

Introduction

By Sayyid Muhammad Rizvi

Is Islām the only right path? Is *as-ṣīratul Mustaqīm* (the right path) a single phenomena or are there multiple paths leading to the same destination? What happens to the non-Muslims who live a decent life and do not violate the rights of other people? Do they gain salvation, and go to Paradise or not? These are some of the burning questions of the modern era.

The concept of religious pluralism is not new; it has been discussed in one form or another by past philosophers and theologians of various schools. However, with the increased interaction between followers of different religions and inter-faith dialogues, religious pluralism has taken a new life in the stream of current thought.

When the great philosopher, Ḥayātullāh Murtadhā Muḥahharī, wrote his seminal work, *ʿAdl-e Ilāhī* (The Divine Justice) about thirty-five years ago, the debate on religious pluralism had not yet become that popular in Iran.

What you have in your hands is the translation of *ʿAdl-e Ilāhī*’s last chapter on “Good Deeds of Non-Muslims”.

The more appropriate place to discuss religious pluralism and its related issues would be under the theme of “*nubuwwah* – prophethood” when discussing the finality of Prophet Muhammad’s (S) prophethood, however the question “What happens to the good deeds of non-Muslims?” is also connected to the theme of Divine justice; and so Ḥayātullāh Muḥahharī has answered it at the end of his *ʿAdl-e Ilāhī*.

Nonetheless, before discussing that question in detail, Ḥayātullāh Muḥahharī has also briefly stated his views on religious pluralism itself. As you will read yourself, he expresses the prevailing view of the Muslim theologians and philosophers that Islām is the only right path.

However, and more importantly, he cautions the readers not to jump to the conclusion that since Islām is the only right path therefore all non-Muslims will go to hell. The exclusivist view of Islām being the right path does not automatically and necessarily lead to the belief that all non-Muslims will go to hell.

In the last one and a half decades, the question of religious pluralism has been passionately debated among the Muslims in the West as well as the East. Some Muslim intellectuals have even tried to impose the concept of religious pluralism onto the Qurʿān itself!

I would like to take this opportunity to briefly present this discussion as a preamble to the writing of the great scholar, ʿĀyatullāh Murtadhā Muʿaḥhar.

While discussing the concept of pluralism in the Islāmic context, it is important to define the term clearly. Pluralism can be used in two different meanings: “Social pluralism” in the sociological sense means a society which consists of a multi-faith or multi-cultural mosaic.

“Religious pluralism” in the theological sense means a concept in which all religions are considered to be equally true and valid.

Social Pluralism

As far as social pluralism is concerned, Islām seeks for peaceful co-existence and mutual tolerance between the people of different religions and cultures. Among the three Abrahāmic religions, it is only Islām which has accorded recognition to Judaism and Christianity. Judaism does not recognize Jesus as the awaited Messiah or the Prophet; and Christianity does not recognize Muhammad (S) as the true Prophet and Messenger of God.

In the Islāmic worldview, God sent many prophets and messengers to guide mankind; the number given in the ʿAdāth is 124,000 prophets. The first prophet was ʿĀdam (ʿ) and the last Prophet was Muhammad – the Prophet of Islām (S). However, not all the 124,000 prophets were of the same rank and status.^{[1](#)}

Five of these prophets are given the highest rank in the spiritual hierarchy: and they are Nūḥ (Noah), Ibrāhīm (Abraham), Mūsā (Moses), ʿIsā (Jesus), and Muhammad (as). Almighty Allāh says in the Qurʿān:

وَإِذْ أَخَذْنَا مِنَ النَّبِيِّينَ مِيثَاقَهُمْ وَمِنْكَ وَمِنْ نُوحٍ وَإِبْرَاهِيمَ وَمُوسَىٰ وَعِيسَى ابْنِ مَرْيَمَ

“And when We made a covenant with the prophets: with you, with Nūḥ, Ibrāhīm, Mūsā and ʿIsā, son of Mariam...”^{[2](#)}

A Muslim is required to believe in all the prophets, otherwise he cannot be considered a “Muslim”.^{[3](#)} If a person, for instance, says that I believe in Muhammad, ʿIsā, Ibrāhīm and Nūḥ but not in Mūsā as one of the prophets of God, then he cannot be accepted as a Muslim; similarly, if a person believes in all the prophets but refuses to accept ʿIsā as one of the prophets and messengers of God, then he is not a Muslim.

