perdition in the world to come.

In the three Middle Eastern, or so-called Abrahamic religious traditions, exclusivism, in one form or another, remains a fundamental tenet. In the Jewish tradition it is expressed in the doctrine of the chosen people, with its moral, political and theological implications. To be sure, ancient prophets spoke against an exclusivist nationalism that abhorred other nations and condemned them to a state of total insignificance in the sight of God. Jewish exclusivism has remained largely an exclusivism of indifference to what may be termed gentile religions and belief-systems.

The well-known exclusivist Christian doctrine formulated by the North African theologian Cyprian in the third century, "salus extra ecclesiam non est" (outside the Church there is no salvation)[4] characterized the theology of the Catholic Church at least till the Second Vatican Council. But the Vatican Council adopted an inclusivist theology which denied real validity to religions other than Christianity, as we shall presently see.

The Qur'anic assertion, "Anyone who desires a faith other than *islām*, it shall not be accepted of him; and in the hereafter he shall be among the losers,"[5] expresses an exclusivist view of religion, but only if the term *islām* is taken narrowly to refer to Islam as an institutionalized religion. If, however, it is taken to signify a human attitude of total submission (*islām*) to God, then we are talking not about religious institutions, but about an ideal relationship between God and human beings that transcends all religions, including Islam.[6]

The opposite of exclusivism is inclusivism. Inclusivism is a modern and mainly Western humanistic Christian theological concept which takes many forms. One of these forms is the belief that even though my religion is the only way to salvation, moral women and men of good conscience, even if they be atheists, will attain salvation by being anonymous members of my faith-community .

The well-known German theologian Karl Rahner [1904-1984] coined the term "anonymous Christians" to formulate a theology of Christian inclusivist salvation.[7] He echoed in this the Second Vatican Council declarations *Nostra aetate* and the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (*lumen gentium*) . The Constitution states:

Those also can attain to everlasting salvation who, through no fault of their own, do not know the gospel of Christ or his Church, yet sincerely seek God and, moved by grace, strive by their deeds to do his will as it is known to them through the dictate of conscience. [8]

Rahner argued for the validity of his theology of universal salvation through the atoning death of Christ on the ground that it is in virtual agreement with the theology of Vatican II. But while Vatican II presupposes faith in God, however erroneous such faith may be, Rahner made everlasting salvation available to all decent men and women of good conscience, even if they are atheists. It must be observed that his theology of salvation ultimately goes against the Christian doctrine of original sin and the need for redemption and atonement through faith in the cross of Christ.

Religious pluralism, as has already been observed, is the recognition of the multiplicity and diversity of religions as a natural or divinely willed phenomenon. Yet if religious pluralism is to serve as a meaningful framework of constructive dialogue among the followers of the various religions, all religions, or at least all theistic religions, must be recognized as legitimate ways to the Truth or Ultimate Reality. It must be further agreed that the followers of every religion have the right to regard their own faith as the true one for them. Since, moreover, the need for everlasting salvation in some form is common to at least all the major religions, no one way should be privileged as the only way to salvation.

It may be argued that acceptance of the equal validity of all the major religions would ultimately lead to religious relativism, or the relativity of the Truth. Some have therefore posited a super-religion as a unifying spiritual vision of all religions. This view is, in the final analysis, another form of inclusivism, which reduces all religions to one imaginary ideal faith.[9] That God spoke to every community or nation in its own language, through a long list of prophets and sages, is frequently asserted in the Qur'an and the New Testament.[10] All the major religions hold that the Truth is One, and it transcends human understanding. Yet since the goal of all religions is to seek the Truth, they must all be ways to that goal, for "to God do we belong, and to Him we shall return." (Q. 2:156).

Religious Pluralism In Ancient Iran And The Mediterranean Basin

The period from the eighth to the third century BCE can be regarded as the axial age in religious and philosophical creativity in greatly separated areas around the then known world.[11] It witnessed the rise of Chinese philosophy in its Taoist, Confucianist and other forms. In India, during this period of spiritual growth, the great sages of the Upanishads formulated an enduring mystical monistic philosophy which supplanted the somewhat crude Vedic religion. In India too the Buddha “set the wheel of dharma turning” with his moral philosophy of suffering and salvation, and challenged the vast Hindu pantheon with its authoritarian priesthood.

