

Between Heaven and Hell

*Islam, Salvation, and
the Fate of Others*



Edited by

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OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

completed in 1126 by the staunchly Sunni theologian Rashīd al-Dīn Maybudī, a contemporary of al-Ghazālī and follower of the famous Ḥanbalī Sufi 'Abd Allāh Anṣārī (on Maybudī, see Annabelle Keeler, *Sufi Hermeneutics* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006]). The passage follows a long exegetical section quoting the opinions of various authorities on Q. 25:20–44. Maybudī then turns to explaining the “allusions” (*iṣṭirāḥāt*) that can be discovered in these verses by someone with deep insight into their meaning. In the previous section of the commentary, Maybudī had explained that the verse in question refers to the terrible punishment that will be meted out on the Day of Resurrection to those who do not follow the religious command. In this section, he applies the principle of *tawḥīd* and points to the foundational significance of the mercy that drives the creative command. The verse is this: “We [God] shall advance on what work they have done and make it scattered dust” (25:23).

One of the *shaykh*s of the Path said, “No verse in the whole Qur'an makes me as happy as this verse. When God throws these tainted works of ours into the wind of His utter lack of needs (*istighnā'*), He will act toward us with His bounty alone. What He does with His bounty will be worthy of His generosity, and that is better than what is worthy of our works.”

Then he said, “God has rights (*ḥuqūq*) against us, like obedience and worship, but in our makeup we are destitute (*mufṭis*), and it is He who has decreed our destitution. When the decreer decrees that someone be destitute, the plaintiff can have nothing against him. . . . Whenever someone is destitute, it is incumbent to give him respite so that he can acquire some capital. But we will never acquire any capital until the next world, when He will pour the treasury of bounty on our heads. We have no riches through our own being—we are rich through His attributes. Nothing comes from us or our works. When some affair is opened up for us, it is His bounty that opens it up. When He accepts us, He does not accept us because of the form of our practice. He accepts us because of our readiness that He saw in His beginningless knowledge. Everything in the cosmos is subordinate to that readiness. Wait until tomorrow [the Resurrection], when He will make the readiness apparent and open up the doors of the treaties. He will give the treasury of mercy [e.g., the All-Merciful mercy] to the disobedient and the treasury of bounty [e.g., the Ever-Merciful mercy] to the destitute and thereby let them discharge His rights with His treasury, for the servants cannot discharge His rights with what belongs to them.” (*Kaṣf al-Asrār wa-'uddat al-abrār*, ed. 'Alī Aṣghar Hikmat [Tehran: Dāneshgāh, 1952–60], 740; for a much briefer version, see *ibid.*, 2:23).

14. This hadith appears in the *Musnad* of Ahmad ibn Ḥanbal.

15. This hadith appears in *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* (in “Kitāb al-riqāq”).

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Beyond Polemics and Pluralism

THE UNIVERSAL MESSAGE OF THE QUR'AN

Reza Shah-Kazemi

And they say: "None entereth Paradise unless he be a Jew or a Christian." These are their vain desires. Say: "Bring your proof if ye are truthful." Nay, but whosoever submitteeth his purpose to God, and he is virtuous, his reward is with his Lord. No fear shall come upon them, neither shall they grieve. (Q. 2:111–112)

Introduction

This passage from the Qur'an demonstrates clearly the spiritual sense of polemics and the logical absurdity of religious chauvinism. The text does not allow us to play the game of polemics. It is not possible to do that only those called “Muslims” in the confessional sense enter Paradise, rather, we are called upon to stress heartfelt submission to God, to the practice of virtue in consequence of that submission, as the foundation upon which one can legitimately hope for that divine reward by means of which, alone, one enters Paradise. In other words, the riposte to narrow-minded polemical claims compels us to a higher level of discourse, one that transcends theological perspectives based on sentiment and vanity; or on what the Qur'an refers to as *amānī*, plural of *ummiyya*, which can be translated as “vain”—vain both in the sense of “conceited” and in the sense of being futile. It is important to note that this word is also in relation to the Muslims, in the following passage, which reinforces the message of Q. 2:111–112:

And those who believe and do good works, We shall bring them into Gardens underneath which rivers flow, wherein they will abide forever—a promise of God in truth; and who can be more truthful than God in utterance? It will not be in accordance with your vain desires, nor with the vain desires of the People of the Book. He who doth wrong will have the recompense thereof. . . . And whoso doeth good works, whether male or female, and is a believer, such will enter Paradise, and will not be wronged the dint of a date-stone. Who is better in religion than he who submitteth his purpose to God (*aslama wajhahu li-llāhi*), while being virtuous, and following the religious community of Abraham the unswervingly devout? (4:122–125)

Spiritual justice, stemming from divine wisdom, takes priority over selfish desire, stemming from religious chauvinism. These and similar verses invite us to rise above the vanity of particularist polemics and contemplate the sphere of universal metaphysics. In effecting this shift of consciousness from form to essence, from the outward to the inward, from the particular to the universal, the Qur'an helps us overcome the limitations of religious exclusivism, that is, the attitude expressed in one of the tenets of traditional Catholic doctrine: *extra ecclesiam nulla salus* ("no salvation outside the church").