That is why Islam considers the Christian and the Jewish communities as “the People of the Book” or “the People of Scripture” (Ahlul Kitāb). Islam has even allowed a Muslim man to marry a Christian or Jewish woman, but not those from the other faiths.

What is noteworthy is that Islam accorded this recognition to the Ahlul Kitāb fourteen centuries ago when there was absolutely no talk of tolerance among people of different faiths or an ecumenical movement among religions.⁴

On a socio-political level, a Muslim government would readily sign an agreement with its Christian and Jewish minorities. Imām `Alī Zaʿnūl `ʿbidīn, the great-grandson of the Prophet, writes:

“It is the right of the non-Muslims living in a Muslim country that you should accept what Allāh has accepted from them and fulfill the responsibilities which Allāh has accorded them... And there must be a barrier keeping you from doing any injustice to them, from depriving them of the protection of Allāh, and from flaunting the commitments of Allāh and His Messenger concerning them. Because we have been told that the Holy Prophet said, ‘Whosoever does injustice to a protected non-Muslim, I will be his enemy (on the Day of Judgement).’”⁵

Although Islam does not accord to followers of other religions the same recognition that it has accorded to Jews and Christians, it believes in peaceful co-existence with them. One of the earliest messages of peaceful co-existence given by the Prophet Muhammad (S) to the idol-worshippers of Mecca is reflected in Chapter 109 of the Qurʾān:

قُلْ يَا أَيُّهَا الْكَافِرُونَ. لَا أَعْبُدُ مَا تَعْبُدُونَ. وَلَا أَنْتُمْ عَابِدُونَ مَا أَعْبُدُ. وَلَا أَنَا عَابِدٌ مَا عَبَدْتُمْ. وَلَا أَنْتُمْ عَابِدُونَ مَا أَعْبُدُ.
لَكُمْ دِينُكُمْ وَلِيَ دِينِ

Say: “O unbelievers! Neither do I worship what you worship; nor do you worship what I worship. Neither am I going to worship what you worship; nor are you going to worship what I worship. To you shall be your religion and to me shall be my religion.”

(From the historical perspective, the treatment that Muslim societies have given to the minorities under their rule, especially the Christians and the Jews, is comparatively better than the way minorities were treated in Christian Europe.⁶)

Religious Pluralism

The most famous proponent of modern religious pluralism is John Hick, who abandoned his Catholic exclusivist view and formulated his specific theory in the seventies. Hick’s pluralistic hypothesis claims that each religion in its own way represents an authentic revelation of the Divine world and a fully authentic means of salvation.

He believes that all religions are culturally conditioned responses to the same ultimate reality; and, therefore, are equally valid, and salvation is possible through any of them.

Hick uses the famous story of the Hindu mystics to illustrate his point:

*“An elephant was brought to a group of blind men who had never encountered such an animal before. One felt a leg and reported that an elephant is a great living pillar. Another felt the trunk and reported that an elephant is a great snake. Another felt a tusk and reported that an elephant is like a sharp ploughshare, and so on. And then they all quarrelled together, each claiming that his own account was the truth and therefore all the others false. In fact of course, they were all true, but each referring only to one aspect of the total reality and all expressed in very imperfect analogies.”*⁷

There are many flaws in Hick's hypothesis. The most serious problem is of reconciling the conflicting truth-claims of various religions: for example, monotheism of Islām as opposed to polytheism of Hinduism; death and resurrection of Islām and Christianity as opposed to reincarnations and reaching the state of nirvana of Buddhism; salvation through Trinity as opposed to Tawhīd (Monotheism), etc.