Ancient Israel saw the rise of the prophetic movement with its messianic hopes and ideas of universal salvation. Voices like those of Amos, Mica, Jeremiah and others called for social justice and the worship of YHWH as the sovereign Lord of all nations.

The first man of authority to recognize and promote religious pluralism was Cyrus the great, founder of the Persian empire in the fifth century BCE,. Cyrus founded an empire that stretched from Iran to Central Asia to Egypt, Iraq, Syria-Palestine, and even into Europe. This great imperial domain was unrivaled until the rise of the Muslim empire following the death of the Prophet Muh}ammad, and especially after the phenomenal expansion of CE 711.

Cyrus sought to honor all the deities of his realm. He allowed his foreign subjects to return to their lands, worship their gods and pray for his success and prosperity. He thus gave permission to the Judean exiles to return to Judea and rebuild the Jerusalem Temple of YHWH their God. This earned him the honor of being called by the author of II Isaiah YHWH’s servant or messiah.[12]

The next empire builder was Alexander the Great [BCE 356-323]. Alexander was not only a great conqueror, but also a philosopher. According to classical Islamic hagiography, he was even a prophet.[13]

Alexander may be regarded as the father of the classical civilizations of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. With Alexander we witness a conscious attempt to impose a single civilization framework on at least the Mediterranean basin, including western Europe, the Middle East and north Africa. This was the Hellenistic civilization, with its rich religious and philosophical heritage, in particular its Platonic and Aristotelian philosophical and scientific worldview.

Within this Hellenistic framework, the Mithraic mystery cult, as well as the inherently dualistic worldview of the religions of ancient Iran, which was expressed in the eternal struggle between good and evil, light and darkness, became a powerful Gnostic movement which threatened and deeply influenced early Christianity. The influence of these Gnostic philosophies on all three monotheistic religions of the Middle East is undeniable. Less significant in the long run were the mysteries of Isis and Osiris in Egypt, and the Delphic and other Greek mysteries which flourished during this culturally and religiously formative period of Western civilization.

It may be argued that the axial age, mentioned above, culminated with Alexander the Great. With Alexander we see the beginning of a civilizational synthesis which began with the rise of Christianity and Manichaeism and culminated with Islam. Therefore, the period from Alexander to Mu}ammad may be viewed as another seminal epoch in the formative history of the civilizations of Judaism, Christianity and Islam.

Jesus and Paul rejected the particularistic Jewish faith to which they both belonged. The new universalistic faith which they founded constituted a sharp contrast with the traditional narrow Jewish view of religion and culture. From the beginning, moreover, Christianity challenged, and soon supplanted, Greek wisdom and Egyptian religiosity.

Christianity did not eliminate Greek philosophy, but absorbed it as the framework of its own theology. As for Hellenized Egyptian and other mystery cults, they survived in Christian hagiography and popular piety. Both Egypt and the East, most likely Iran, are represented in the account of the nativity of Jesus. For instance, the wise men of the East who came seeking the divine child, the new king, are believed to have been Magian or Zoroastrian priests. This account was meant to affirm that the humble child, placed in a lowly manger, was Christ the King.[14]

Religion has always been associated with power and humility. In Christ the King who was laid in a humble manger, the reconciliation was finally achieved between the two warring Egyptian gods Horus and Seth, represented by the ox and the donkey respectively. Through this Hellenistic synthesis, moreover, Christianity rendered the universalistic vision of the ancient Hebrew prophets a message of salvation for all of humankind.

It is noteworthy that the first post-Christian religious authority to recognize the plurality and unity of religions was another Iranian, Mani the Babylonian prophet. Mani, who presented yet another vision of the unity of all religions in the third century CE, failed to actualize this vision in a new religious system. He failed because Manichaeism, which was yet another Iranian dualistic faith, denied the unity of the creation under one sovereign, all-powerful and wise God. This unity of creation under a supreme divine being was essentially the message of Zarathustra, the prophet of ancient Zoroastrianism, of which Manichaeism was a later corruption. This message was also propagated by many Greek sages, particularly Plotinus. It may in fact be argued from an Islamic point of view that Plotinus, with his mystical faith in the One Divine source of Being, was the prophet between Jesus and Muhammad. This is not to say, however, that Mani's explanation of good and evil was quickly forgotten. On the contrary, Manichaeism exerted a deep and lasting influence on the religious thought and piety of Europe and the Middle East.

