

DIALOGICAL CONVERSATION TO SEARCH FOR PRINCIPLES OF INTERFAITH RELATIONS: THE FUTURE OF PLURALISTIC WORLD ORDER

INTRODUCTORY REMARKS:

As I begin write this paper I need to clarify my position as an insider/outsider academician. As an insider to Islamic tradition I face specific challenges to my inherited perspectives and allegiances. The major challenge for me is to step outside my own community to explore more expansive vocabularies and notions of value understood by other communities. In my initial research on the topic of freedom of religion and conscience in my earlier work on *The Islamic Roots of Democratic Pluralism* (2001), I found that I was confined to and even trapped in familiar and conventional concepts of Islamic juridical tradition, unable to expand the horizons of the possible and desirable interpretation that was sometimes implicit and at other times explicit in the Islamic revelation. As an ethicist I sought relevance to rather than needed radical departure from the normative Islamic tradition. I endeavored to seek the approval of the community by giving it reassurances about the significance of Islamic tradition rather than challenge its gross misunderstanding of the pluralistic impulse of the Islamic revelation. Under the burden of my ties with the Muslim religious establishment and the favors I owed to my teachers in the seminaries in Iraq and

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Iran I constantly struggled with these debts that seemed to demand compromise of my ethical stance when it came to offer honest criticism and propose alternative readings of the scriptural sources. I was faced with the risk of becoming insufficiently and improperly impartial to my ethical responsibilities of making an incontrovertible case for the freedom of religion in the Qur'an.

Without the recognition of religious pluralism as a principle of mutual recognition and respect among faith communities, and without affirming the identification of religious morality with moral rationality of public discourse, I believe that the community of nation-states is faced with endless violence and radical extremism propelled by uncompromising stance in the matter of exclusive religious truth and perspectival rather than objective

morality.⁽¹⁾ Whereas I have taken up the challenge of endorsing the universal morality that undergirds the international human rights declaration and to demonstrate that Islamic theological ethics holds enormous foundational potential to support the principles of universal moral law that governs social cooperation that are common to all human societies, the problematic of exclusivist theology that undermines this universality remains to be unpacked. In my assessment both moral relativism, in the sense of subjective and perspectival morality that suffocates universal moral principles to assume its objective role to provide scales of judging the rightness or the wrongness of human performance, and the exclusionary theology can undo any progress in world peace with justice.

Having observed and participated in some of the international forums to construct bridges of understanding between and within different faith communities, I can assert without any reservations that the impending danger to human relations and human rights regime will come from both the moral relativist arguments as well as exclusionary theological doctrines. Moral relativist arguments are self-defeatist in the sense that the moment cultural relativism enters human rights discourse they unwittingly endorse human rights violations

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as acceptable in the context of the particular cultural valuation of human dignity. Muslim societies have suffered from certain social and cultural practices that have been justified on relative cultural grounds: "We are different!" The faith communities, on the other hand, regard the secular human rights discourse as yet another ploy to exclude peoples of faith in formulating the terms of inclusive, universal moral discourse. More importantly, they disapprove of the secular demand to speak about reasonable pluralism of comprehensive religious and moral doctrines that are consistent with the requirements of a social democratic understanding of a public order. In fact, the traditionalists among them regard religious pluralism as incompatible with the uniqueness of their exclusive experience of truth. More poignantly, they reject any canonical understanding of universal morality

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without first recognizing that a necessary condition for such a common moral terrain is disclosed by the revelation from God that sets the terms of the correlation between the premises of religious and secular reasons for human moral progression.

For the last forty years I have observed the emergence of interfaith dialogue, and even participated in some of them, as a way of forging intercommunal understanding and tolerance of the differences that exist between world religions. These differences, even as they appear irreconcilable, are indispensable part of each community's unique collective identity. No community, however enlightened, is willing to abandon its exclusive religious identity and its claim to salvation. Interfaith dialogue, in my opinion, has essentially remained political-academic without much impact on ordinary believers' negative perceptions about the religious 'other.' In the post-9/11 political-religious climate, as if to underscore its irrelevance to the traditional Christians or Muslims, who recognize no grounds to comply with neutrality requirements based on "There can be several kinds of religions leading to one true God," the dialogue has been formally appropriated for political and diplomatic ends among some nations, both with religious or secular

constitutions. The real goal of the dialogue, namely, of bringing peoples of different faiths to “a word common” among them remains far from being fulfilled. “A Common Word” is the Qur’anic phrase that calls “peoples of the Book” to unite in the worship of One God as “a word common between us and you, so that we serve none other but God, and that we associate not aught with Him, and do not some of us take others as Lords, apart from God” (Q. 3:64). Iran and Saudi Arabia come to mind immediately as examples of the countries that claim such a dialogue as part of their international efforts to promote tolerance of other religions. Ironically, besides their formal participation in some officially organized dialogues that have continued to take place under different international sponsorships, their record of human rights violation in the matter of free exercise of religion, their patterns of discrimination, intolerance and persecution remains to be improved.

The universal morality and the inherency of human dignity that empowers individual human person to exercise the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion, has not received full treatment in the traditionalist scholarship on freedom of religion in the international document that proclaims universal human rights. In some recent works

on Islam and human rights some Muslim jurists have begun to address and reconsider the juridical perspectives on apostasy and the right of a Muslim to sever his/her relationship with the community by converting to another religion. Some of the recent rulings in the matter of apostasy have critically undertaken to reexamine the precedents that provided the justificatory documentation for the harsh treatment meted out to the apostates in the Shari’a. Since the death penalty is deduced on the basis of the traditions rather than the text of the Qur’an, where one’s rejection of Islamic faith after having accepted it is regarded as a sin against God, these scholars have ruled against it and, have consequently regarded the issue beyond the jurisdiction of Muslim state.⁽²⁾ Among the leading jurists in Iran, for instance, Ayatollah Muntazari, upheld the right to freedom of religion and change of religious allegiance.⁽³⁾ However,

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majority of the jurists in the Muslim world continue to affirm the traditional rulings in this matter and, at least theoretically, maintain the validity of the classical formulations regarding apostasy.⁽⁴⁾

