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[Islam](#) [8]

[Religious Pluralism](#) [9]

Islam and Religious Pluralism

by *Dr Muhammad Legenhausen*

[Liberalism and Pluralism](#)

The history of the world's religions is full of horrible tales of persecution and intolerance. Often times the religious opposition to the beliefs of a people has been used to serve colonialist purposes, as in the treatment of Native American people by Christian Europeans.

It is not surprising to find that with increased awareness of this history, and of the beliefs and customs of others, among sincere Christians there also comes compassion, regret for what has been done in the past, and a resolve to prevent its recurrence. Indeed, the development of political liberalism in eighteenth century Europe was largely fueled by a rejection of the religious intolerance exhibited in the sectarian wars of the Reformation period.

While liberalism was the political response to diversity of beliefs within the Christian community, its tenets were extended to non-Christian beliefs only in the twentieth century. Even in the late nineteenth century, the Mormon sect was considered sufficiently heretical to lie beyond the pale of proper Christianity and as such was publicly denounced by the U.S. President Grover Cleveland (1837–1908). But the failure of liberal efforts to successfully eradicate religious intolerance was nowhere more

manifest than in the rise of anti-Semitism and its institutionalization by the fascists.

Eventually, the fascists were defeated and the liberal tolerance of non-Christian beliefs was written into the Declaration of Human Rights, but within Catholic Churches around the world, the Jews continued to be cursed as Christ killers. It was only in the 1960's, with the Second Vatican Council, that reference in the Mass to the "perfidious Jews" was expunged. This background of religious intolerance and the rise of liberalism must be kept in mind in order to understand what, has come to be called "*religious pluralism*."

Religious pluralism is the outcome of an attempt to provide a basis in Christian theology for tolerance of non-Christian religions; as such, it is an element in a kind of religious modernism or liberalism.

No matter how laudable the intentions of those who have advanced religious pluralism, and no matter how much we may sympathize with their struggle against entrenched intolerance, the theological project is severely flawed, and its flaws are not unrelated to those found in liberal political philosophy – flaws which stand out most prominently in contrast to Islamic political thought. In order to recognize these flaws, we must first call to mind the basic outline of the historical development and the central ideas of religious and political liberalism.

Then an examination and criticism of the theology of the most outspoken advocate of religious pluralism, John Hick, will be presented with particular attention to the reasons why his proposals should be rejected by Muslims. Finally, I shall advance an approach to religious pluralism consonant with Shi'i Islamic theology which is free of the difficulties attributed to liberal religious pluralism.

Although liberalism in religion and in politics bears significant historical and theoretical relations to one another, they ought not to be confused. The term "*liberalism*" was first used to designate a political ideology in late nineteenth century Europe, and it was in the same period and locale that the theological movement initiated by Friedrich Schleiermacher (1768–1834) came to be known as liberal Protestantism. Although there are liberal Protestants who are not politically liberal, and political liberals who have no use for religious liberalism, the attitudes toward moral, social and political issues among religious and political liberals are often the same.

As a political ideology, liberalism does not have any precise definition, although all liberals emphasize the importance of tolerance, individual rights and freedoms to safeguard a pluralism of life styles. A wide variety of political theorists have been called liberal, some of the more important of whom are Adam Smith (1723–1790), Thomas Paine (1737–1809), Benjamin Constant (1767–1830), James Madison (1751–1836), and, perhaps of the greatest philosophical importance, John Stuart Mill (1806–1873).

The ideas of Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679), John Locke (1634–1704) and Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) have had a tremendous influence on liberal theory, even if Locke and Kant cannot themselves be called liberals, let alone Hobbes. Among contemporary philosophers John Rawls is undoubtedly the champion of liberalism about whom the most has been written, although attention has also been given to the forms

of liberalism advanced by Aron, Berlin, Dewey, Dworkin, Habermas, Hayek, Popper and Rorty, to mention but a few.

Most liberals agree that liberalism is to be traced to the aftermath of the Reformation. Freedom of conscience in religious matters came first, and was then extended to other areas of opinion. So, tolerance of different opinions about religion ties at the very foundations of political liberalism, and religious pluralism may be viewed as a very late arrival which seeks to provide a theological basis for this tolerance.