Mani proclaimed a universal religion of light and salvation. He sought to present himself as the final messenger of God and his religion as a synthesis of Zoroastrianism, Buddhism and Christianity. Yet ironically this great religious genius had a tragic end, and his religion came to be regarded as a great heresy by both Christian and Muslim theologians and heresiographers.[15]

Religious Pluralism In The Qur'an

Among all the scriptures of the theistic religions the Qur'an is unique in that it sets its worldview within the context of divine Oneness and human diversity, including the plurality of religions. Furthermore, it regards religious diversity as one of the signs (*aya>t*) of God, second in importance to the "creation of the heavens and earth." [16] The Qur'an does not directly and categorically deny the validity and truth of any religion. Rather it is concerned with individuals and nations and their faith (*Imām*), or rejection of faith (*kuf'r*) in God, witnessing (*shahādah*) to His Oneness (*tawhīd*) and acceptance of humankind's accountability before Him on the Day of Judgment.

The Qur'an presents its view of religious pluralism in a somewhat progressive manner. In a preliminary statement it simply enumerates the religions known to the Prophet's listeners and leaves the question of their truth for God to judge on the Day of Resurrection. It states: "Surely those who have accepted faith [that is the Muslims], those who are Jews, the Sabaeans, the Christians, the Magians and those who have associated other gods with God, God will judge among them on the Day of Resurrection. God is witness over all things." [17] It should be observed that the verse under consideration first lists the legitimate religions and then mentions those who associate other beings or things with the worship of God alone as people without a legitimate religion.

The Qur'an lays down four basic principles, which are necessary for the truth-claim of any religion. The first is that a true religion must be enshrined in a divinely revealed scripture or

sacred law (*sharī'a*). Secondly, it must affirm God's absolute Oneness (*tawhīd*). Thirdly, it must profess active faith in God and the last day. Finally, it should foster righteous living (*ihsān*). On the basis of these four principles, the Qur'an affirms the truth of the faith of Muslims, Jews, Christians and Sabaeans.[18]

It is to be observed that although a scripture or divinely revealed book is of the utmost importance for the truth of a religion, it is not the sole criterion by which a religious community is to be judged. While the Jews, Christians and Muslims are people of the Book, the Sabaeans may not have had a scripture. Nor is it clear that they were true monotheists, as they are reported to have venerated the stars. They did acknowledge a divine creator, on the basis of which the Qur'an includes them among the people of faith in God. Hence, it may Phenomenologically be concluded that the Sabaeen faith may spiritually prefigure the truth in the non-prophetic wisdom religions, such as Hinduism, Buddhism and the religions of China and Japan.

It may be further argued that the Qur'an affirms faith in any book that God has or may have revealed.[19] This means that, like the plurality of religions, the plurality of scriptures is open ended. The Zoroastrians, for instance, under Muslim rule collected an impressive canon of sacred books, which they claimed goes back to their ancient prophetic sages.[20]

It is noteworthy that the Prophet himself bestowed on them the status of the people of the Book in his command, "Follow in dealing with them the Sunnah (practice) of the people of the Book." [21] Likewise, the famous young Umayyad general Muḥammad b. al-Qāsim extended this status to the Hindus, following his conquest of the Indus Valley in 711.

The Qur'an claims to have been revealed as a book confirming all previous scriptures, but particularly the Torah, the Psalms and the Gospel. Thus the scriptural requirement is understood, and therefore omitted in the following crucial verse for our discussion. The three remaining principles are affirmed, where the Qur'an transcends all religious affiliations: "Surely those who have faith [that is the Muslims], the Jews, the Christians and the Sabaeans; whoever accepts faith in God and the last day and performs good deeds, those shall have their reward with their Lord; no fear shall come upon them, nor will they grieve." [22] This verse is of decisive importance for several reasons. First, it occurs twice in the Qur'an at the beginning and near the end of the Prophet's career in Madīnah, as Surah 2 was the first major sūrah to be revealed in Madīnah and Surah 5 was revealed before Surah 9, which was the last major sūrah sent down to the Prophet. It must therefore be conclusively argued that this verse could not be abrogated, as many classical and modern jurists and Qur'an commentators have held. This is because abrogation applies only to legislative verses and this is a narrative verse.