AREAS OF CONFLICT BETWEEN HUMAN RIGHTS NORMS AND ISLAM

The requirement to abide by religious and metaphysical neutrality in the public sphere is at the heart of all public claims regarding consensual politics to advance constitutional democratic governance. Such a requirement excludes making moral and metaphysical claims bearing on political choices in terms of specific religious doctrines and commitments. The theoretical presumption of the international declaration of human rights (IDHR), undeniably, is constructed in terms of the neutrality requirement in public domain so that human rights norms find their cross-cultural application in the secular mode of morality without any reference to revelation or religion. This presumption about the normative universality attached to the declaration (UDHR) is rejected by the Muslim traditionalists, who assert the right of individuals and groups to voice their religious commitments in the public sphere. The latter aspect of traditionalist

public theology is also a major source for deep-seated suspicion of modernity and its negative ramifications for sacredness of the revealed texts that function as the foundation of traditional legitimacy. When revelation-based political system like Islamic government in Iran or Saudi Arabia evaluate their compliance with the international declaration of human rights document and the secular norms that undergird it, they discern an oblique threat to their faith-based social-political system that must comply with democratic politics. By doing so, they believe, they will end up denying a public role for Islamic norms. In the seminarian assessment in Muslim centers of traditional learning modernity and democracy are construed as major threats to the Islamic revelation and the Shari'a-based government it supports.

Taking the case of freedom of religion, for example, one can detect three major areas of differences in the reflections related to international human rights norms of freedom of religion and the Islamic juridical tradition in the context of diverse Muslim cultures:

First, freedom of the individual to choose a religion other than Islam of which it is a member;

Second, the relationship between Muslim

political authority and religious belief and whether the state has the right to enforce religious beliefs and considerations;

Third, the irreconcilable claims of the exclusive and final Islamic truth and its implications for intercommunal and international public order.

From Islamic juridical perspective, **the first area** of difference dealing with conversion leads to ascribing apostasy, heresy and promotion of religion or belief and proselytism that impact negatively upon the community-centered salvation in Islam. The Islamic laws of apostasy are totally at odds with the human rights articles and their insistence upon every human being having the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion, which includes the right to change religion or belief. **The second area** of difference raises the implications of state-religion relationship on the rights of religious minorities in Islamic states where Muslim majority claims a privileged relationship with the state, and where the state and religion are intertwined to create a national religion with special considerations in imposing its values in the public square. **The third area** of difference between Islamic tradition and the universal human rights standards is associated with the relationships among different faith communities when

Islamic doctrines of superiority and exclusivity impinge upon essentially pluralist nature of modern nation-state and its commitment to the international human rights standards based on neutrality in matters of religions and beliefs.

In Islamic tradition there is a tension whether human beings are endowed with natural capacity to choose and act or whether all their actions are predetermined by God. The basic argument in relation to the freedom of religion in Islamic revelation and pluralism, in the specific meaning of various spiritual paths to the divine truth, is that revealed texts capture the real experience of the early community struggling to regulate relation between tolerance and exclusive truth claim that provided the people its unique identity among communities of faithful. The guidelines that appeared for promoting religious tolerance and freedom of religion in the classical texts remain to this day part of

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the justificatory documentation for interfaith relations. There are differing, and often conflicting, interpretations of these normative documents that address the question of religious diversity, disbelief and its negative and even damaging consequences for the spiritual and moral wellbeing of humanity.

It is worth keeping in mind that the essential element in the above-cited three areas of disagreement between Islamic tradition and international human rights is the exclusionary theology and its implications for the freedom of religion article (Article 18 of the IDHR) that promotes individual autonomy to determine his/her spiritual destiny without any interference from religious or political establishment. To put it differently, pluralism as a distinct feature of the multifaith and multicultural global community is at odds with the community's sense of the uniqueness and superiority of its religious tradition and its community-centered salvation that refuses to grant individual believer autonomy and freedom to determine personal faith. From the traditionalist point of view, what appears to be a predicament for the religious minded people is that while the declaration (IDHR) supports individual right to believe what one wishes regarding the implementation of divinely ordained norms and values, it does not endorse the freedom of

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one's decision to act upon one's convictions. This contradiction is not so much in the Article 18 as it is in its implementation within those Muslim states with Muslim majority. According to these religious scholars, while the IDHR, on the one hand, upholds the freedom to believe and to manifest one's belief in practice, on the other, it evaluates religiously inspired political activity negatively and even incompatible with democratic governance. However, what has been overlooked in this critical assessment of the IDHR is any attempt to rethink the Shari'a values in order to bring it in line with universal norms of human rights articles and to account meticulously for extra-revelatory sources of international law which are based on a secular estimation of religious pluralism as a principle of coexistence and cooperation among various inter- and intra-faith communities.

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rejection of any such notion that would take away the unique claim of Islam as the only religion that is acceptable to God. In fact, both the Arabic *ta'addudiya* and the Persian *takaththur-garayi* for pluralism are treated as foreign imposition on Muslim religious thought, and hence, are treated as lacking internal cultural legitimacy. At the foundational level, and, more particularly, in affording the international document cultural legitimacy in Muslim societies, religious discourse is not only licit but indispensable for developing reciprocity of reason-giving feature of global society in which human rights regime must guarantee the rights to free exercise of religion.

In comparison to the traditionalist exclusionary theology, modernly educated Muslims, who see their faith in cultural terms as an important source of their identity, have shown little resistance in complying with appropriate public discourse that does not deny the integrity of their religious identity and yet complies with non-sectarian rationality that undergirds the freedom of religion article in the IDHR. Nevertheless, as my

fieldwork suggests, even among the educated Muslims there is no whole-hearted acceptance of the culturally dominant secular morality of the West which they believe undergirds the universal declaration. The major problem at the international level, as I perceive at this time, is the lack of conversation between Muslim traditionalist scholars and human rights advocates whose strategy to impose an aggressive human rights discourse that reduces faith commitments to private domain and denies faith claims a legitimate voice in the public forum backfires by the declaration's outright rejection as culturally insensitive to Muslim social values.