In our times, this attitude has resulted in countless intelligent people, in all parts of the world, losing their faith in their inherited religion. In traditional civilizations, such an attitude of exclusivism was more tenable and justifiable, given the fact that religious communities were so clearly distinct from each other, and lived almost as self-contained communal worlds, even when they were coexisting in the same lands. However, the same attitude becomes difficult to maintain, if not completely untenable, in the contemporary world, where religious boundaries have all but dissolved. We live in a global religious village, the different faith communities intermingling in a manner that would have been inconceivable in the premodern period. In this context, sensitive and intelligent people cannot help perceiving virtue, faith, beauty, and holiness in the adherents of religions other than their own. Are these people to deny the validity of the faiths that give rise to these flowers of holiness, in order to uphold their belief in the exclusive validity of their own faith, and thereby risk denying with their will that which is self-evident to their heart? Or should they affirm the validity of other faiths, doing so at the price of diluting the absoluteness of their commitment to their own faith?

Religious thinkers in the West have struggled with this "problematic" in the most general terms, traditional polemics are being confronted by modern pluralism, the doctrine chiefly associated with the Christian scholar John Hick. According to Hick, all religions are equally valid; one must abandon traditional claims to be the sole possessors of the truth, and one must affirm the equal truth of all religions. But this shift from polemics to pluralism has brought with it an inevitable dilution of commitment to the specific, unique forms of one's own faith, as we shall see shortly.

The question that I intend to address in this chapter, then, can be expressed as follows: how can one answer to the urgent need to transcend conventional exclusivism and open up to the Other, without relativizing or diluting one's own faith and identity? How can one go beyond absolutist polemics without falling into the pitfall of relativist pluralism?

The argument I make here is that the universality of the Qur'an provides us with the most effective answer to this question. This presentation of the universal message of the Qur'an is based on the tradition of Sufi metaphysics, in particular the school of thought derived from Ibn 'Arabi (d. 1240). It also benefits from the insights of the contemporary school of thought known as the "perennial philosophy," associated chiefly with the name of Frithjof Schuon (d. 1998), and the most important contemporary scholarly exponent of which is Seyyed Hossein Nasr.

Beyond Polemics

As regards the first issue, it is surely one of the greatest ironies of our times that the scripture that is most tolerant of other religions, indeed that is unique in its recognition of, and reverence for, other religion should be used as the basis for the most fanatical acts of intolerant violence. In the West, new interpretations of scripture are required in order to move away from traditional exclusivism. Now this exclusivism is based on the *literal* meaning of key verses of the Bible; by contrast, when we look at the Qur'an, it is precisely the *literal* meaning of dozens of verses that incontrovertibly uphold a universal perspective on religion. One often needs to resort to complex strategies of interpretation and abrogation in order to move away from the literal, universal meaning toward an imposed exclusivist reading of these verses.

In order to highlight, as succinctly as possible, the universal message of the Qur'an let us imagine an interview between a Western inquirer and a Muslim. The interviewer asks the following six basic questions, and the Muslim must answer in the form of one or two verses from the Qur'an. It is striking that these simple short answers cannot avoid universality; they cannot but express some aspect of the universal scope of the Qur'anic message.

Question 1: What is your credo; what do you believe?

The answer to this must include Q. 2:285: "The Messenger believeth in that which hath been revealed unto him from his Lord, and [so do] the believers. Every one believeth in God and His angels and His scriptures and His messengers. . . ." Indeed, it is an essential part of Muslim belief to affirm the truth of all the messengers of God, making no distinction between any of them. Belief in all revealed religions is stressed here as an integral and not merely optional aspect of Islamic faith.

Question 2: According to your faith, who is saved?

Again, the answer is astonishingly universal: the Qur'anic verse 2:62 reads as follows: "Truly those who believe, and the Jews, and the Christians, and the Sabians—whoever believeth in God and the Last Day and performeth virtuous deeds—surely their reward is with their Lord, and no fear shall come upon them, neither shall they grieve." Rather than give an exhaustive list of all religions, the Qur'an instructs us that the essential prerequisites for salvation are faith and virtue. These are essential but not sufficient conditions for salvation, since, as the Prophet said, nobody enters Paradise on account of his deeds, but only through the mercy of God. Nevertheless, this verse informs us that faith and virtue will be rewarded by the Lord who is merciful and just.

Question 3: Why is there a diversity of faiths?

Again, rather than requiring some elaborate interpretive strategy, the Qur'an gives us the explicit divine purpose behind the diversity of revelations and religions. The latter half of Q. 5:48 reads as follows:

For each We have appointed a Law and a Way. Had God willed, He could have made you one community. But that He might try you by that which He hath given you [He hath made you as you are]. So vie with one another in good works. Unto God ye will all return, and He will inform you of that wherein ye differed.

This view stands at the opposite of the pluralist thesis, according to which the diversity of faiths is the result of human responses to God. The Qur'an tells us on the contrary that God is Himself the source of religious diversity, and that we as members of different faith communities should engage in healthy competition: to outstrip each other in goodness.²

Question 4: What is the quintessence of the religious message?