In order to resolve the problem of conflicting truth-claims, Hick suggests that religious traditions differ on three issues:

- (1) on historical facts;
- (2) on trans-historical facts;
- (3) on conceptions of the Real.

Then he proposes the solution for these differences.

For the disagreements on historical facts, Hick suggests that they are minor issues and they could be resolved by application of the historical method.

As for differences on trans-historical facts (i.e., matters that cannot be established by historical or empirical evidence such as “is the universe temporal or eternal” or “death and then resurrection versus reincarnations”), he says that the resolution of such differences are not necessary for salvation and that religions need to dialogue more in order to modify their beliefs.

For differing conceptions of the Real, Hick assumes that all religious traditions are authentic manifestations of the Real and that each tradition's deity is an authentic face of the Real.⁸

Finally, Hick believes that any religious belief that would conflict with, and if literally true, falsify another religious belief, must be treated as mythological.

The end result of this theory is that in order to make it workable, Hick would have to redefine many religious beliefs in ways that the founders and followers of those religions would strongly protest! Take

the example of the historical status of Jesus from Islamic, Christian and Jewish perspectives:

Concept	Christianity	Islam	Judaism
1. Miraculous birth	Yes	Yes	No
2. Miracles	Yes	Yes	No
3. Status	Messiah & Son of God	Prophet & Messenger	No
4. Revelation	Gospels written by different authors.	Injil revealed by God to Jesus	No
5. Death and After	Crucified for the redemption of sins and resurrected after three days.	Never crucified; taken to the Heavens.	Crucified and died.

Apart from the two first items (and that also only between Islam and Christianity), all three Abrahamic religions have conflicting views on Jesus. According to John Hick's theory, the first two common beliefs would be considered as "facts" (at the least in Christianity and Islam) whereas the other points of disagreements must be treated in two possible ways: Either these conflicting views should be resolved by historical/empirical inquiry or they should be put in the category of "mythology"!

The first solution will force the Jews, the Christians and the Muslims to reject many verses of their respective scriptures while the second solution will place many statements from the Bible and the Qur'an into the category of "mythology". None would be acceptable to any of the three faiths.

I think this one example (that also of Islam vis-à-vis Christianity and Judaism which are closer to one another than Islam vis-à-vis Hinduism and Buddhism) suffices to show that Hick's theory of religious pluralism is not workable.

Based on Hick's solution for meta-historical facts (issues related to death and after), Muslims will be forced to consider more than five hundred verses of the Qur'an on death, resurrection and afterlife as part of "mythology"!

Coming to the third type of differences on conceptions of the Real, Dr. John Hick wants us to believe that the Trinity of Christians, the multiples idols of Hindus, and the Tawhid (Monotheism) of Muslims are equally valid and true! This hypothesis weakens the faith in one's religion and pushes one towards agnosticism if not atheism.

Using Immanuel Kant's view of dualistic categories, Hick says that there is a difference "between an entity as 'it is in itself' and as 'it appears in perception'." [9](#)

Something could be *completely* true "in itself" but when it is perceived by others, it is *relatively* true. Based on this idea, Hick wants all religions to accept all differing conceptions of God as equally authentic because none of them are absolutely true, all are only relatively true.

The way Hick has used the story of the blind men and the elephant, he has assumed all religious people to be blind and that they lack the ability to know the complete truth. Unfortunately, he has missed the moral of the same story as given by Mawlānā Rāmī:

Some Hindus have an elephant to show.
 No one here has ever seen an elephant.
 They bring it at night to a dark room.
 One by one, we go in the dark and come out
 saying how we experience the animal.
 One of us happens to touch the trunk.
 “A water-pipe kind of creature.”
 Another, the ear. “A very strong, always moving
 back and forth, fan-animal.”
 Another, the leg. “I find it still,
 like a column on a temple.”
 Another touches the curved back.
 “A leathery throne.”
 Another, the cleverest, feels the tusk.
 “A rounded sword made of porcelain.”
 He’s proud of his description.
 Each of us touches one place
 and understands the whole in that way.
 The palm and the fingers feeling in the dark are
 how the senses explore the reality of the elephant.
**If each of us held a candle there,
 and if we went in together,
 we could see it.**[10](#)