The aftermath of the 9/11 has certainly put Islam on defensive. The assessment of Islam's ability to forge peaceful coexistence is under greater scrutiny in view of the rising tide of religious extremism and militancy in many

sectors of the Muslim societies that suffer social and political injustices. It is no more possible to convince the international community that the public role of religion is desirable in building bridges between

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communities. And, yet, the influence of faith communities in advancing human well-being and human flourishing, even if this advancement is robustly grounded in the exclusive religiosity, cannot be ignored as politically infeasible. Although religions have traditionally inspired strongly particularistic loyalties with a domineering attitude toward both adherents and outsiders, the world order today needs to overcome this domineering feature of religion by encouraging a healthy diversity and pluralism within and among religious communities. Can this be achieved by disestablishing religion? Can disestablishment be realized without thoroughly privatizing religion and imposing secular neutrality on it?

My readings in the present militantly radical Islamic movements force me to be cautious in suggesting secularization of Islamic tradition with its comprehensive doctrines that claim relevant application in all spheres of human society, both spiritual and temporal. Such a proposition has become the breeding ground for radicalism and reactionary politics of Muslim extremism.

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In the Muslim world the modernist discourse is associated with agnostic secular culture that defines the public forum and its discourse. It is culturally illegitimate to speak about the form of secularism that not only asserts hegemony over discourse in the public forum, but also aspires to transform Islam into its image and likeness.

From its inception, Islam as a source for spiritual and temporal life of its community has been directly involved in setting the purpose of government and regulating interhuman relationships in society. At the present time, with the weakening of the state's overall influence in directing the moral and political life of its citizens, Islam has once again stepped in to assume its critical role in providing the guidelines for an ideal public order. However, under its traditionalist interpreters, historical

Islam lacks the conceptual framework to develop modern notion of citizenship. Historical Islamic tradition has grown to be notoriously exclusive in its theology and discriminatory in its juridical tradition. Whereas the Qur'an

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treats diversity of religions as a divinely ordained system, and unification of all humanity under one confessional tradition beyond human power, Islamic juridical tradition empowers Muslim government to impose restrictions and discriminate against non-Muslims minorities by reducing them to second-class citizens.

The fundamental problem in establishing the freedom of religion in Islamic tradition has been lack of serious conceptual analysis to distinguish between strictly religious from political. Muslim jurists were, more or less, aware of the two separate spheres of human activity in the realm of spiritual and temporal existence. Accordingly, they had distinguished separate jurisdictions in formulating the spiritual in distinction from the temporal in Islamic jurisprudence. Human-God relationship, *ibadat*, as part of strictly spiritual relevance, remains permanently beyond the reach of human institutions, including political power; in contrast, human-human relationships, *mu'amalat*, retain

their secular relevance under the legal and consensual actions that must be undertaken as part of one's reciprocal responsibility in all human institutions. This separation of jurisdictions in the Shari'a could have served as the foundation of freedom of religion and conscience which was beyond any human institutional control.

TRADITIONALIST ENGAGEMENT WITH PLURALISM

There are three variable categories of Islamic tradition that continue to exercise influence and shape the public forum and its discourse in Muslim societies. Essentially, Islam as a world-embracing tradition inspires and sustains a civilization based on a civil religion that embraces pluralistic ideas and concern for those who are not adherents of its creed and practice. This kind of Islamic understanding provides moral grounds that enable the faith community to establish relations with other communities. The second kind of Islam, which many modern Muslims find relevant to their situation in the ever-shrinking national and cultural boundaries and the emergence of global universalism at many levels of their material and cultural connection to the larger human communities, is guided

by conventional wisdom and moral insights provided by one's participation in a plurality of communities under the dictum of "Live and let live." The third kind of religious discourse encapsulates the unique and exclusive experience of Islamic truth that is based on the fundamental doctrine that human prosperity in this and the world to come is restricted to the adherents of Islamic revelation. This kind of religious discourse does not take interfaith dialogue as an intellectual and sincere endeavor to understand the religious "other" as one's equal. Rather, it is taken as an opportunity to convert the "misguided other" into one's own tradition. Hence, it is viewed as a mission work, not very different from the evangelical efforts to save the "pagan other."

This latter traditionalist Muslim discourse challenges the usefulness of interfaith dialogue which is viewed with much suspicion and trepidation as nothing more than a compromise of one's own religious claims under foreign domination. However, its progression on the path of, at least, intellectual appreciation of other human's faith, is very much dependent upon internal dialogue among different schools of thought and sects among Muslims. More than the exclusive claims against other faiths, it is the internal understanding of the pluralistic theology of religions in Islam that awaits

intelligent calibration with phenomenological integrity.

The phenomenological integrity of Islamic public theology is dependent upon the acknowledgement of the differences between the traditional and modern perspectives on human nature, society, and the world at large. Such an analysis can lead to decipherment of the ways in which scriptural resources were retrieved and manipulated to justify one or the other interpretation that impacted the reality of religious diversity in terms of interfaith relations or freedom of religion in Muslim societies. Both modernists and religiously-oriented intellectuals fail to emphasize the fact that, in large measure, social and political history impacts upon the hermeneutics of the revealed texts. Remarkably, different periods of Muslim history have generated different interpretations of the Qur'an in consonance with the social and political conditions that faced the community. During the heyday of the Muslim empire's po-

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litical ascendancy some Qur'anic passages were evoked to determine tolerant attitude toward other faiths, and religious minorities enjoyed, relatively speaking, better treatment in the hands of Muslim administration. In contrast, in the age of European political dominance over Muslim regions, the Qur'an and the Tradition were searched and interpreted to provide justifications for armed resistance against non-Muslim powers and their representatives, and intolerance towards non-Muslim populations living among Muslims. This lack of awareness regarding the historicism of the normative sources in traditionalist Muslim scholarship leads to many misunderstandings and unjustified accusations about Muslims and their scriptures among non-Muslim powers. Such ahistorical retrieval of the revealed texts in the traditional scholarship has become the major source of fears and concerns in the West that can easily be, and often is, transmuted into hatred and violence.