The verse under discussion is important also because it does not limit faith and its rewards to the people of the book. It has already been observed that the Sabaeans may not have had a sacred scripture.[23] Yet they are included among those who shall have the reward of their faith with God. The identity of the sabaeans has been under debate. Shahrastānī, in his book *al-Milal wal-niḥal* presents two sects of the Sabaeans.[24] These are the religious Sabaeans of Iraq and the philosophical Sabaeans of Ḥarrān in northern Syria. While the religious Sabaeans, with whom we are here concerned, acknowledged one divine creator, they probably did not have a sacred book and they venerated the stars, as did the Babylonians before them. Yet they are included among the people of faith in God.

A close hermeneutical analysis of this verse would reveal two further points. The first is that both the plurality of religions and scriptures are open ended, and closely related. Even though the Qur'an limits the designation "people of the Book" to the Jews and Christians, it speaks of an unspecified number of prophets and messengers who were sent by God as guides

and warners to every nation or community. On the basis of this Qur'anic assertion, Muslims, as we have already observed, extended this designation to Zoroastrians and even Hindus. Any other community that could lay credible claim to a sacred scripture would have been included. The second point is that the assertion, "whoever has faith in God and the last day and performs good deeds" provides a universal criterion of divine favor, independent of any religious identity.

According to the principles outlined above, religious affiliation in itself is no guarantee for the attainment of Paradise. The scriptural religions are important frameworks of legal and social identities, but they must be lived within a higher sphere of sincere faith and righteous works. God addresses Muslims and the people of the Book with the warning: "It is not in accordance with your [Muslims] wishes, nor the wishes of the people of the Book; rather, whoever does evil, he will be recompensed for it, nor will he find for himself any friend or helper against God. And, anyone who performs righteous deeds - be he male or female - and is a person of faith, those will enter the Garden [of Paradise] and they will not be wronged in the least".[25] Thus we see that the criterion for acceptance with God is neither religious identity, nor class or gender but faith and good deeds.

The plurality of religions and scriptures arises ultimately from the great number of prophets and messengers who followed one another, from Adam to Muhammad, in a great universal procession. Relying on the Qur'anic assertion, "There is no community (ummah) but that a warner was sent to it,[26] later Islamic tradition puts the number of prophets at one hundred and twenty-four thousand. The Qur'an further asserts that God did not send a messenger to a community except in its own language, in order that he may elucidate for them God's commands and prohibitions.[27]

Human history, according to this Qur'anic worldview, is prophetic history. Prophetic history is in reality the history of divine guidance of humankind to God through the mission of His prophets and messengers. Divine guidance, moreover, is promised to a heedless humanity that must be reminded again and again of its primordial covenant with God.

God tells us in the noble Qur'an that in primordial time, when humankind were still in the realm of potentiality, called by tradition "the world of atoms" (*'alam al-dharr*), God took out of the loins of the children of Adam their progeny and made them witness over themselves. He said, "Am I not your Lord?" they said, "Yes, we hear and we witness." God then warned humanity, "lest you say on the Day of Resurrection we were heedless of this..."[28]*ghaflah* into the light of faith in Him. The human part of this primordial divine covenant is to affirm in word and deed the sovereign Lordship of the One God. God's part is to guide humankind out of the darkness of heedlessness (

God first renewed this covenant with Adam and his spouse, after they lost the bliss of Paradise through man's first act of heedlessness, first in His saying, Their shall come from me to you guidance; and whoever follows my guidance, no fear shall come upon them nor will they grieve."[29] God then renewed this covenant with every prophet until the coming of the last Prophet, Muhammad, may God's peace and blessing be upon him.

The Qur'an presents religion as such under two distinct, but also interrelated, dimensions. The first is institutionalized religions, such as Islam, Christianity and Judaism. These are the frame work of the laws and rituals of worship which give their followers their legal and social identity as Jews, Christians and Muslims. All three traditions should ideally constitute what the Qur'an calls, "*millat abikum ibrahim* (the religion of your father Abraham)", who called all his children *muslims*. Institutionalized human religions are the necessary vehicle and framework of the inner dimension which they represent.