Characteristic of political liberalism is a sharp division between the public and the private, and the assertion that individuals enjoy a number of rights which safeguard the private realm from interference by the state. Secularism is the first product of the liberal separation of the private from the public. Foremost among the individual rights protecting the private realm is freedom of opinion (especially religious opinion), which gradually has degenerated into the notion of freedom of expression.^{[1](#)}

In order to protect individual liberties, liberals have advocated the constitutional government of nation states, the rule of law, representative democracy and market economies. Utilitarianism provided the philosophical underpinning to the dominant form of nineteenth century liberalism. Contemporary liberalisms range from *libertarian* views, according to which the role of the state is to be minimized, to liberal socialism.

While the rights advocated by liberals were often restricted in practice to white European males, liberals have been instrumental in the struggle for their universal extension and have led movements for universal suffrage, the abolition of slavery, prison reform and equal rights for women, minorities, the disabled and, most recently, homosexuals. In the mid-twentieth century, *welfare-state liberalism* became predominant, according to which various kinds of equality are to be protected by the state.

Rawls describes his own welfare-state liberalism as one which gives priority to the principles of justice over those of the good. The principles of justice, according to Rawls, are to minimize disadvantage while allowing individuals to pursue their own ends. This point is especially important, because many religious outlooks include a conception of the good to which the principles of justice are considered derivative. This opens the way for opposition between religious and liberal principles of justice, so that rather than playing the role of the neutral arbiter among disputing religious factions, the liberal becomes just one more party to the conflict.^{[2](#)}

The application of liberal theory in the United States has not always exhibited the homogenizing force it currently displays. In the past, even though religions could not be officially established, there was sufficient local autonomy to allow for the enactment into law of precepts stemming from the religious views which prevailed in various regions.

The continued prohibition of alcohol in various counties is a reminder of how distinctive religious practice claims found their way into civil law. The struggle between community rights and individual rights in the

United States has a long and sometimes bloody history. In retrospect, the defeat of the autonomy of the community seems all almost inevitable consequence of the consistent application of liberal theory. The movement toward the maximization of individual liberty is at the same time a movement by central authority to restrict the legislative power of local communities.

Liberal Protestantism may be defined in terms of the following features:

1. a receptive attitude toward unorthodox interpretations of Christian scripture and dogma, particularly when informed by attention to claims of the natural sciences and history;
2. A general skepticism toward rational speculation in theology;
3. An emphasis on religious support for modern moral principles and social reform consonant with such principles; and
4. The doctrine that the essence of religion lays in personal religious experience rather than in dogma, canon, community or ritual.

While religious liberalism is sometimes identified with modernism, liberal Protestantism is best seen more specifically as a particularly influential form of modernism, where the term “*modernism*” is used for all religious reform movements which focus on the need for religion to accommodate itself to the realities of the modern world.

Religious pluralism is an outgrowth of liberal Protestantism which

1. Requires unorthodox interpretations of Christian scripture and dogma to make salvation available by routes other than Christianity,
2. Is skeptical toward rational arguments in favor of the superiority of Christian beliefs,
3. Appeals to the modern moral principles of tolerance and rejection of prejudice, and
4. Emphasizes the elements common to personal religious faith, particularly the inward turning toward the Ultimate, while the outward expressions of faith in religious law, ritual and theological doctrine are considered to be of secondary importance.

Religious pluralism is a theological movement grounded in the ethos of political liberalism and emerging directly out of liberal Protestantism. It has drawn fire from conservative Christians and from post-modernist thinkers who have found that at many points their critique of modernist thought applies to religious pluralism. However, the internal weaknesses common to political liberalism and religious pluralism are most prominent when contrasted with Islamic thought, for the liberal separation of religion from social order is founded on the assumption that this separation is consistent with the tenets of all sects, while it is in direct conflict with the ideals of Islam.

Nevertheless, this does not mean that there is no place for any sort of religious pluralism in Islam. To the contrary, a case can be made for an Islamic form of religious pluralism free from the flaws of liberalism, but first, we had better investigate the claims of liberal religious pluralism by turning to the ideas of its most outspoken proponent, John Hick.[3](#)

Religious pluralism is described by Hick as a doctrine of salvation, and is contrasted with two earlier Christian views of the matter, termed by Hick *exclusivism* and *inclusivism*. In simplistic terms, the question is: 'who is to be allowed to go to heaven'? The *exclusivist* answers that it is only those of his own faith who can reach heaven.