Recognition of the religious pluralism within a community of faithful promises to advance the practical principle of inclusiveness in which existence of competing claims to the religious truth need not precipitate conflict within religiously and culturally varied societies. In fact, although when a person always needs to anchor oneself in one community so that he/

she can forge long terms relations, in order to grow spiritually and morally he/she may not be confined to any one community in order to benefit or effect change in themselves or others based on the standards of another. Moreover, recognition of inclusive truth claim in other communities should encourage to develop a sense of multiple and unique possibilities for enriching human quest for spiritual and moral wellbeing through participation in a plurality of communities, "the relation of which should be pictured as a series of partially overlapping circles, not as a series of wholly concentric circles."⁽⁵⁾

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Religious pluralism, it is worth emphasizing, is not peculiar to the modern world of increasing interdependence brought about by the phenomenal technological advancement that has changed the way we think about the 'other.' All religious communities required the faithful to search for peaceful ways of dealing

with comparable and competing claims of exclusive salvation in other faith traditions. check the grammar of this part of the sentences: where is the subject? which it acknowledged and evaluated critically, but never rejected as false. The major task confronting the early Muslim community was to secure identity for its follower within the God-centered worldview on which different groups had claims. The community provided necessary instruments of integration and authenticity without denying other religious groups their due share in God-centered religious identity. Muslim polity was founded on some form of inclusiveness in the public sphere to deal with the broad range of problems arising from the encounter of Muslims with non-Muslims living together. These historical and scripture-based precedents should lead the contemporary Muslim societies to institutionalize pluralism without having to succumb to secularize Islam and sever its connection to the transcendence founded

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upon God-centered pluralism. More pertinently, it should lead them to affirm the right of all human beings to freedom of religion and conscience.

The ability to accept or reject faith and to pursue an ethical life presupposes the existence of an innate capacity that can guide a person to a desired goal. This innate capacity is part of the human nature--the *fitra*--with which God shapes humanity (Q. 91:7-10). This innate capacity encompasses the faculty of moral reasoning. Conscience in the Qur'an is connected with the source of ethical knowledge because its point of reference is the human nature and its inherent ability to shape laws of conduct. Conscience, then, is as a God-given ability to judge values and obligations. In this sense, conscience is a necessary locus of universal moral guidance. God has endowed human beings with the necessary cognition and volition in their nature to further their comprehension of moral truths. Moreover, the distinction between evil and good is ingrained in the human personality in a form of a pre-revelatory, natural guidance with which God has favored human beings. It is through this natural guidance that human beings are expected to develop the ability to perform and judge their actions and to choose that which will lead them to prosperity without

any fear of external sanctions, immediate or eschatological.

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Guidance from God is an exaltation of individual conscience as opposed to forcible, collective conformism; hence, the responsibility for the salvation of each Muslim lies in his or her own hands rather than in any religious authority. God provides a general direction, a spiritual predisposition that can guard against spiritual and moral peril (if a person hearkens to its warnings); this natural guidance is further strengthened through prophetic revelation. The Qur'an repeatedly shows the path to salvation to emphasize the fact that this form of guidance is universal and available to all who aspire to become "godly" and "prosperous."

If the function of religious guidance through revelation is to provide precepts and

examples to all men and women in worshipping God and in dealing justly with their fellow humans, then it presupposes individual responsibility that flows from an inward stance, a "natural faith"⁽⁶⁾ that lies at the heart of any religious and moral commitment. The Qur'an differentiates between formal submission to the sacred authority--which could become mere utterance of the formula of faith without any real commitment to uphold God's commands--and the faith born of the voluntary consent of conscience, free of external coercion, developing from a keen spiritual and moral awareness and motivation.⁽⁷⁾ The faith that enters the 'heart' (another term for 'conscience' in the Qur'an) is the result of a choice innately available to all human beings, which is then strengthened and assisted by revelation. In this sense, faith is freely and directly negotiated between God and human being and cannot be compelled. This is an extremely important observation about individual autonomy in matters of faith. The Qur'anic utterance "No compulsion is there in religion" (Q. 2:256) seems to be saying that a person cannot be deprived of civil rights on account of a religious conviction, no matter how distasteful it might be to the dominant faith community.⁽⁸⁾

In support of the freedom of religion in the

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early days of Islam, the commentators relate a story of a Muslim belonging to the tribe of Salim b. 'Awf of Medina, whose two sons had embraced Christianity before Islam was preached. When the sons came to visit their father in Medina, their aggrieved father asked them to convert to Islam. The two refused to do so. The father brought them before the Prophet and asked him to intervene in the controversy. It was precisely on this occasion, according to these commentators, that the "no compulsion" verse was revealed, and the father, apparently on the advice of the Prophet, left his two sons alone. And yet, the classical exegetes endorsed the view that tolerance in the matter of religion was to be afforded only to the people of the Book and that others were to be coerced into converting to Islam.⁽⁹⁾

Free exercise of religion and beliefs is an inalienable right of all human persons. The corner stone of religious pluralism is the verse "There is no compulsion in religion." Since no authority can coerce an individual to believe or to accept a particular faith, human beings are free to negotiate their personal faith and its consequential connection to a community to which that faith commitment relates the individual. Whereas in the matters of private faith the position of the Qur'an is 'non-interventionist', that is, human authority in any form needs

to defer to the individuals' acting on their own internal convictions; in the public projection of that faith, the Qur'anic stance is based on coexistence among faith communities, even if one among them enjoys majority in terms of membership and political power. Without denying the uniqueness of its own message, the dominant community needs to leave the public space non-coercive and cognizant of other communities' rights to follow their religious practices without any impediment. In this particular sense, religious discourse needs to recast its spirituality into moral commitments materially equivalent to those of secular morality so that it can participate in the universalistic aspirations of the public order to establish justice for all regardless of their creed, gender or color. Such an inclusive religious discourse is grounded in religiously inspired rationality, and projects normative application through seeking to promote how persons of different religious commitments ought to live together

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by providing common public and religious reasons for their adopted course of moral action in the public sphere. It is in no sense a thoroughgoing moral reduction of religion to morality, as Immanuel Kant would have put it in the context of Christianity.⁽¹⁰⁾

DEALING WITH RELIGIOUS EXCLUSIVISM

Although at one level the Qur'anic rationality can capture the secular universality and produce an inclusive public theology to solve the problem of diversity of human faiths in the public sphere, at another level the same theology can breed exclusivist claims that can completely destabilize the social and political cohesion. The problem is the difficulty connected with the affirmation of any particular moral position, whether secular or religious, as the universal morality secured through sound rational argument. The subjectivity of any moral perspective is conditioned by the particular subject's circumstances, commitments, and assumptions, including his or her particular moral framework, with the result that the disputants will inevitably speak past each other, thus creating an irresolvable moral quandary at the international level. Unless people share life experiences framed by the same moral

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and metaphysical assumptions it is impossible to discover common moral premises and rules of moral evidence to solve problems of social and political injustices around the globe. Competing moral visions in the international communities need to endorse the normativity of a particular understanding of reasonableness of revelation-based rationality in order to deal with fundamental freedoms, including the freedom of religion, to promote universal human rights norms.