The Qur'an calls this inner dimension the *fiṭrah*, or original creation of God of all His human creatures. The Qur'an identifies this divine original creation with the "straight (*qayyim*) religion: "Set [O Muḥammad] your face straight towards God, a man of pure faith (*ḥanīfan*), for this is God's original creation (*fiṭrah* upon which He created humankind; there is no altering of God's creation."^[30]

This divine pure creation is the innate capacity to know God and have faith in Him, with which every human being is born. This means that every child is born pure, like Adam before he sinned, and is thus ready to affirm anew the divine primordial covenant of "Am I not your Lord." This innate capacity to know God is realized through human unaided reason, as was the case with Abraham who took first the luminous star to be his Lord, then when it set, he said, "I love not those that set. He then turned to the moon, and when it set, he exclaimed, "if my Lord guides me not, I shall surely be one of those who had gone astray." He finally took the sun to be his God, but when it set he realized that the sun is not God. Then, in an outburst of adoration, he cried out, "I turn my face towards Him who created the heavens and the earth, a man of pure faith, nor will I be one of the associators (*mushrikīn*)."^[31]

This Qur'anic two-dimensional view of religion in no way implies dichotomy or duality. Rather institutionalized religion is itself legislated by God as the instrument for the realization of the inner dimension of faith and righteous living. God says in the Qur'an:

To everyone of you we have appointed a [sacred] law and a course to follow. For, had God so wished, He would have made you all one community. Rather He wished to try you by means of what He had given you; who among you is of the best action. Compete therefore with one another as if in a race in the performance of good deeds. To God shall be your return, and He will inform you concerning the things in which you had differed."^[32]

This verse first stipulates that the exoteric dimension of religion should mirror its inner dimension through the performance of good deeds. Secondly, differences among God's laws which He appointed for different peoples should be respected, and should not lead to conflicts. Finally, the truth concerning these different divine dispensations will be known only on the Day of Judgment when God will inform all faith-communities of all their religious differences. To paraphrase St. Paul, here we see things through a glass darkly, but then we shall see things as they are.^[33] better understanding. But then God, the absolute Truth (*al-ḥaqq*) will manifest the truth, all the truth. Here we must avoid turning our religious differences into religious conflicts through dialogue in humility and the desire for

The Qur'an not only acknowledges religious diversity and plurality, it also lays down the principles that should govern interreligious relations. It first calls for respect and protection of all places of worship. God says: "Had God not repelled some people by means of others, synagogues and churches, mosques and monasteries in which God's name is mentioned, would have been demolished."^[34] The Prophet himself applied this principle by allowing the delegation of the Christians of Najrān to pray in his mosque. He went even further by calling them and the Muslims to "just word of common ascent" between the two communities.^[35] It took the Muslims fourteen centuries to renew this call, and for some Christians and Jews to listen.

The Qur'an enjoins Muslims to dialogue with Jews and Christians in the fairest manner. It sets forth both the etiquette and theology of dialogue: "Do not debate with the people of the Book save in the fairest manner, except those among them who do wrong; and say to them 'we accept faith in that which was sent down to us [that is the Qur'an] and that which was sent

down to you [that is the Torah and the Gospel]. Our God and your God is one, and to Him we are submitters (*muslims*).[36]

What then is the ultimate goal of interfaith dialogue from the point of view of the Qur'an? The following few conclusions will, it is hoped, suggest some tentative answers.

Concluding Remarks

It may be first concluded from the preceding discussion that, neither the Qur'an nor the Prophetic tradition demands of Jews and Christians that they give up their religious identity and become Muslims unless they freely choose to do so. The basis of this religious freedom in Islam is the categorical Qur'anic assertion (Q. 2:256), "there is no compulsion in religion." This is a categorical command, not a statement of fact.

Secondly, the Qur'an and Prophetic tradition only enjoined Muslims as well as the followers of other faiths to engage in meaningful dialogue, cooperation and agreement on basic principles. This is what the Qur'an calls "a just word of common ascent", between the Muslims and the people of the Book to worship no one except God and not "take one another as lords beside God".[37] This important call to a unity of faith across the diversity of religions is far more relevant to our time than it was to the time of the Prophet and his people. It goes far beyond the issue of whether Christians actually worship their monks or not. One of the Companions of the Prophet, 'Adī b.Ḥātim who was formerly a Christian, said to the Prophet: "But the Jews and the Christians do not worship their Rabbis and their monks." The Prophet said, "Do not they legislate for them and they accept their legislation?" This is tantamount to worshipping them.[38] This is because worship in Islam is obedience and if one obeys anyone other than God it is as though one worships him instead of God.

It is important in this regard to observe that Karaism, a movement within Judaism which arose after Islam, may be regarded as an answer to this call. The Karaite movement continues to this day to call other Jews to return to the law of God as revealed in the Torah, and rejects Rabbinic Judaism. It is with this Rabbinic Judaism that the Qur'an was concerned and with which the Muslim community has been struggling ever since.