The Christian evangelist who preaches that there is only one way to be saved, and that the way is to be found exclusively in the Christian tradition, would be characterized by Hick as an exclusivist. *Inclusivists* would open the doors to heaven a bit wider to allow for the admission of honorary Christians who participate in some non-Christian religious tradition, but who, by Christian standards, could be said to have led sincere lives of moral rectitude, those who were called "anonymous Christians" by Karl Rahner (1904–1984).

More radical than inclusivism is Hick's own religious pluralism which would allow just about anyone into heaven, regardless of race, color or creed, provided that the person undergoes a transformation from "self-centeredness to Reality-centeredness" within some religious tradition. Hick is even prepared to allow that communism may provide the route to salvation for some; at least he is not prepared to rule this out on purely doctrinal grounds.

It must not be forgotten that the three views regarding salvation described above are all Christian theological positions. Hick himself describes religious pluralism as "a Christian position" which starts at *inclusivism*, but accepts certain further conclusions.[4](#)

The problems which generate the debate over religious pluralism are problems about how to understand the Christian doctrine of salvation. According to traditional Christian doctrine, salvation consists in the divine forgiveness of sin, a forgiveness which, with respect to the universal human participation in Adam's original sin, is made possible only by Christ's suffering and sacrifice on the cross.

Christians have furthermore held that to share in the redemption provided by Christ, one must personally respond by placing one's faith in that redemption, according to Protestants, or by the sacrament of Baptism, in Catholicism.

It is to be observed that the doctrine of salvation in Protestant Christianity is articulated in terms of faith, while in Catholicism the emphasis is on the sacramental, although exceptions are allowed. According to Catholic doctrine, salvation is the proper end of man, the beatific vision of God in heaven. Redemption is the release of man from the bondage of sin and restoration of friendship with God through the suffering and death of Christ as God incarnate.

One participates in the redemption through the sacraments, by means of which grace is obtained, and first of all, through Baptism. There are three kinds of Baptism in Catholicism: (a) Baptism by water, administered by pouring water on the head and reciting the words: "I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit"; (b) Baptism by desire, considered to obtain in the case of adults who sincerely intend to enter the Catholic Church, but for whom Baptism by water is for some reason impossible; and (c) Baptism by blood, martyrdom,⁵ which is bearing witness to Christ through the sacrifice of one's life. It is useful to keep the Catholic doctrine in mind in order to highlight, by way of contrast, some of the features of Hick's position on salvation and redemption.

Hick does not give much consideration to the Catholic doctrine, for he is writing as a Presbyterian minister who is at once a theologian, philosopher and a liberal social activist. His social activism brought him into close contact with the Muslims, Jews, Hindus and Sikhs of Birmingham when in 1967, he accepted a chair in the Philosophy of Religion at Birmingham University.

As a result of his engagement in community relations and his activities to combat racism, he became a part of a religiously pluralistic community, and he could not accept the judgment of traditional Christianity that his non-Christian friends would not be able to achieve salvation.

The practical religious pluralism experienced by Hick led him to view Christian theological doctrine as lagging behind the reality he himself was experiencing, but his religious pluralism is not merely an attempt to make room in heaven for his non-Christian friends, for he was led by his reflections on the capacities of the non-Christian to be saved to question the most fundamental teachings of Christianity, and to formulate a new Christian theology consonant with religious pluralism.

In place of the Christian doctrine of salvation, Hick came to a broader, more abstract understanding according to which salvation is simply the human transformation that takes place when a person turns away from a life of self-centeredness and turns to a life centered on the Ultimate Reality, regardless of whether this ultimate reality is called God, Brahman, Nirvana, or the Tao. If this is how salvation is to be understood, there would seem to be little place left for the special role given to Christ and the Incarnation in *Christian* dogma.