At this juncture I need to come back to my earlier observation that exclusive claims about Islam or any other religion remain strong and adamant part of one's religious identity. My field experience suggests to me that even modernly educated men and women, at one time or another, reveal this exclusivist tendency and its natural accompaniment, that is, intolerance if not outright bigotry. Here critical evaluation of some revisionist-pluralist pre-

sumption that stifles the acknowledgement of profound disagreements or affirmation of the truth of one's own beliefs and practices has implications for the progression of the notion of pluralism among Muslims. Traditionally, Muslims had developed a theory about Islam's self-sufficiency in relation to other religions, and had regarded Islam in possession of the religious and moral truth required by all humanity until the end of time. The Qur'an spoke of Prophet Muhammad as "the seal of the prophets," who confirmed the revelations to previous prophets where they were sound, and corrected them if they had been corrupted. This doctrine also implied that there would be no other prophet after Prophet Muhammad, so that he was God's final word to humanity. This theology was the foundation of Muslim exclusiveness. The finality of Islamic revelation, in addition to the corporate solidarity founded upon the sacred Shari'a and Muslim rule, formed the resilient self-assurance with which Muslims considered the exclusive truth

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they possess, over against the abrogation or supersession of other traditions like Christianity and Judaism.⁽¹¹⁾ In light of this theology, to be sure, Muslim religious opposition to the international human rights stems from the fear that endorsement of the document would deny them their exclusive claim to the religious and moral truth - the important sources to the community-centered salvation. In supporting freedom of religion and conscience human rights advocates seem to be saying to all the faith communities that in order to prevent discord, enmity and violence they need to stress the commonalities of the world's major religions, and avoid the temptation of maintaining that their religion possesses absolute truth to the exclusion of other faiths.

There is much in this pluralist presumption for interreligious dialogue that is realistic and conducive to outwardly better relations between dialogue participants. The proposal that the practitioners of different religions must be encouraged to accept historicity and cultural specificity of their traditions to engage in searching for the common orientation to the divine to strike some kind of parity in their endeavors of relating properly to it, is sound and practicable. However, in a dialogical conversation it is not realistic to expect that people in dialogue will not adhere to exclusive

views about their religious beliefs. In view of entrenched self-righteous attitude among adherents of major religious traditions it is not irrational or immoral for these staunch believers to think of their religion as the only source of human salvation. Exclusionary attitudes certainly deserve closer scrutiny in the light of my own reservations about our ability to transcend intercommunal theological claims and counterclaims to convince faith communities that their exclusivist theologies are irrational and must be abandoned for the good of all humanity.⁽¹²⁾

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An exclusivist who believes that certain doctrines of her religion are true and that those who are incompatible with them false is actually engaged in religious truth exclusivism founded upon sufficient familiarity with other religious traditions to acknowledge in all sincerity that although these traditions can

generate genuine piety and dedication, they have these doctrines that do not necessarily generate confidence in their truthfulness. In contrast, there can be an exclusivist who, as part of her soteriological exclusivism, denies the ability of any other religion than her own to guarantee salvation. In other words, the other tradition is rejected simply because it does not teach the creed she believes in. Such a soteriological exclusivism remains popular among large sectors of Muslim community around the globe. However, in recent years, truth claim exclusivism connected with the Muslim religious leadership which has condemned relativizing the divine truth of Islam into multiple truths has in some important ways downplayed the popular soteriological exclusivism, to allow religious inclusiveness to emerge as an important ingredient of international relations policy.⁽¹³⁾

The common world and the contemporary time when our physical and mental isolations are at an end, the development of humanity from religiously endorsed uniqueness of one's faith commitment that breeds exclusivity and intolerance to equally religiously prompted mutual respect and harmony founded on common moral terrain rests on a retrieval and interpretation of appropriate Qur'anic passages. It is not necessary that religious exclusivism

among Muslims, or, for that matter, among any other religious group, will almost certainly grow to hate those with whom one fundamentally disagrees. Doubtless the challenge for Muslim religious establishment is to find ways of channeling the disagreements to develop respect to one another's exclusivist truth claims while still believing that one is right and the other is wrong.

THE CHALLENGE OF MUTUAL RESPECT

Some religious groups in the Muslim community have not hesitated to commit inhuman acts towards peoples of other faiths with whom they disagree, whether doctrinally or politically. Although it is not difficult to find political or economic reasons to account for discriminatory behavior towards non-Muslim minorities, religious intolerance seems to be the root cause of human rights violation. Even in the case of intrafaith violations of human rights, as observed in the Sunni-Shi'ite sectarian carnage in Iraq, Afghanistan or Pakistan in the aftermath of American invasion, religious sources regarded as authoritative by both communities remain the main source for endless violent clashes between the two communities. No international effort has suc-

In view of entrenched self-righteous attitude among adherents of major religious traditions it is not irrational or immoral for these staunch believers to think of their religion as the only source of human salvation.