If one were to choose a single Qur'anic verse to answer this question it might well be 21:25: "And We sent no messenger before thee but We inspired him [saying]: 'There is no God save Me, so worship Me.'" This quintessence is by definition universal; whatever is added to this message is specific to time and place and other conditions. Universality takes precedence over particularity, in the measure that essence takes precedence over form.³

Question 5: To whom is this message addressed?

The whole of humanity has received this message, according to the Qur'an: "For every community (*umma*) there is a messenger" (10:47).⁴

Question 6: What is the purpose of warfare in your faith?

The answer to this question would have to contain what many commentators regard as the very first Qur'anic passage revealed in relation to warfare, 22:39-40: "Permission [to fight] is given to those who are being fought, for they have been wronged. . . . Had God not driven back some by means of others, monasteries, churches, synagogues, and mosques—wherein the name of God is oft-invoked—would assuredly have been destroyed." This defense of all places of worship resonates with the explicit function of the Qur'anic revelation as a *muṣaddiq*, "confirmer," and a *muhaymin*, "protector": "And unto thee We have revealed the Scripture with the Truth, confirming whatever scripture was before it, and a protector of it" (Q. 5:48).

In the light of these illuminating verses, the explicit denunciation of religious exclusivism in Q. 2:111-112 cited at the outset, assumes greater significance. This denunciation of exclusivism should be situated within a universal, all-embracing Qur'anic perspective on the nature of revealed truth, on the one hand, and an objective, nonconfessional perspective on the conditions and requirements of salvation on the other. It remains to be seen how one is to integrate this universal vision within a framework that does not violate the uniqueness, specificity, and normativity of the Islamic faith.

Beyond Pluralism

The majority of Muslim scholars who have attempted to bring the message of the Qur'an into this debate have done so by submitting to the rules of the pluralist game, such as this game has been defined by John Hick. Several writers have stressed the universality of the message of the Qur'an, but in doing so, they have truncated and reduced the message of the Qur'an in conformity with the pluralist model.⁵ The pluralism of John Hick calls upon fellow pluralists, in their own religions, to dismantle those aspects of their beliefs that would assert the uniqueness of their religion: for to be unique is to lay claim to superiority, and to claim superiority breaks the rules of the pluralist game.⁶ The pluralist model thus aims at including all, but ends up excluding most: that is, the overwhelming majority of believers in any religion, those who practice that religion precisely because they believe it to be the only true religion, or at least the best religion.

In other words, the would-be inclusivist excludes exclusivists, and thus ends up as an exclusivist himself, in a manner that logically undermines his claim to inclusivism. In contrast, the "universalist" becomes a particularist precisely by excluding particularism. To give just one example, Hasan Askari, a notable Muslim scholar associated with Hick, goes so far in asserting Islam's universality that he claims that "Islam," in the sense of primordial and universal submission, abolishes "the particular and the historical Islam."⁷

Instead of integrating the particular within the universal and seeing the universal as embodied within the particular, the pluralist is forced to sacrifice or belittle the particular for the sake of the universal. If, however, one has recourse to Sufi metaphysics, one is able to transcend this false dichotomy between the particular and the universal and to see each in the light of the Other. This is the vision that flows from the spiritual perspective of thinkers like Ibn 'Arabī, for whom the universal has no meaning without the particular, and vice versa. His great statement on the nature of being can furnish the foundation both for a resolution of the particular within the universal and for an effective mode of interpreting verses of the Qur'an in a manner that does not exclude exclusivism: "Part of the completeness of existence is the existence of incompleteness within it; otherwise, the completeness of existence would be incomplete by virtue of the absence of incompleteness within it."⁸

In the light of this metaphysical principle, Ibn 'Arabī's hermeneutics can help us to present the universal message of the Qur'an in such a way

as to transcend both the explosive fanaticism that is fed by conventional exclusivism, on the one hand, and the corrosive relativism that is the product of modern pluralism, on the other. The key hermeneutical principle of Ibn 'Arabī, as far as our argument is concerned, is expressed as follows:

Every sense (*waḥīf*) which is supported by any verse in God's Speech (*kalām*)—whether it is the Qur'an, the Torah, the Psalms, the Gospel, or the Scripture—in the view of anyone who knows that language (*lisān*) is intended (*muqṣṣad*) by God in the case of that interpreter (*muta'awwif*). For His knowledge encompasses all senses. . . . Hence every interpreter correctly grasps the intention of God in that word. . . . Hence no man of knowledge can declare wrong an interpretation which is supported by the words (*lafẓ*). He who does so is extremely deficient in knowledge (*fi ghāya min al-qusūr fi al-'ilm*). However, it is not necessary to uphold the interpretation nor to put it into practice, except in the case of the interpreter himself and those who follow his authority.⁹

From this key principle one can approach the Qur'anic message of universality in a manner that is truly all-inclusive: one includes even the exclusivist reading as a legitimate possibility. This need not be seen as contradicting universality but rather, as expressive of universality, and indeed, proving its all-encompassing nature.