Christ is just one vehicle among many by means of which the personal transformation which is the orientation toward the Ultimate may be realized. Hick did not shy away from this conclusion. Indeed, perhaps his most controversial work in Christian theological circles has been the collection of essays he edited under the title, *The Myth of God Incarnate*.⁶

But Hick does not really deny the doctrine of the Incarnation, rather he reinterprets it in accordance with "degree Christology's" which hold that a person may be considered to be divine, or an incarnation of Divinity, to the extent that the person lives in accord with the Divine will. To be redeemed in Christ then comes to mean that it is through Christ in his exemplary life that one finds the way to personal transformation from selfishness to a focus on transcendent reality.

Hick's religious pluralism and his reformulation of Christian theology are influenced by his social activism, on the one hand, but also by his reflections on the rationality of religious belief. The question of the rationality of religious belief is the single most important, most discussed question in the philosophy of religion in the twentieth century.

Like many philosophers of religion writing in English, Hick has come to the conclusion that it is religious experience which makes religious belief rational. Hick argues that it is rational for those whose religious experience strongly leads them to do so to believe wholeheartedly in the reality of God. The centrality of the problem of religious diversity for those who would base religious belief on religious experience is clearly expressed in Hick's *An Interpretation of Religion*:

“If there were only one religious tradition, so that all religious experience and belief had the same intentional object, an epistemology of religion could come to rest at this point. But in fact there are a number of different such traditions and families of traditions witnessing to many different personal deities and non-personal ultimate's.”⁷

Responding to the problem of religious diversity in the context of a discussion of Alvin Plantinga's *reformed epistemology*, in which religious experience also plays a basic role; William J. Wainwright sees only three options: firstly, one may deny that any real conflicts occur.

This is a popular view, according to which all the religions are really saying the same thing but in different words. Secondly, one may claim that those who hold religious beliefs at odds with one's own are epistemic inferiors, perhaps because their religious capacities have been distorted by sin or other cultural deficiencies. Finally, one may attempt to find relevant differences; between the ways in which orthodox and non orthodox beliefs are produced which could be used to explain the unreliability of non-orthodox belief formation.⁸

The plausibility of Wainwright's second and third moves, according to which those who do not share one's religious beliefs are somehow in an epistemologically deprived set of circumstances, seems to vary inversely to one's familiarity with other religious traditions. Hick argues this point most forcefully, and the force of his argument is moral as well as epistemological.

It is wrong to view others as epistemologically inferior simply because their religious views are opposed to ours. Thus, Hick defends a version of the first move, the denial of ultimate conflict. The possibility that a fourth alternative exists in addition to those proposed by Wainwright will be considered later, but Hick certainly does not allow for any such fourth alternative.

Hick was by no means the first to have suggested that all the great religions are somehow expressions of the same truth, despite their surface differences; it is the thesis of Frithjof Schuon's first book, *The Transcendental Unity of Religions*.⁹ What is exceptional about Hick is the thoroughness of his attempt, in the context of Christian theology, to recognize and accommodate radical diversity of belief and even of mystical experience as stemming from an ineffable Reality.

Many of the students of world mysticism have argued that the experiences of the mystics transcend religious and cultural boundaries, and that mystics have the same fundamental types of experiences regardless of their religious differences. Largely due to the work of Steven T. Katz, this view has increasingly come to be rejected. [10](#) Katz points out that the experiences of the mystics are often highly specific and often reinforce the detailed structures of belief within the traditions which give rise to them.

Taxonomies which typify religious experiences across religious boundaries tend to underrate or ignore the importance of the contribution of the concepts and categories provided by a specific religious tradition to the religious experience itself. If Katz is right, the superficial similarities of religious experiences cannot be used to support a doctrine of religious pluralism; indeed, the more important diversities would seem to undermine the pluralist's claim that religious conflicts are not ultimate.

Surprisingly, Hick accepts Katz's view of the ultimate diversity of religious experiences, but nevertheless defends a pluralism which would reconcile all such diversity as having its source in the differences in the ways

in which people think about Ultimate Reality. Hick writes:

The Real *an sich* is postulated by us as a presupposition, not of the moral life [as in Kant], but of religious experience and the religious life, whilst the gods, as also the mystically known Brahman, Sunyara and so on, are phenomenal manifestations of the .Real occurring within the realm of religious experience. [11](#)

Ultimate Reality is thus an ineffable phenomenon to which we are directed in apparently conflicting ways by the religious traditions of the world and the experiences generated within these traditions.