Judaism, as it has been observed for nearly 2,000 years, is Rabbinic Judaism. Although Rabbinic Judaism is continuous with biblical religion, the latter has been completely superseded by the former. This is perhaps the reason behind the Qur'anic call for the people of the Torah to judge by what God has revealed in it. For the same reason, the Qur'an calls upon the people of the Gospel to judge by what God has revealed in it.[39]

To the extent that Eastern Christians, more than other peoples, at least at the time of the revelation of the Qur'an, tried to harmonize their faith in God with moral living and humility before Him, they are considered to be the "nearest in amity" to Muslims.[40] This special relation with the Christians does not close the door to dialogue with other religious communities. In fact, the legal designation of *Ahl al-Kitāb* (peoples of the Book) has been quite fluid. It came to include more and more communities as Muslims came to know more and more religious traditions.

To conclude: what then is the challenge that the Qur'an presents to us today? The challenge is this, that we all have faith in God and compete with one another in righteous works. It follows from this challenge that all people of faith respect one another and that they believe in all of God's revelations.

The Qur'an presents the followers of all three monotheistic religions not only with a great challenge, but with a great promise as well. The promise is this:

Were the people of the Book to abide by the Torah, the Gospel and that which was sent down to them from their lord [i.e. the Qur'an], they would be nourished with provisions from above them and from beneath their feet.[41]

[1] The present essay has appeared in different forms in the following publications:

- "Islam and Pluralism." *Encounters* 3, 2 (Sept. 1997): 103-18.

- "Islam and the Challenge of Religious Pluralism." *Global Dialogue* 2, 1 (Winter 2000): 53-64.

- "Religious Pluralism and The Challenges of Inclusivism, Exclusivism and Globalism: An Islamic Perspective". In Th. Sumartana et. al. (eds.), *Commitment of Faiths: Identity, Plurality and Gender*. Yogyakarta, Indonesia: Institute of DIAN/Interfidei, 2002.

[2] For the role of religion in the rise of human civilizations, see William H. McNeill. *The Rise of the West: A History of the Human Community*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991).

[3] This capacity is called in the Qur'an "*fit}rat Allah*", God's pure creation. See Q. 30:30, to which we shall return later in this discussion.

[4] See *Encyclopedia of Religion* Mircea Eliade editor in chief, Macmillan Publishers, Electronic Edition produced by Infobases Inc, Provo, Utah. SV Cyprian. For a modern Protestant defense of Christian exclusivism, see Alvin Plantinga, "Pluralism: A Defense of Religious Exclusivism," in *The Philosophical Challenge of Religious Diversity*, K. Meeker and P. Quinn (eds.), (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999) 172-192.

[5] Q. 3:85. See also v. 19, and Mahmoud M. Ayoub, *The Qur'an and Its Interpreters vol. 2*, [hereafter M. Ayoub Qur'an] (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), pp. 56 and 66, and pp. 240-43 for the views of Qur'an commentators of these verses.

[6] For a good study of the term Islam in the Qur'an and exegetical tradition, see Jane Smith, An historical and semantic study of the term "islām" as seen in a sequence of Quran commentaries Published by Scholars Press for Harvard Theological Review (1975)

[7] Rahner developed his idea into an elaborate theology of salvation through the cross of Christ. See his *Theological Investigations*, particularly vols 14 and 16, both available in English translations.

[8] Dogmatic Constitution on the Church no. 16.

[9] See for a penetrating study of the different approaches to religious pluralism, as well as the issue of religious relativism, John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, ed. 2 (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2005).

[10] See for examples Q. 10:47,4:41 and 16:36; and Acts 2:1-11, I Tm 2:4 and Heb. 1:1 ff.

[11] This notion was first introduced by Karl Jaspers in his *Origin and Goal of History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1953). For a good discussion of this important period in the development of human civilization and Islam's place in this development, see Marshall Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam: Conscience and History in a World Civilization*, vol. 1 (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1974).

[12] See *The Cambridge History of Iran: Vol. 2 ; The Median and Achaemenian Periods*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985); Isaiah 44:27-28, 45:1-3, 12-14; see also II Chronicles 36:21-23; Ezra, 1:1-9, 3:6-8, 5:12-17, 6:2-4

[13] Muslim hagiography identified Alexander with the prophetic figure *dhū al-qarnayn* of Q. 18:83-98.