These men were groping in darkness and, therefore, they came with wrong description of the elephant; if they had used a “candle”, they would have seen the light! In Islām, God does not let a searcher for truth grope in darkness:

لِلّٰهِ وَلِيُّ الَّذِيْنَ اٰمَنُوْا يُخْرِجُهُمْ مِّنَ الظُّلُمٰتِ اِلَى النُّوْرِ

“Allah is the Protector of the believers, He brings them forth from the shadows into the light.” [11](#)

The Qur’ān and Religious Pluralism

Some Muslim intellectuals have attempted to read the theory of religious pluralism into the Qur’ān itself. The most famous argument used by them is that the term “Islām,” in the Qur’ān, should not be taken as a noun but just as a verb.

Sometimes they differentiate between “Islam” (the act of submission) and “Islam” (the religion); and say

that the main message of God and the basis of salvation is submission to God, and that it does not matter whether the submission takes place through Ibrāhīm, Mūsā, `Isa or Muhammad (as).

This is nothing new; even ʿġyatullāh Muḥahhar, in the present work, writes, *“If someone were to say that the meaning of ‘Islām’ in this verse is not our religion in particular; rather, the intent is the literal meaning of the word, or submission to God, the answer would be that undoubtedly ‘Islām’ means submission and the religion of Islām is the religion of submission, but **the reality of submission has a particular form in each age**. And in this age, its form is the same cherished religion that was brought by the Seal of the Prophets (Muhammad). So it follows that the word ‘Islām’ (submission) necessarily applies to it alone.*

“In other words, the necessary consequence of submission to God is to accept His commandments, and it is clear that one must always act on the final Divine commandments. And the final commandments of God is what His final Messenger [Muhammad] has brought.”¹²

“Islām” in the Qurʾān [3: 19–20]

When the Qurʾān says, for example:

إِنَّ الدِّينَ عِنْدَ اللَّهِ الْإِسْلَامُ

“Surely the religion with Allāh is al-Islām,”¹³

some Muslim intellectuals say that it does not mean “Islām” the religion that started in the seventh century by Prophet Muhammad (S). They say it means “islām,” submission to God through any of the Abrahamic religions.

In their attempt to read a politically correct idea into the Qurʾān, they even ignore the context of the verse. Let us read the whole passage together:

إِنَّ الدِّينَ عِنْدَ اللَّهِ الْإِسْلَامُ وَمَا اخْتَلَفَ الَّذِينَ أُوتُوا الْكِتَابَ إِلَّا مِنْ بَعْدِ مَا جَاءَهُمُ الْعِلْمُ بَغْيًا يَبِئْسَ مَا كَانُوا يَفْعَلُونَ
فَإِنَّ اللَّهَ سَرِيعُ الْحِسَابِ

“Surely the religion with Allāh is al-Islām. And those who have been given the Book [i.e., the Christians and the Jews] did not show opposition but after knowledge had come to them, out of envy among themselves. And whoever disbelieves in the verses of Allāh, then surely Allāh is quick in reckoning.”

فَإِنْ حَاجُّوكَ فَقُلْ أَسْلَمْتُ وَجْهِيَ لِلَّهِ وَمَنِ اتَّبَعَنِي

“But if they dispute with you, say: “I have submitted myself entirely to Allāh and (so has) everyone who follows me.”