Recall that pluralism is supposed to function in the reconciliation of differences in beliefs prompted by religious experiences in such a way that the entitlement to believe on the basis of the experience is preserved by analogy to the manner in which sense experience warrants perceptual belief.

Faced with conflicting perceptual reports made by epistemic peers, one may preserve the degree of warrant provided by experience for one's belief only if the conflicting reports are found to be ultimately reconcilable with one's own, or if good reasons can be found for thinking that the conflicting reports are mistaken. Given the general skepticism about rational theology among liberal Protestants, it should come as no surprise that Hick seeks the route of reconciliation.

The reconciliation should show how, despite differences in categories and a concept, some common information is conveyed in the apparently conflicting reports. Thus, in case of religious conflict, if one person asserts that his spiritual perceptions convey to him the information that God is the greatest while another person claims that he spiritually perceives that Brahman is the greatest, one might attempt a reconciliation by showing that Brahman is the name Hindus use for God. Hick is aware, however, that the matter is not as simple as this.

The concepts of Brahman and God are really different, and must be understood in terms of the vastly different theological world views of the Vedas and the Semitic scriptures. Despite such differences, Hick asserts that claims made about God and Brahman may ultimately point to the same ineffable reality. The admission of the difference in the concepts deprives us; however, of the grounds for asserting ultimate agreement, and without such grounds, the diversity of religious beliefs and experiences undermines the attempt to find in religious experience rational warrant for belief.

Hick uses the example of those who cannot see describing an elephant (one feels its trunk and claims it is like a snake, another feels its leg and says the animal must be like a tree, etc.) from Maulavi Jalal al-Din Rumi¹² claiming that we are in the position of the blind men whose descriptions of the elephant of ultimate reality are given the limited forms of the various religions. Against this, it has been argued that if we were really in the position of one of the blind men and were faced with such a variety of reports, we should conclude not that all of the reports describe the same elephant, but that all of the reports are wrong.¹³

It should be noted that Rumi's own use of the example was to point out how limited are our abilities to know the divine, and that one should attempt to understand God by means of a spiritual light which cannot be provided by the normal modes of understanding. To extend the allegory to differences in religious experience, it would seem that what is needed is some guidance beyond that which is to be found by reliance upon one's own religious experiences, and that religious experiences by *themselves* cannot serve as a reliable basis for religious belief. In the Islamic tradition, the wayfarer is not led by religious experience, but by gnosis (*marifah*).

This conclusion is disputed by William P. Alston.¹⁴ Alston holds that religious experience can support religious beliefs analogously to the manner in which sensory experience supports beliefs about the physical world, despite the problem of the diversity of religious faiths. The difference between the situation of the blind men and the elephant and that of religious diversity is that in the case of the elephant we can easily imagine ways in which the blind men could revise their beliefs and arrive at a consensus.

They merely need to explore further. Alston holds that since there is no such means for resolving religious differences, the cases are not analogous, and in the absence of such means, it is rational to believe in accordance with the experience available, despite the conflicting reports of the experiences of others. A detailed examination of Alston's views is not relevant to our investigation of religious pluralism, but four points are worth mentioning.

Firstly, like Hick, Alston has no faith in the ability of rational argument to settle the differences. The idea that the sort of further exploration by means of which consensus is to be achieved is a process of inquiry in which reasons are given, weighed and examined is not considered. This is especially odd, since Alston scolds other philosophers for not paying sufficient heed to the epistemology of their own discipline.

In philosophy, it is not reasonable to simply adopt a metaphysical stance because it is dominant in one's culture, or because one's teachers propounded it, or because it reflects the way one happens to see the world. Arguments are required, and even if decisive arguments are not to be had, this is no excuse to give up looking for reasons altogether.

Second, Alston admits that even according to his own assumptions, the existence of conflicting religious experiences indeed does undermine the warrant provided by experience for religious belief to some extent. He thinks that the damage is not serious enough to threaten the rationality of religious belief, but he admits that it is indeed damage.

Third, Alston does not accept Hick's pluralism because he holds that this would require a revision of Christian doctrine while his project is to defend the rationality of actual Christian belief.