For example, consider the verse, "Truly, religion with God is Islam (*al-islām*)" (Q. 3:19). The question as to whether "Islam" is to be understood here universally (as the principle of universal submission, as Askari would stress), or only as the particular religion revealed to the last prophet, can be resolved without any need for mutual exclusion. A truly universalist understanding of the meaning of "Islam," or of religion as such, both affirms and transcends the particular meaning. One can see the particular religion not just as an embodiment of the universal principle but also as a path leading to that essence of which it is a formal embodiment. The universal essence manifests in and as the particular form; it is not contradicted by it.

This universalist hermeneutic of Ibn 'Arabī also helps us to address the problematic issue of abrogation. We cited earlier Q. 2:62 in response to question 2: "Who is saved?": "Truly those who believe, and the Jews, and the Christians, and the Sabians—whoever believeth in God and the Last Day and performeth virtuous deeds—surely their reward is with their

Lord, and no fear shall come upon them, neither shall they grieve." The literal meaning of this verse cannot be disputed; however, for the majority of the classical commentators, the meaning is circumvented by recourse to the strategy of abrogation. The verse is deemed to have been abrogated by Q. 3:85, which reads: "And whoso seeketh a religion other than Islam, it will not be accepted from him, and he will be a loser in the Hereafter."

Among these commentators, however, it is noteworthy that al-Ṭabarī (d. 923) and the Shi'i commentator al-Ṭabarsī (d. 1153) both reject the idea that the verse can be subject to abrogation. Before turning to Ibn 'Arabī's view on abrogation in general, and applying his hermeneutical principles to this verse in particular, it is worth noting what al-Ṭabarī says on this question, particularly in his commentary on Q. 2:106: "We abrogate no verse, nor do We cause it to be forgotten, but that We bring one better than it or like it." As regards the principle of abrogation (*naskh*) al-Ṭabarī writes as follows:

Thus, God transforms the lawful into the unlawful, and the unlawful into the lawful, and the permitted into the forbidden, and the forbidden into the permitted. This pertains only to such issues as commands and prohibitions, proscriptions and generalizations, withholding and granting authorization. But as for reports (*akhbār*), they cannot abrogate nor be abrogated.¹⁰

In regard to Q. 2:62, he writes that the literal meaning of the verse should be upheld, without being restricted in its scope by reference to reports of its abrogation, "because, in respect of the bestowal of reward for virtuous action with faith, God has not singled out some of His creatures as opposed to others."¹¹

Turning now to Ibn 'Arabī, let us note his position on the issue of abrogation in general. Most Muslim scholars assert that Islam "abrogates" the previous religious dispensations, in the sense that its revealed law supersedes the laws promulgated in pre-Qur'anic revelations.¹² Ibn 'Arabī accepts this position but then nuances the notion of abrogation in such a way as to transform it into an affirmation of the continued validity of the "abrogated" faiths. Abrogation does not imply nullification or invalidation, neither does it imply that the religions "superseded" by Islam are rendered inefficacious in salvific terms. He stresses that one of the reasons for the pre-eminence (the "supercession," literally, the quality of being "seated above") of Islam resides precisely in the fact that Muslims must

believe in all revelations and not just in that conveyed by the Prophet of Islam. We return to the universalist answer given to question one above: "What do you believe?"

All the revealed religions are lights. Among these religions, the revealed religion of Muḥammad is like the light of the sun among the lights of the stars. When the sun appears, the lights of the stars are hidden, and their lights are included in the light of the sun. Their being hidden is like the abrogation of the other revealed religions that takes place through Muḥammad's revealed religion. Nevertheless, they do in fact exist, just as the existence of the lights of the stars is actualized (*muhāqqaq*). This explains why we have been required in our all-inclusive religion to have faith in the truth of all the messengers and all the revealed religions. They are not rendered null (*bāṭil*) by abrogation—that is the opinion of the ignorant.¹³

To believe that pre-Qur'anic religions lose their efficacy is thus to render meaningless the avowed function of Islam to be a "confirmation" and "protection" in relation to those religions: if the religions are inefficacious as vehicles of salvation, there is no point in confirming and protecting them. They should simply be cast into the dustbin of religious history along with other degenerate religious traditions, according to the logic of those who believe that "abrogation" equals "nullification"—the "ignorant," as Ibn 'Arabī calls them. In contrast to this logic one should argue robustly as follows: the Sharia grants protection to believers of other religious traditions precisely because the essential, saving spirit of the revelations inaugurating those traditions is granted recognition, protection, and confirmation by the Islamic revelation. If the revelations pertaining to pre-Qur'anic religions were rendered null and void by the Qur'an, the legal protection accorded to them by Islamic law would be at best paradoxical, at worst, illogical.

However, when we apply the hermeneutical principle of Ibn 'Arabī to the specific issue of the abrogation of Q. 2:62 by 3:85, we observe that a universalist hermeneutic must allow for this particularist interpretation, even at the price of paradox. In other words, since the literal meaning of 3:85 does indeed allow for the interpretation that would deem all pre-Qur'anic revelations unacceptable to God, the universalist cannot simply dismiss this interpretation as being wrong or unfounded. For, to quote Ibn

'Arabi again, "no man of knowledge can declare wrong an interpretation which is supported by the words. He who does so is extremely deficient in knowledge."