وَقُلْ لِلَّذِينَ أُوتُوا الْكِتَابَ وَالْأُمِّيِّينَ أَاسْلَمْتُمْ فَإِنْ أَاسْلَمُوا فَقَدْ اهْتَدَوْا وَإِنْ تَوَلَّوْا فَإِنَّمَا عَلَيْكَ الْبَلَاغُ وَاللَّهُ بَصِيرٌ بِالْعِبَادِ

“And to those who have been given the Book [i.e., the Christians and the Jews] and to the idol-worshippers [of Mecca], say: “Do you submit?” If they submit, then they are rightly guided; but if they reject, then upon you is only the delivery of the message. And Allāh sees the servants.”¹⁴

This passage clearly states the following:

“Al-Islām” mentioned in this verse is the message of submission as brought by Prophet Muhammad (S).

The People of the Scripture (i.e., Christians and Jews) are in opposition of this version of submission to God.

The Prophet Muhammad (S) and his followers are followers of the Islām which was brought by him.

The People of the Scripture are being asked to submit to God through Prophet Muhammad (S) even though they already are followers of Prophets Mūsā (as) and `Isā (as).

The same message is given to the idol-worshippers of Mecca.

If the People of the Scripture do not submit (as Prophet Muhammad (S) and his followers have submitted), then they are not “rightly guided”.

So the term *al-Islām*, in this verse, refers to “submission to God” through His final message brought by Prophet Muhammad (S) and not through previous prophets.

“Islām” in the Qur’ān [3:83–85]

Another passage from the same chapter is also relevant for understanding the meaning of “Islām”:

أَفَغَيْرَ دِينِ اللَّهِ يَبْغُونَ وَلَهُ أَسْلَمَ مَنْ فِي السَّمَاوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ طَوْعاً وَكَرْهاً وَإِلَيْهِ يُرْجَعُونَ

“Is it then other than Allāh’s religion that they seek while to Him submits whoever is in the heavens and the Earth, willingly or unwillingly, and to Him shall they be returned?”

قُلْ آمَنَّا بِاللَّهِ وَمَا أُنْزِلَ عَلَيْنَا وَمَا أُنْزِلَ عَلَىٰ إِبْرَاهِيمَ وَإِسْمَاعِيلَ وَإِسْحَاقَ وَيَعْقُوبَ وَالْأَسْبَاطِ وَمَا أُوتِيَ مُوسَىٰ وَعِيسَىٰ وَالنَّبِيُّونَ مِنْ رَبِّهِمْ لَا نُفَرِّقُ بَيْنَ أَحَدٍ مِنْهُمْ وَنَحْنُ لَهُ مُسْلِمُونَ

“Say: “We believe in Allāh, and what has been revealed to us, and what was revealed to Ibrāhīm, Ismā‘īl, Ishāq, Ya‘qub, and the Tribes; and what was given to Mūsā and ‘Isā and to the prophets from their Lord. We do not make any distinction between (the claim of) any of them, and to Him do we submit.”

وَمَنْ يَبْتَغِ غَيْرَ الْإِسْلَامِ دِينًا فَلَنْ يُقْبَلَ مِنْهُ وَهُوَ فِي الْآخِرَةِ مِنَ الْخَاسِرِينَ

“And whoever desires a religion other than Islām, it shall not be accepted from him, and in the hereafter he shall be one of the losers.”

This passage clearly explains basic beliefs of Allāh’s religion:

Among those basic beliefs is the requirement to believe in “what has been revealed to us” (i.e., the Qur’ān that has been revealed to Muslims).

“Islām – submission” only follows when one accepts all the prophets and does not differentiate in the truth of any one of them, including Prophet Muhammad (S).

“Islām” and “Imān” in the Qur’ān [2: 135–137]

The following passage in Chapter Two of the Qur’ān further clarifies the meaning of “islām–submission” as well as “imān–belief”:

وَقَالُوا كُونُوا هُودًا أَوْ نَصَارَى تَهْتَدُوا

“And they say: “Be Jew or Christian and you will be guided aright.”