ceeded in downplaying the religious histories and their ramifications in perpetrating violation of the fundamental right to freedom of religion. While it is true that communal religious histories that recount the victimization of the minority by the dominant majority cannot be rewritten to generate a variant form of reconciliatory collective memory, religious leadership with its exclusionary theology has been least interested in bringing diverse communities together on a pluralist platform that can be extracted from the revealed texts of Islamic tradition. In my meeting with the Iraqi religious leaders in the year 2003 in Amman, Jordan, there was no sign of reconciliation between Sunni and Shi'ite delegates or consensus between the Muslim and Christian leaders that change of attitude was the key if tolerance is to be built and discrimination eliminated. The prominent Sunni Iraqi leaders bemoaned the lost political power that had concentrated in the

hands of the Sunni minority under Saddam. The Shi'ite leadership reiterated its community's victimization by Saddam government and saw very little advantage for its majority

community to accept power-sharing arrangements that were being negotiated by the international power brokers. In the midst of all the arguments and counter-arguments, the rights of the people to life and security were being threatened and violated in all these countries by militant Muslims supporting one or the other claim to truth and victimization. It is perplexing to note that the religious leadership on both the Sunni and the Shi'ite sides, whether in Iraq or Afghanistan, were totally indifferent to the moral consequences of relativizing human dignity through exclusive interpretations of the sanctity of life of fellow believers or other human beings. Religious revival in its nationalistic and militant forms can be cited as the main cause for majority of the human rights violations in these regions.

To add to these violations of human rights in the matter of freedom of religion on the ground, now with the help of internet technology the interreligious and intrafaith warfare is

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being conducted in the cyberspace. The inter-religious battles are no more local; they have become global and are being fiercely waged by the so-called "Soldiers of God." More

than ever before, the cyberspace is faced with spread of intolerant and immoral messages about one or another religious group, dampening any hope for salvaging the deterioration of equitable relationship between communities based on recognition of the inherency of human dignity and mutual respect due to all humans. It is apparent that no religion is immune from such abuse by its own followers. Abrahamic faiths with their political vision for humanity have more than ever become a weapon for encouraging discrimination and violation of basic human dignity. Online religious information, instead of functioning as a source of increasing mutuality and articulating a common vision for global community under universal morality, has amplified intentional misinformation about the religious/cultural 'other' and has led to mutual condemnation of peoples of faith. In view of the growing potential in modern day religious revival for discrimination and violence against those with whom

one disagrees, who can one turn to for retrieving authoritative moral-religious resources to instill mutual respect among diverse religious and ethnic groups that make up the modern citizenry?

Traditionalist Muslim scholars and their large following among the masses remain the most conscious of directing Islamic public order in Muslim majority societies, with a clear understanding that political governance can attain legitimacy by committing itself to implementing the Shari'a. In this conscious commitment to founding a public order based on the divinely ordained Shari'a, Islam has been accurately described as a faith in the realm of public.⁽¹⁴⁾ In comparison to the performance of religious-moral duties, laid down in minute detail in the Shari'a, official creed plays a secondary role in orienting the faithful to this goal. It is relevant to note that communal identity among Muslims is even today, therefore, defined less in terms of a person's adherence to a particular doctrinal position, and more in terms of his/her loyalty to one of the officially recognized rites of the Shari'a.⁽¹⁵⁾

Religious pluralism as a sociological fact, as far as the Shari'a was concerned, was not simply a matter of accommodation with competing exclusive claims over religious truth in the private domain of an individual's faith,

where it had to begin anyway. It was and remains inherently a matter of public policy in which a Muslim government had to acknowledge and protect the God-given right of each and every person to determine his/her spiritual destiny without coercion. The recognition of freedom of religion in all matters related to human moral and spiritual life is the cornerstone of the Qur'anic notion of religious pluralism, both at the level of inter-religious as well as intra-religious relations.⁽¹⁶⁾ In other words, the Qur'an lays down the foundation of theological pluralism that takes the equivalence and equal rights of human beings as a divinely ordained system. The statement that "the people are one community" in the Qur'an indicates that while this sense of unity among diverse peoples needs to be acknowledged theologically as part of God's activity, it is attainable in the sphere of ethics and its function in sustaining just relationships between peoples of diverse faith traditions.

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However, political ascendancy of Muslim rulers had far-reaching consequences for the ways in which the Qur'anic teachings about pluralism were side-stepped in favor of the discriminatory rulings in the Shari'a to gain control over the conquered peoples. The active engagement of the contemporary militant leaders with these discriminatory rulings in the juridical corpus to seek political solutions to the problems faced by Muslims living under their autocratic rulers points to the ongoing tension that exists between the Qur'anic principles of justice and fair treatment of the non-Muslims and the political demands of maintaining the Muslim public order. There is little doubt that in the Muslim world the struggle is for the shape of the public culture, for the style of life that is visible in the public square. Respect for the dignity of all humans is a key element in the principle of coexistence among peoples of diverse faiths and cultures and yet, the denial of extending that equal dignity to all humans, regardless of their color, creed, or sex is at the heart of violations of human rights in these

societies.

Religious systems have traditionally claimed absolute devotion and exclusive salvation history for themselves. Even within a single faith community it was by no means always conceded that the direction taken by dissenting schools of thought, for instance, the Shi'ite in the larger context of the majority Sunni community, could lead to the authentic salvation.⁽¹⁷⁾ Some classical Muslim scholars of the Qur'an attempted to separate the salvation history of the Muslim community from other Abrahamic faiths by attesting to the superseding validity of the Islamic revelation over Christianity and Judaism.⁽¹⁸⁾ In an attempt to demand unquestioning acceptance of the new faith Muslim theologians had to devise terminological as well as methodological stratagem to circumscribe those verses of the Qur'an which tended to underscore its ecumenical thrust by extending salvific authenticity and adequacy to other monotheistic traditions.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The process of cultural self-identification in the Muslim community was carried on through shared religious beliefs, practices and attitudes. The religious commitment to a community-oriented belief system necessarily

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led to the formulation of an exclusivist theology in which all pre-Qur'anic revelations were considered superseded. Politically, this theology was not neutral; it led to the negation of pluralism, overshadowing the ethical mission of creating a just society founded upon the universal obligation to call people to good and forbid evil. The community was tempted and did succumb to the abandonment of the ethical element in Abrahamic monotheism, which demanded attention to the concerns, needs and capabilities of common people irrespective of particular religious affiliation.