In defense of this inclusion of exclusivism, one might say the following: there will always be a category of Muslims who must believe in this kind of exclusivism if they are to believe in Islam; and this exclusivist meaning, being supportable by the literal words of this and other such verses, was surely intended (*maqṣūd*) by God. That is, He wished this meaning to be inferred by those who need it in order to uphold key spiritual and intellectual concomitants of their faith in Islam. One might say that their faith in Islam is supported by pillars of exclusivism. Remove the exclusivism, and the edifice of faith collapses.

But let us also recall the words that complete this passage from Ibn 'Arabi: "However, it is not necessary to uphold the interpretation nor to put it into practice, except in the case of the interpreter himself and those who follow his authority." So the universalist will grant the exclusivist his right to interpret the words of Q. 3:85 in this manner, while not being under any obligation to concede that this is *the one and only* meaning of the verse. Rather he would politely refer to the preceding verse, 3:84, and argue that the "Islam" mentioned in 3:85 *can also* be understood as universal submission rather than simply as the particular religion inaugurated by the Qur'anic revelation; and that this universal submission is in fact described in the verse immediately preceding 3:85. This verse, 3:84, reads as follows:

Say: "We believe in God and that which is revealed unto us, and that which is revealed unto Abraham and Ishmael and Isaac and Jacob and the tribes, and that which was given unto Moses and Jesus and the prophets from their Lord. We make no distinction between any of them, and unto Him we have submitted."

We thus return to the idea of "Islam" as universal and primordial submission, and uphold this interpretation as being more satisfactory than the exclusivist interpretation. Let us recall that Askari argues that this universal Islam "abolishes the particular and the historical Islam." Such an "abolition" of particular and historical Islam ironically shares a great deal with the kind of exclusivism it is supposed to be transcending; for this "abolition" is a kind of pluralist mirror image of the traditional "abrogation" resorted to by exclusivist Muslims. Both pluralist "abolition" and exclusivist

"abrogation" are avoided by the true universalist. The particular and historical form of Islam is doubtless to be situated at a lower level than the universal and timeless essence, but the particular is not to be trivialized, marginalized, or invalidated by the universal. On the contrary, the particular is elevated and ennobled in the very measure that it is deemed to be an expression of the universal—the form becomes more, not less, *essential* to the extent that it is grasped as an embodiment of the essence and a vehicle leading to the essence.

In other words, a vision of the universal essence of Islam, its *ḥaqīqa*, can, and indeed must, go hand in hand with adherence to the specific form of Islam, the Sharia. The uniqueness and irreducible character of the Islamic form is thereby not sacrificed at the altar of universality, in the name of the false god of pluralism; rather, the uniqueness of its form is articulated, precisely, in terms of its universal ramifications. To apply a key principle expressed in a different context by Frithjof Schuon, referred to as a "formidable scholar" by the late Shaykh of al-Azhar, Abdel-Halim Mahmud,¹⁴ one might say: far from diminishing our participation in the particular treasures of the Qur'anic revelation, a universal perspective bestows upon those treasures a compass that touches the roots of existence.¹⁵

This conception of the relationship between the form and the essence is far more likely to engage the traditional exclusivist; it has more chance of persuading him to move from a "harsh" to a "gentle" form of exclusivism.¹⁶ The Hickean pluralist is bound to provoke defensive reflexes from the conservative upholders of Islam, for this type of pluralism challenges the very normativity of Islam. The universalist, by contrast, upholds that normativity, while aerating it with a tolerant, respectful vision of the Other, a vision based on a plausible reading of many verses of the Qur'an. This vision is made less unacceptable for the exclusivist in that the normativity of Islam is not undermined, but rather enriched, by this perspective.

One of the most important concomitants of this presentation of Qur'anic universalism concerns the sensitive question of *dā'wa* (calling people to the faith). Traditional Muslims have shied away from presenting the universality of the Qur'anic message for fear of its implications regarding *dā'wa*: if all religions are still valid, on what basis do we invite people to Islam? However, those who wish to "bear witness" to the normativity of the Islamic faith have nothing to fear, for the universalist will not dismiss or deny the right or the duty to engage in *dā'wa*. For strict Hickean pluralists, of course, there can be no *dā'wa*, because the pluralist cannot assert that his religion is "better" than anyone else's. The Muslim

universalist, however, can argue that one of the best forms of *da'wa* lies, precisely, in expounding the universal message of the Qur'an: one's invitation to Islam can be made all the more compelling in the measure that this universal dimension of the Qur'an is brought to the fore.

In an age dominated by the false dichotomy between fanatical exclusivism and secular inclusivism, the revealed universality of the Qur'an constitutes the ideal antidote to both errors. Against so dark a background, the Qur'an stands out with dazzling clarity as the only revealed scripture in which other faiths are explicitly accorded spiritual reverence and not just juridical tolerance. Diatribe can thus give way to dialogue, and dialogue, in turn, can be appreciated as a form of *da'wa*—for those who feel the need to engage therein. The exclusivist can present Islam as the best religion, precisely because it recognizes and respects all religion. This is one aspect of the shift from "harsh" to "gentle" exclusivism noted above: one encourages the exclusivist to move from the position that says, "Islam is the only true religion," to the position which says, "Islam is the best religion." The first is based on a harsh rejection of all faiths but Islam,¹⁷ while the second is based on Ibn 'Arabi's principle: "We have been required in our all-inclusive religion to have faith in the truth of all the messengers and all the revealed religions."