[14] See Matt 2:1-12

[15] See for a quick reference on Mani's life and death and his religion, *Encyclopedia of Religion* sv Mani.

[16] Q. 30:22. See also 2:213 and 5:48.

[17] Q. 22:17.

[18] See Mahmoud Ayoub, *A Muslim View of Christianity: Essays on Dialogue*, Irfan A. Omar (ed.), (New York: Orbis Books, 2007) pp. 17-30. ---. For a more detailed discussion of these four principles from a comparative religion point of view, consult my original lecture, on which this essay is largely based, in the IIIT archives, summer 2008.

[19] See Fazlur Rahman, *Major Themes of the Qur'an* ed. 2 (Minneapolis: Bibliothica Islamica, 1994) p. 162.

[20] Max Muller (ed), *Sacred Books of the East*, vol. 47 “*Pahlavi Texts*, vol. 5 of 5. *Marvels of Zoroastrianism*.” (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1897)

[21] Majd al-dīn Abu al-Sa’ada al-Mubārak b. Muḥammad b. al-Athīr al-Jazarī, *Jāmi’ al-uṣūl fī aḥādīth al-rasūl*, ed. ‘Abd al-Qādir al-Arna’ūṭ, ed. 2, 13 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-fīkr, 1403 A.H.) vol. 2, p. 660, h. 1161.

[22] Q. 2:62, and 5:69.

[23] See for a *tafsīr* discussion of the religious identity of the Sabaeans M. Ayoub, *Qur’an*, vol. 1, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1984) pp 109-110

[24] Shahrastānī’s two-volume famous heresiographical work exists in many editions. See the chapter on the Sabaeans in the first volume.

[25] Q. 4:123-24. This is a cardinal principle of the Qur’an; see for example, S. 2:177, where faith in God, His revelations and prophets and human virtues such as generosity, steadfastness and keeping one’s covenants are given as true signs of righteousness.

[26] Q. 35:24; see also 40:78, where the plurality of faiths is clearly asserted.

[27] See Q. 14:4; see also 10:47.

[28] Q. 7:172.

[29] Q. 2:38. For the story of Adam’s sin and God’s forgiveness, see M. Ayoub, *Qur’an*, vol. 1, pp. 83-93.

[30] Q. 30:30 The Prophet is said to have asserted that every child is born upon this divine *fitrah*, and then his parents bring him or her up a Jew, a Christian, or a Magian. See Ahmad b. Ḥambal, *Musnad Ibn ū Ḥanbal*, ed. Ah{mad Muḥammad Shakir, 20 vols. (Cairo: Dar al-Ḥadīth, ed 1, 1995-1416) vol. 7, p. 33, h. 7182.

[31] Q. 6:76-79. This human capacity to know God by the unaided reason has been recognized by both ancient and classical philosophers and theologians. It is called by Muslim theologians “the way of the Friend (Khalīl) of God, that is Abraham.

[32] Q. 5:48. This is a recurrent theme of the Qur’an.

[33] See I Cor. 13:12

[34] Q. 22:40, see also 24:36.

[35] See Q. 3:61-64, and M. Ayoub, *Qur’an*, vol. 2, pp. 187-208

[36] Q. 29:46, see also 49:13, which calls upon all the peoples and tribes of humankind to get to know one another through dialogue.

[37] Q. 3:64. It is significant that this call to dialogue follows the only heated debate which the Prophet had with the Christians. This debate is alluded to in the Mubaḥalah, or imprecation verse, 3:61. See M. Ayoub, *Qur’an*, vol. 2 pp. 188-202, 206.

[38] M. Ayoub, *Qur’an*, vol. 2, p. 205-207.

[39] Q. 5:44, 47.

[40] The piety and humility of these Christians is touchingly described in the Qur’an. See Q. 5:82-5. See also my article “Nearest in Amity: Christians in the Qur’an and contemporary exegetical tradition.” *Journal of Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations*. (July, 1997). 8, 2: pp. 145-64. or in my book *A Muslim View of Christianity: Essays on Dialogue*, Irfan A. Omar (ed.), (New York: Orbis Books, 2007) 187-208

[41] Q. 5:65-6. This means that they would eat of the bounties of the sky through rain and the rich yield of the earth.