The predicament of conflicting claims to exclusive salvation had to be resolved if the Muslim community was to prove its universal excellence as an ethical and spiritual paradigm. In the words of the Qur'an, in order to be the best community "ever brought forth to human beings" the historical community had to undertake to institute the good and prevent the evil so that faith in God could become objectified in an inclusive attitude towards all peoples of different faiths. The best community had the moral responsibility of working toward the creation of a just society in which peoples of different religions would coexist in peace and harmony. This was the divinely ordained future for humanity.

The Qur'anic universe is moral. Human

beings are by nature moral beings, that is, capable of knowing the right from wrong, the good from evil and act accordingly. In order to protect this nature in its original form it is fortified with faith. Accordingly, the criteria for the "best" community are both ethical and religious: ethical in instituting good and preventing evil, and religious in responding to God's guidance. Inasmuch as the fulfillment of other-regarding ethical obligation justifies and even requires institutional structures like government agencies that could use reasonable force to ensure justice and fairness in all interpersonal human situations, the self-regarding duty of faith is founded upon a non-interventionist approach.

At this juncture the "best" community faces its greatest challenge: how can it create an inclusive political society if the guiding principle of its collective identity as a confessional community is strictly founded upon shared religious doctrine? How about the Qur'an's repeated reminder that if God had willed "whoever is in the earth would have believed, all of them, all together" and

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that people cannot be constrained "until they are believers"(Q. 10:99)? Does this not contradict the emphasis on a comprehensive shared religious doctrine in a political society? Given the logic of divine wisdom in endowing humans with the freedom to believe, it is inconceivable that the foundation of this just society under the "best" community be based on an exclusionary notion of mandatory uniformity in human religiosity.

The Qur'an severely criticizes the exclusive claims of the pre-Qur'anic communities, which led to hostilities among them and destruction of life, including the lives of God's prophets, who were unjustly killed while calling people to serve God's purposes. In fact, to alleviate the negative impact of such behavior, the Qur'an went back to the very source of the monotheistic tradition, namely, "submission to the Divine Will." Essentially and fundamentally, it is the acceptance of the same Creator that determines the spiritual equality of the followers of diverse religious traditions. Nevertheless, this God-centered

pluralism of the Qur'an was in tension with the historical, relative experience of the new political society, which regarded its own system as the best. This exclusionary conceptualization of historical Islam proved to be both a point of departure for the early community, affording it a specific identity as a Muslim community, and the beginning of an internal dialogue within Muslim community about the Qur'anic commandment to create an inclusive, just public order under divine revelation. The importance given to the moral duty to institute good and prevent evil indicates the way the Qur'an conceived of ethics as the basis for interreligious cooperation, in a religiously oriented civil society, with equally shared responsibility for the moral well-being of the people.

The juridical thesis that Islam does not make a distinction between the religious and the political requires revision in light of what has been argued in this paper. God-human relations are founded upon individual autonomy and moral agency regulated by a sense of accountability to God alone for any acts of omission or commission. Interhuman relations, in contrast, are founded upon an individual and collective social-political life, with personal responsibility and social accountability as the means of attaining justice and fairness in human relations. This latter category of interhuman relations has

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customarily provided Muslim governments with the principle of functional secularity that allows them to regulate all matters pertaining to interpersonal justice. The same principle rules out the authority of Muslim governments to regulate religious matters except when the free exercise of religion for any individual is in danger. The foundation of a civil society in Islam is based on the equality in creation in which the privilege of citizenry attaches to equally Muslim and non-Muslim, entailing inclusive political, civil, and social membership in the community.

Functional secularity (not secularism) was well entrenched in the political thinking of the early community. A number of Arab tribes that had submitted to the Prophet Muhammad felt themselves free of any further obligation when the Prophet died and refused to send any further taxes to Medina. They viewed their relation to the public order under the Prophet

as null and void because of the death of the party to the contract. But some men had a more integrated conception of the Islamic polity and of the community the Prophet had created. Islam was not merely a matter of each individual obeying God; it was a compact in which all Muslims and non-Muslims were bound to one another as well. This compact did not cease with the Prophet's death; the pattern of life he had instituted could be continued under the leadership of those who had been closest to him. Anyone who separated from the core of the Muslims at Medina was in fact backing out of Islamic polity; they were traitors to the cause of God for which Prophet Muhammad and his followers had so long been fighting. That cause was still to be fought for and demanded a single chief to whom all would be loyal. The successors to the Prophet are credited with persuading the Muslims of Medina to adopt this daring interpretation of a latent political membership as distinct from a religious membership. It is remarkable that when one studies the religious sermons that were delivered by the early Muslim leaders on Fridays or other religious holy days, there are hardly any comments about getting rid of the non-Muslims as a threat to Islamic public order. Their treatment of their subjects is illustrated by their inclusive rather than exclusive political order.

Notes

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- 1 Richard A. Posner, *The Problematics of Moral and Legal Theory* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), p. 6 maintains that there is no-trans-historical or extra-cultural authoritative source for our moral obligations. A form of moral relativism is dominant in an adaptationist conception of morality, in which "morality is judged nonmorally....by its contribution to the survival, or other ultimate goals, of a society or some group within it." Such a view would ultimately lead to the irreconcilable differences among world communities regarding universal moral values that provide human rights norms their validity internationally. I do concede that cultures retrieve and apply these norms in the context of their social-political experience variedly; but they cannot afford to negate them as being relative to their humanity, otherwise it will be impossible to speak about funda-
 - mental right to freedom of conscience and religion.
 - 2 A number of Sunni and Shi'ite jurists have questioned the applicability of the classical rulings about death penalty, mainly because the Qur'an treats the matter as strictly between God and human being, and, hence, beyond the jurisdiction of Muslim courts over the offense. In my earlier research I have argued against not only the death penalty as such; I have also questioned the application of the concept in Islamic juridical corpus because of the absence of the "church" that can determine the seriousness of the offence. In addition, the problem seems to be the lack of precision in categorizing the offence as "religious," since the precedent that provided the paradigm case for the later rulings of capital punishment in the early Muslim history was certainly a matter of rebellion against Muslim political order, and not against the religion of Islam.
 - 3 For example, Ayatollah Muntazari, has ruled against capital punishment in this regard and has criticized the Iranian government for ignoring one of the fundamental articles of the Declaration about the freedom of religion.
 - 4 In his article on the rights of religious minorities in the Muslim world, the prominent traditionalist Sunni jurist, Yusuf al-Qaradawi, while asserting the rights of the minorities to the freedom of religion, entirely ignores to deal with the right of a Muslim to convert from Islam to other recognized religions like Christianity and Judaism. See: "Huquq al-Aqalliyat ghayr-muslima," in *al-Twhid*, Vol. 84 (2006), pp. 13-23; Vol. 85 (2007), pp. 15-28.
 - 5 David Novak, *Covenantal Rights: A Study in Jewish*