قُلْ بَلْ مِلَّةَ إِبْرَاهِيمَ حَنِيفًا وَمَا كَانَ مِنَ الْمُشْرِكِينَ

“Say: “Nay! (we follow) the religion of Ibrāhīm, the sincere, and he was not one of the polytheists.”

قُولُوا آمَنَّا بِاللَّهِ وَمَا أُنْزِلَ إِلَيْنَا وَمَا أُنْزِلَ إِلَى إِبْرَاهِيمَ وَإِسْمَاعِيلَ وَإِسْحَاقَ وَيَعْقُوبَ وَالْأَسْبَاطِ وَمَا أُوتِيَ مُوسَى وَعِيسَى وَمَا أُوتِيَ النَّبِيُّونَ مِنْ رَبِّهِمْ لَا نُفَرِّقُ بَيْنَ أَحَدٍ مِنْهُمْ وَنَحْنُ لَهُ مُسْلِمُونَ

“Say: “We believe in Allāh, and what has been revealed to us, and what was revealed to Ibrāhīm, Ismā‘īl, Ishāq, Ya‘qub, and the Tribes; and what was given to Mūsā and ‘Isā and to the prophets from their Lord. We do not make any distinction between (the claim of) any of them, and to Him

do we submit.”

فَإِنْ آمَنُوا بِمِثْلِ مَا آمَنْتُ بِهِ فَقَدْ اهْتَدَوْا وَإِنْ تَوَلَّوْا فَإِنَّمَا هُمْ فِي شِقَاقٍ فَسَيَكْفِيكَهُمُ اللَّهُ وَهُوَ السَّمِيعُ الْعَلِيمُ

“If they (i.e., the Jews and the Christians) then believe as you believe, then they are rightly guided; but if they refuse, then they are only in great opposition; and Allah will suffice you against them. He is the Hearing, the Knowing.”

These two verses clearly define the “*imān* – faith and belief” of the Muslims as opposed to that of the Jews and the Christians. Central to the *imān* of the Muslims is belief in the revelation of all the prophets, including the revelation to the Prophet Muhammad (S). They clearly say that if the Jews and the Christians “believe as you believe,” only then will they be rightly guided.

Sūratul Baqarah (2), Verse 285 also confirms this meaning of “*imān*”:

آمَنَ الرَّسُولُ بِمَا أُنْزِلَ إِلَيْهِ مِنْ رَبِّهِ وَالْمُؤْمِنُونَ كُلٌّ آمَنَ بِاللَّهِ وَمَلَائِكَتِهِ وَكُتُبِهِ وَرُسُلِهِ لَا نُفَرِّقُ بَيْنَ أَحَدٍ مِنْ رُسُلِهِ

“The Messenger (i.e., Muhammad) has believed in whatever that has been revealed to him from his Lord; and the believers all believe in Allah, His Angels, His books, and His messengers. (And they say:) “We do not differentiate between (the claim of) any one of His messengers.”

A note on “we do not differentiate between any one of the messengers” or “we do not make any distinction between any one of them”: it does not mean that all the prophets and messengers of Allah (S) are of the same rank and status.

We have already mentioned that there are five prophets who rank highest in the spiritual hierarchy. Rather, this means that we do not make any distinction in the truth of any of the prophets; all are equally true in their claim.

This is unlike the Jews who accept all the prophets but reject `Isa (as) and Muhammad (S) or the Christians who accept all the prophets but reject Muhammad (S).

Prophet Muhammad (S) and Religious Pluralism

Those Muslim intellectuals who preach about religious pluralism in Islam seem to be oblivious of some historical facts of Islamic history and the Prophet’s life.

If Judaism and Christianity are concurrently valid paths of submission to God, then why did the Prophet Muhammad (S) work so hard to convey his message even to the Jews and the Christians? If they were already on the Right Path (*ḥirat Mustaqīm*), then why did the Prophet (S) feel it important to invite them

to Islām?