This combination of universalism and particularism permits those practicing Muslims who are aware of the presence of holiness, truth, beauty, and virtue in religions other than Islam to do justice to their perception or intuition or "taste" of the religions of the Other, without compromising fidelity and commitment to their own religion. As noted at the outset, there are many believers in today's multicultural world who cannot, in good conscience, believe that the right to salvation and the realization of spiritual truth is the preserve of one religion only and that all other religions are intrinsically false. The Qur'an speaks to such individuals precisely through its universality, a universality that ensures that it also speaks to those who, on the contrary, cannot commit themselves to Islam unless they believe it to be *the best*, and, for yet others, the *only* religion. As Schuon observes: "Every religion by definition wants to be the best, and 'must want' to be the best, as a whole and also as regards its constitutive elements; this is only natural, so to speak, or rather 'supernaturally natural'.¹⁸

It is "supernaturally natural" because of the element of absoluteness that makes religion what it is: that absoluteness has a right to impose itself upon the believer, and it does so in myriad ways, including the universality that resides at the mystical core of every religion. One of the

distinguishing features of the Islamic revelation, however, is that this universality pervades even the exoteric form of the religion, that is, its very founding scripture. Martin Lings makes this point very clearly:

All mysticisms are equally universal . . . in that they all lead to the One Truth. But one feature of the originality of Islam, and therefore of Sufism, is what might be called a secondary universality, which is to be explained above all by the fact that as the last Revelation of this cycle of time it is necessarily something of a summing up. The Islamic credo is expressed by the [Qur'an] as belief in *God and His Angels and His Books and His Messengers*.

He then proceeds to cite Q. 5:48, saying that "nothing comparable to it could be found in either Judaism or Christianity." He continues this passage by pointing to another aspect of the universality of Islam, namely, its primordially:

There is a certain coincidence between the last and the first. With Islam "the wheel has come full circle," or almost; and that is why it claims to be a return to the primordial religion, which gives it yet another aspect of universality. One of the characteristics of the [Qur'an] as the last Revelation is that at times it becomes as it were transparent in order that the first Revelation may shine through its verses; and this first Revelation, namely the Book of Nature, belongs to everyone.¹⁹

This helps us to see the way in which adherence to a universalist perspective can go hand in hand with upholding the normativity of the Islamic faith. It can help us to see that universalists such as Ibn 'Arabi and Rumi (d. 1273) are not compromising their universalism when they refer to Islam as the best religion, when they describe the Prophet as the best of all prophets, and when they invite non-Muslims to embrace Islam. In perhaps the most oft-cited of all of Ibn 'Arabi's lines of poetry in the West we read about the "religion of love" (*din al-hubb*):

My heart has become capable of every form: it is a pasture for gazelles and a convent for Christian monks,
And a temple for idols and the pilgrim's Ka'ba and the tables of the [Torah] and the book of the [Qur'an].

I follow the religion of Love: whatever way Love's camels take, that is my religion and my faith.²⁰

But much less well known is his own interpretation of this "religion of love":

No religion is more sublime than a religion based on love and longing for Him whom I worship and in whom I have faith. . . . This is a peculiar prerogative of Muslims, for the station of perfect love is appropriated to Muḥammad beyond any other prophet, since God took him as His beloved.²¹

Similarly, with regard to Rūmī, we are presented with this paradoxical combination between universalist vision and an invitation to embrace Islam. He, also, refers to the "religion of love" (*millat-i 'ishq*), saying in his poetry:

The religion of Love is separate from all religions.

For lovers, the religion and creed is—God.²²

But this does not prevent Rūmī from appealing to a Christian, Jarrāḥ, to embrace Islam, and to cease believing that Jesus is God. When Jarrāḥ says that he believes that Jesus is God because this is what "our books" tell us, Rūmī replies:

That is not the action or the words of an intelligent man possessed of sound senses. God gave you an intelligence of your own, other than your father's intelligence, a sight of your own other than your father's sight, a discrimination of your own. Why do you nullify your sight and your intelligence, following an intelligence that will destroy you and not guide you? . . . Certainly, it is right that . . . the Lord of Jesus, upon whom be peace, honoured Jesus and brought him nigh to Him, so that whoever serves him has served his Lord, whoever obeys him has obeyed his Lord. But inasmuch as God has sent a Prophet superior to Jesus, manifesting by his hand all that He manifested by Jesus' hand and more, it behooves him to follow that Prophet, for God's sake, not for the sake of the Prophet himself.²³

Conclusion

If one wishes to define the universality of the message of the Qur'an in a manner that appeals not only to liberals, pluralists, and universalists, but also to the vast majority of practicing Muslims, together with their conservative representatives, one cannot afford to ignore or dismiss the principle and the power of religious exclusivism. If, on the contrary, one's universalism is predicated upon a truly inclusive perspective, one that includes even the exclusivist perspective, then instead of alienating the exoteric scholars of Islam, one has at least a better prospect of winning over some of them. One also has a realistic chance of changing the attitudes of those who adopt a harsh, intolerant attitude toward the non-Muslim Other, encouraging them to take up a more gentle, tolerant attitude toward adherents of faiths that are granted recognition in the Qur'an²⁴ and must be accorded protection according to the Sharia.