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- Political Theory* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), p. 5ff. discusses the relation between “person” and “community” and human existence in terms of a person’s participation in a series of communities.
- 6 I have adopted the phrase from Razi, Tafsir al-Kabir, Vol. 25:120, where he believes this to be sufficient for the proper affirmation of the unity of God as explained in the revelation.
 - 7 Tabtaba’i, al-Mizan, Vol. 18:328 and Sayyid Qutb, fi Zilal al-Qur’n, Vol. 6:3349 make a distinction between a deeper commitment through *iman* and formal submission through *islam*. As Qutb points out explicitly: “This external *islam* is the one that has not as yet fused with the heart in order to become transformed into a trustworthy and dependable faith.” And, although God accepts this *islam* because He is most forgiving and merciful, it is not the expected ideal faith.
 - 8 See, for instance, Sayyid Qutb, fi Zilal al-Qur’an, Vol. 1:291 and Tabataba’i, al-Mizan, Vol. 2:342-43, for representative commentaries of the Sunni and Shi’ite thinkers, respectively.
 - 9 Tabari, Jam’ al-Bayan, Vol. 3:10-12; Razi, Tafsir, Vol. 4:15-16. For a variety of interpretations of the verse to circumscribe its general meaning, see: Mahmoud Ayoub, *The Qur’an and Its Interpreters* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1984), Vol. 1:252-255.
 - 10 Immanuel Kant, *Religion within the Limits of Reason Alone*, trans. Theodore M. Greene and Hoyt H. Hudson (New York: Harper and Row, 1960), p. 98 argues that the real content of religion is that secured by the rational requirements of a universal morality. Morality is identified with rationality, that is, acting on reasons grounded in discursive reflection. Kant’s pluralism is underscored by his statement: “There is only *one* (true) *religion*; but there can be *faiths* of several kind.”
 - 11 See, Kenneth Cragg, “Islam and Other Faiths,” in *Theology of Religions: Christianity and Other Religions* (Rome: Editrice Pontificia Universita Gregoriana, 1993), pp. 257-270. Cragg’s essentialist and reductionist analysis of the selected passages of the Qur’an is undertaken to assess the possibility of dialogue with Muslims in the light of their religious exclusive claim to religious truth and its finality founded upon the doctrine of supersession. It is worth pointing out that a similar case can be made for the most exclusive theology for Christianity and its relation to other religions.
 - 12 W. T. Dickens, “Frank Conversations: Promoting Peace among the Abrahamic Traditions through Interreligious Dialogue,” in *Journal of Religious Ethics*, Vol. 34, Number 3 (September 2006), has critically evaluated John Hick’s revisionist pluralism and has proposed fresh grounds for a more fruitful dialogue to achieve peace among the followers of the three Abrahamic traditions.
 - 13 Whether Sunni or Shi’ite, majority of the religious leaders representing the traditionalist scholarship reject the notion of “relative” truth claim in order to produce a theology of interreligious dialogue. Several articles and books that were published in the late 1990s, when pluralism was the catchword of the new

- world order in which the Declaration was asserting its moral authority to promote freedom of religion, prominent Muslim leaders while rejecting revisionist pluralism that denied exclusive truth claim to the faith communities reasserted the Qur'anic notion of pluralism as a source of social co-existence. For details of this debate see: Sachedina, *Islamic Roots of Democratic Pluralism*.
- 14 Marshall G. S. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam: Conscience and History in a World Civilization* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977), 3 vols., Vol. 1:336.
- 15 The term 'rite' or 'legal school' is the translation of *madhhab* - a system of rules that cover all aspects of human spiritual and moral obligations *takif*, plural of *takalif* that a Muslim must carry out as a member of the community. Four *madhhabs*, Maliki, Hanafi, Shafi'i and Hanbali, were ultimately accepted as legitimate by the Sunnis; while the Shi'ite formulated and followed their own rite, known as Ja'fari>.
- 16 I have treated the matter of freedom of conscience from the Qur'anic point of view in my earlier work: "Liberty of Conscience and Religion in the Qur'an," in *Human Rights and the Conflict of Cultures: Western and Islamic Perspectives on Religious Liberty*, co-authored with David Little and John Kelsay (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1988), pp. 53-100.
- 17 Historically, Muslims like other religious groups, have demonstrated far greater intolerant attitude towards dissenters within their own ranks. Muslim history is replete with instances of intra-religious violence, not only between the majoritarian Sunni and the minority Shi'ite communities; but also among the Sunni adherents of different legal rites, such as the Hanafi and the Hanbali schools. See: *Christians and Jews in the Ottoman Empire: The Functioning of a Plural Society*, ed. by Benjamin Braude and Bernard Lewis (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1982), pp. 1-34; G. R. Elton, "Introduction," in *Persecution and Toleration*, Vol. 21 of *Studies in Church History*, ed. W. J. Shields (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1984), pp. xiii-xv.
- 18 McAuliffe, *Qur'anic Christians: An Analysis of Classical and Modern Exegesis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), has done extensive work on the verses dealing with Muslims perceptions of Christians through the exegetical works produced both by the Sunni and the Shi'ite commentators, from the classical to the modern period. Her study concludes accurately that the issue of the prophethood of Muhammad remained an important element is affording non-Qur'anic 'Peoples of the Book' a share in the salvation. However, in the midst of this exclusivist soteriology there have been Muslim commentators, more in the modern period of the inter-faith hermeneutics, who have regarded the promise in Q. 2:62 as still important in constructing inclusive theology founded upon belief in God, the Hereafter and the right action as overriding criteria in attaining the salvation.