After the peace treaty of Hudaibiyya in 6 A.H., the Prophet of Islām (S) sent emissaries to various rulers and tribes around and beyond the Arabian Peninsula with a distinct purpose of inviting them to Islām. According to historians, around 25 letters were sent by the Prophet (S) to various rulers and tribes.¹⁵

Among those who were sent to the Christian rulers and tribes, we see the following names: Dihyah al-Kalbī sent to Heraclius, the Emperor of Byzantine; `Amr bin Umayyah Zamrī to the Negus, the King of Abyssinia; Hāshib bin Abī Baltā'a sent to the Muqawqis, the King of Egypt; and the tribes of Ghassan and Qanāfah (in northern Arabia). Three letters are important and relevant to our discussion.

In his letter to Heraclius, the Byzantine Emperor, the Prophet Muhammad (S) wrote:

“... Peace be upon him who follows the guidance.

I invite you to accept Islām. Accept Islām and you will prosper and Allāh will give you double rewards. But if you refuse, then the sin of your people also will fall upon your shoulders.

O' People of the Scripture, come to the word common between us and you that we shall not worship anything but Allāh, and that we shall not associate anything with Him, nor shall some of us take others for lords besides Allāh. But if you turn back, then say: Bear witness that we are Muslims.”

In the letter to the Negus, the King of Abyssinia, the Prophet Muhammad (S) wrote:

“... Peace be upon him who follows the guidance.

Praise be to Allāh besides whom there is no other god, the Sovereign, the Holy One, the Preserver of Peace, the Keeper of the Faithful, the Guardian.

I bear witness that Jesus, son of Mary, is indeed a spirit of God and His word, which He conveyed unto the chaste Mary. He created Jesus through His word just as He created Adam with His hands.

And now I call you to Allāh who is One and has no partner, and to friendship in His obedience. Follow me and believe in what has been revealed to me, for I am the Messenger of Allāh. I invite you and your people to Allāh, the Mighty, the Glorious.

I have conveyed the message, and it is up to you to accept it.

Once again, peace be upon him who follows the path of guidance.”

In the letter sent to the Muqawqis, the King of Egypt and a Coptic Christian, the Prophet Muhammad (S) wrote:

“...Peace be upon him who follows the guidance.

I invite you to accept the message of Islām. Accept it and you shall prosper. But if you turn away, then upon you shall also fall the sin of the Copts.

O' People of the Scripture, come to a word common between us and you that we shall worship none but Allāh and that we shall ascribe no partner unto Him and that none of us shall regard anyone as lord besides God.

And if they turn away, then say: Bear witness that we are Muslims."¹⁶

Even the arrival of the delegation from Christian Najranis and how the Prophet (S) invited them to Islām and, finally, the *mubāhala* with them is in the same spirit of inviting the Ahlul Kitāb to Islām.

All these letters and the meeting with Najranis prove beyond any doubt that if the Ahlul Kitāb (the People of the Scripture) were on *ṣirāt mustaqīm* – on the right path that leads to salvation – then the Prophet (S) would not have invited them to Islām.

Important Caution

At the conclusion of this introduction, I would like to reiterate the caution that believing in Islām as the only valid path of submission to God does not automatically and necessarily lead to the belief that all non-Muslims will go to hell.

Neither does this exclusivist view of Islām as the only *ṣirāt mustaqīm* prevent us from promoting tolerance and peaceful co-existence among the followers of various religions, especially the Jews and the Christians.

While talking about polytheist parents, Almighty Allāh says:

وَإِنْ جَاهِدَاكَ عَلَى أَنْ تُشْرِكَ بِي مَا لَيْسَ لَكَ بِهِ عِلْمٌ فَلَا تُطِعْهُمَا وَصَاحِبُهُمَا فِي الدُّنْيَا مَعْرُوفًا

“And if they insist on you to associate with Me (someone as an object of worship) of what you have no knowledge, then do not obey them, however interact with them in this world kindly ...”¹⁷

Thus, a Muslim has to resist the un-Islamic influence of non-Muslims, but still be kind to them. In other words, although your paths *in the hereafter* will be separate, that does not prevent you from being kind, merciful, and just to non-Muslims *in this world*.