As regards dialogue with the West, such a nuanced presentation of universalism will serve two causes: first, it will demonstrate the unparalleled breadth of vision opened up by a spiritual perspective on the Qur'an, doing so in a manner that avoids both the pitfall of secular pluralism and the polemics of religious fanaticism. This will show that fervent faith in one's religion can go hand in hand with a universal vision of all revealed religions. Second, it will disprove the argument made by those who claim that Islamic "universalism" is but the preserve of a privileged elite, having no resonance with grass-roots Muslims.

In this connection, the following argument by Richard Neuhaus should be noted:

As for conferences, it is not hard to get "Muslim spokespersons." There are teams of them flitting from conference to conference all over the world. . . . I have met them in Davos, Switzerland, where top CEOs and heads of state annually gather with select intellectuals to chatter about the state of the world in the esperanto of an internationalese that is not spoken by real people anywhere. The Muslims in such settings are for the most part westernized, secularized; academic intellectuals who are there to "represent the Muslim viewpoint," but have little more connection with living Islam than many Christians and Jews.²⁵

A pluralist presentation of the universal message of the Qur'an falls into precisely this trap. The result is that non-Muslims in the West cannot take seriously the supposed universality of a message that is apparently upheld only by a tiny minority of Western-educated liberal Muslims. By contrast, one cannot fail to take seriously this universal message if it be presented in terms that are truly universal, and not simply nominally so. To be truly universal is to open up to the Other, but not at the expense of the Self—the community of believers which one belongs to and that one ostensibly represents in dialogue. Universality comprises and is expressed by specificity; it is not undermined or contradicted by it, as Ibn 'Arabi's metaphysical and hermeneutical perspectives demonstrate with such compelling force. On the one hand, we have the universal principle of divine ubiquity: "Wherever ye turn, there is the Face of God" (Q. 2:115); and on the other, the specific—exclusive—orientation that expresses, embodies, and enlivens the transformative power of the universal principle: "Turn thy face toward the Sacred Mosque, and wheresoever ye may be, turn your faces [when ye pray] toward it" (Q. 2:144).

Notes

1. This chapter summarizes the principal points in my book *The Other in the Light of the One: The Universality of the Qur'an and Intersfaith Dialogue* (Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 2006). This is an expanded version of a paper that was read at a conference organized by al-Azhar in Cairo, January 5, 2009: "Al-Azhar and the West—Bridges of Dialogue."
2. Cf. Q. 22:67: "Unto each community We have given sacred rites (*mansakan*) which they are to perform; so let them not dispute with thee about the matter, but summon them unto thy Lord"; and Q. 2:148: "And each one hath a goal (*wajihā*) toward which he turneth. So vie with one another in good works. . . ."
3. One might also add these verses, which further confirm that the message conveyed to the last prophet contains nothing essentially new: "Naught is said unto thee [Muhammad] but what was said unto the messengers before thee" (Q. 41:43); "Say: I am no innovation among the messengers. . ." (Q. 46:9).
4. Cf. Q. 40:78: "We sent messengers before thee; among them are those about whom We have told thee, and those about whom We have not told thee."
5. See, for example, Farid Esack, *Qur'an, Liberation and Pluralism* (Oxford: Oneworld, 1997); Abdulaziz Sachedina, *The Islamic Roots of Democratic Pluralism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001); and Hasan Askari, "Within and Beyond the Experience of

- Religious Diversity," in *The Experience of Religious Diversity*, ed. J. Hick and H. Ask (Aldershot: Gower Press, 1985).
6. Thus, Hick cannot affirm belief in the Christian dogma of Jesus being God incarnate, for this would be making a claim to uniqueness: "If Jesus was God incarnate the Christian religion is unique in having been founded by God in person." *Metaphor of God Incarnate: Christology in a Pluralistic World* (London: SCM Press, 1993), 87 (cited by Adnan Aslan, *Religious Pluralism in Christian and Islamic Philosophy: The Thought of John Hick and Seyyed Hossein Nasr* [Richmond: Curzon Press, 1998], 250).
 7. Hasan Askari, "Within and Beyond the Experience of Religious Diversity," in *The Experience of Religious Diversity*, ed. J. Hick and H. Askari (Aldershot: Gower Press, 1985), 199.
 8. Ibn 'Arabi, *al-Fuṭūḥāt al-makkiyya*, cited in William C. Chittick, *The Sufi Path Knowledge: Ibn al-'Arabi's Metaphysics of Imagination* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), 296 (translation modified).
 9. Ibn 'Arabi, *al-Fuṭūḥāt al-makkiyya*, cited in *ibid.*, 244 (translation modified).
 10. Muḥammad ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-bayān* (Beirut: Dār Iḥyā' al-Turūth al-'Arabiyya, 2001), 1546.
 11. *Ibid.*, 1373. Al-Ṭabarī, for his part, argues in his commentary, *Majma' al-bayān tafsīr al-Qur'an*, that "abrogation cannot apply to a declaration of promise. It can allowed only in respect of legal judgments that may be changed or altered with a changes in the conditions of general welfare." Cited in M. Ayoub, *The Qur'an as Its Interpreters* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1984), 110c. In the temporary period, both Rashīd Riḍā (d. 1935) and Allamah Ṭabatabā'i (d. 1981) likewise uphold the literal meaning of the verse, and reject the possibility that it subject to abrogation. See the discussion of this issue in Farid Esack, *Qur'an, Liberation and Pluralism* (Oxford: Oneworld, 1997), 162–166; and in Abdulaziz Sachedina, *The Islamic Roots of Democratic Pluralism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 29–34.
 12. See the article "Abrogation," by John Burton in *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'an*, ed. J. McAuliffe (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 113.
 13. Ibn 'Arabi, *al-Fuṭūḥāt al-makkiyya*, cited in William C. Chittick, *Imaginal Worlds: Ibn al-'Arabi and the Problem of Religious Diversity* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), 125 (translation modified).
 14. See Abdel-Halim Mahmud, *Qaḍiyat al-tasawwuf: al-madrasa al-shādhiliyya* (Cairo: Dār al-Ma'ārif, 1999), 297. It is interesting to note that Shaykh Abdel-Halim, one of the most highly revered Shaykhs of al-Azhar of modern times, spoke in glowing terms about the founder of the perennial school of thought, René Guénon (d. 1951). He went so far as to say that Guénon was one of those personalities who have rightfully taken up their place in history and that "Muslims place him close to al-Ghazālī and his like (*yaqda wahu al-Mushimūn bi-jawār al-imām al-Ghazālī wa-amthalihi*)" (*ibid.*, 301).