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Toronto, Ontario

May 13th, 2004 / 23th of Rabūl Awwal 1425 AH

¹ Al-Qurʾān, Sūratul Baqarah (2), Verse 253; Al-Qurʾān, Sūrat Banī Isrāʾīl (17), Verse 55

[2.](#) Al-Qurʿān, Sūratul Ahzāb (33), Verse 7; also see Al-Qurʿān, Sūratul Shūrā (42), Verse 13:

..شَرَعَ لَكُمْ مِنَ الدِّينِ مَا وَصَّى بِهِ نُوحًا وَالَّذِي أَوْحَيْنَا إِلَيْكَ وَمَا وَصَّيْنَا بِهِ إِبْرَاهِيمَ وَمُوسَى وَعِيسَى

“He has made plain to you the religion that He enjoined upon Nūḥ, and that which We have revealed to you, and that We have enjoined upon Ibrāhīm, Mūsā, and ʿIsā...”

[3.](#) Al-Qurʿān, Sūrat ʿAlī Imrān (3), Verse 84

[4.](#) It took the Catholic Church almost two thousand years to recognize the non-Christians including the Muslims. The Second Vatican Council declared in 1964 that “Those who, through no fault of their own, do not know the Gospel of Christ or his church, but who seek God with a sincere heart, and moved by grace, try in their actions to do his will as they know it through the dictates of their conscience—those too may achieve eternal salvation.” Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents (Wilmington, Delaware: Scholarly Resources, 1975) p. 367.

[5.](#) Imām ʿAlī Zaʿnūl ʿʿbidīn, Risālatul Huqūq, tr. SSA Rizvi (Vancouver: VIEF, 1989) p. 36.

[6.](#) Ira Lapidus writes: “The Ottomans, like previous Muslim regimes, considered the non-Muslim subjects autonomous but dependent peoples whose internal social, religious, and communal life was regulated by their own religious organizations, but their leaders were appointed by, and responsible to, a Muslim state.” A History of Islamic Societies (NY: Cambridge University Press, 1990) p. 323. Also see Marshall Hodgson, The Venture of Islam, vol. 1 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974) p. 306.

[7.](#) Hick, God and the Universe of Faith (London: Macmillan, 1977) p. 140.

[8.](#) Hick, An Interpretation of Religion (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989) p. 364–365.

[9.](#) John Hick, An Interpretation of Religion, p. 241. In other words, we cannot really know God; what we know is our perception of Him. Muslim philosophers do not accept Kant’s theory. For more on the theory of knowledge from the Islamic perspective in English, see Sayyid Muhammad Husayn Tabṭabʿī, The Elements of Islamic Metaphysics, tr. S.A.Q. Qarʿī (London: ICAS Press, 2003) p. 115–132 and also Part One of S.M. Bēqir as-Sadr, Our Philosophy, tr. Shams C. Inati (London: Muḥammadi Trust, 1987).

[10.](#) The Essential Rumi, translated by C. Barks (New Jersey: Castle Books, 1997) p. 525.

[11.](#) Al-Qurʿān, Sūratul Baqarah (2), Verse 257

[12.](#) See the discussion in this book. ʿAyatullāh Muṭahharī’s comment that “the reality of submission has a particular form in each age” is also key to the proper understanding of Sūratul Baqarah (2), Verse 62.

[13.](#) Al-Qurʿān, Sūrat ʿAlī Imrān (3), Verse 19

[14.](#) Al-Qurʿān, Sūrat ʿAlī Imrān (3), Verse 19–20

[15.](#) Muhammad Ibrāhīm ʿAyatī, Tārīkh-e Payghambar-e Islam (Tehran: Tehran University Press, n.d.) p. 480–482.

[16.](#) Ibid, p. 483– 494.

[17.](#) Al-Qurʿān, Sūrat Luqmān (31), Verse 15

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