15. See F. Schuon, *Light on the Ancient Worlds* (Bloomington: World Wisdom, 2006), 57 for the full citation in context.
16. See Shah-Kazemi, *The Other in the Light of the One: The Universality of the Qur'an and Intersfaith Dialogue* (Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 2006), 210–278, for elaboration on this argument.
17. This harsh rejection of all other faiths, which all too often characterizes the ultra-orthodox puritanical flag-wavers of Islam, can in our times easily descend into militant jihadism, which is an illegitimate aberration, not least from the point of view of the Sharia—whence the importance of recognizing the stabilizing role played historically by the kind of “tolerant exclusivism” that has traditionally been fostered by principled adherence to the Sharia.
18. F. Schuon, “The Idea of ‘The Best’ in Religions,” in his *Christianity/Islam—Essays on Esoteric Ecumenism* (Bloomington: World Wisdom Books, 1985), 151. Recent works in religious philosophy in the West have been reevaluating the intellectual credibility of religious exclusivism. See for example, David Basinger, *Religious Diversity: A Philosophical Assessment* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002). The most salient point made in this book seems to be the following, which develops some powerful arguments made by Kelly James Clarke (in “Perils of Pluralists,” *Faith and Philosophy* 14 [1997]: 303–320): exclusivism is justified insofar as the grounds for affirming the truth and validity of one’s own tradition are stronger than those for affirming “transformational parity,” that is, the equality of the power within all religions to transform and re-center consciousness, the central function of religion—posited by the pluralists as the premise for their acceptance of all religions as equally true and valid. Basinger proceeds to argue that “while an exclusivist can never justifiably deny that there is actual transformational parity among diverse religious perspectives on the basis of experience alone, she [sic] can justifiably deny such parity if the denial follows from (or is required by) other beliefs within her perspective that she justifiably affirms” (64). See Reza Shah-Kazemi, “Civilizational Dialogue and Sufism: The Holy Qur’an and the Metaphysics of Ibn al-‘Arabi,” in *Universal Dimensions of Islam*, ed. Patrick Laude (Bloomington: World Wisdom, 2011), for discussion of the possibility of an esoteric revalorization of religious exclusivism.
19. Martin Lings, *What is Sufism?* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1975), 22–23.
20. Ibn ‘Arabi, *The Idrisîyân al-Ashwâq: A Collection of Mystical Odes*, trans. R.A. Nicholson (London: Theosophical Publishing House, 1978), 52.
21. *Ibid.*, 69.
22. *The Mathnawî of Jalâlî‘ddîn Rûmî*, trans. R.A. Nicholson (London: Luzac, 1926), 2:312, line 1770. The following line from Rûmî’s *Divân-i Shams al-Dîn Ibrîzî* is also to be noted here: “O lovers! The religion of love is not found in Islam alone.” Quoted by Ashk Dahlén, “Transcendent Hermeneutics of Supreme Love: Rûmî’s Concept of Mystical ‘Appropriation,’” in *Orientalia Suecana* 52 (Uppsala: 2003).
23. *Discourses of Rumi*, trans. A.J. Arberry (London: John Murray, 1961), 135–136.

24. See Reza Shah-Kazemi, *Common Ground Between Islam and Buddhism* (Louisville: Fons Vitae, 2010), and the article by Shaykh Hamza Yusuf therein (“Buddha in the Qur’an?”) for ways of extending this recognition to a religion not explicitly mentioned in the Qur’an.
25. From his review of *The Decline of Eastern Christianity Under Islam: From Jihad to Dhimmitude* by Bat Ye’or, in *First Things* 76 (October 1997): 93.