“Since I take my task to be the analysis and evaluation of real life religious dogmatic practices, not the reform, or degradation, thereof, I will not avail myself of Hick's way out.”¹⁵

Alston claims that religious believers normally understand their faith realistically, rather than as a culturally conditioned expression of something shared in common by such diverse faiths as Judaism and Buddhism.

Fourth, the religious pluralist's position seems to be incompatible with the idea of revelation found in the Abrahamic religions. According to Judaism, Christianity and Islam, God truly reveals Himself to man. If He were to provide us with accounts of Himself that are couched in terms of one of the many ways in which He could appear to us, rather than in terms of what He is and does, revelations would be “misleading at best and deceptive at worst”.¹⁶

Aside from the failure of Hick's pluralism to rescue the attempt to model the rationality of religious belief on perceptual belief from the problem of the diversity of religious beliefs and experiences, there have been other objections raised against Hick's pluralism.

Generally, commentators have expressed dissatisfaction with the ineffability of the Ultimate Reality in Hick's theory. “If we are left with nothing to be said about God or the Ultimate as it is in itself,” it is argued, “our religious belief more closely approximates unbelief and becomes relatively indistinguishable from atheism.”¹⁷

Another problem with Hick's religious pluralism has to do with the fact that religions are more than collections of doctrines. Religions have important practical dimensions, not only because of the moral codes they promote, but because of their ritual and aesthetic dimensions. Even if the doctrinal conflicts among religions could be reconciled along the lines suggested by Hick, the practical conflicts would remain. Of course, the practical demands of a religion with a strong juridical element, like Judaism, are integrated with its doctrinal elements.

The force of Jewish law derives from its source in God mediated by the prophets. To the extent that the characterization of God presented to Jews through their prophets is considered a merely human product which does not really describe the Supreme Being itself, the force of Jewish law is weakened.

The difference between being circumcised and uncircumcised becomes a mere cultural difference. Ritual and sacrament are able to lift the believer from the mundane world to a confrontation with the Ultimate because they are special; because they have been ordained by the Ultimate or the representative of the Ultimate.

While this is compatible with there being a variety of ritual ways ordained by God, the replacement of particular beliefs about the Ultimate by the notion that particular beliefs, old practices are mere cultural products by means of which one approaches an ineffable reality reduces the specifically religious imperative. If the Jewish law is a cultural expression of God's will which is in no way superior to the absence of such law in Christianity, why bother with it?

Hick's religious pluralism is the advocacy of a forced doctrinal synthesis. It will not allow for ultimate differences in religious belief. No matter how strenuously the Hindu or Buddhist denies the personal nature of ultimate reality, and no matter how fervently the Christian asserts it, Hick would claim that there is no real conflict. Each merely expresses features of his or her own avenue to the Ultimate. This fails to do justice to the lived differences and conflicts among the adherents of the world's religions. While religious pluralism is advertised as a theology of tolerance, it turns out to be intolerant of real religious differences.

According to liberal political theory there is a sharp distinction between the public and private realms. Essentially private individuals posit a public realm through the social contract in order to satisfy mutual interests. Since the society includes those with differing religious ideas, religion is to be excluded from the public realm. Secularism is a corollary of political liberalism. Differences in religious belief are treated as aesthetic differences, or differences in taste. The social dimension of religion is subordinated to the personal. This attitude toward religion is also reflected in the philosophy of religious pluralism advocated by Hick and Smith, for they see differences in religion as cultural differences in the expression of belief.

All the religions involve a turning of the individual from self-centeredness to Reality-centeredness, and the differences between the ways in which this is done in the various religions are non-essential, like matters of personal taste. According to reductive pluralism, preference for the Buddhist, Islamic, or Jewish ways is not to be decided by rational deliberation, for it is simply a matter of feeling, largely determined by one's cultural training. As a result of such a view, reductive pluralists, like liberals, will underrate the social dimensions of religion.

The specifically religious is excluded from public discourse by the liberal because of the lack of mutual interest, and by the reductive pluralist because the specifically religious can have no cognitive import, since it is merely an aspect of personal preference.

Liberalism and reductive religious pluralism both emphasize faith over practice in religion. The fact that no one should be forced to espouse a given creed is taken by liberals as a definitive statement of religious freedom. The use of the coercive force of the state to impose laws at odds with religious codes, e.g. the illegality of Mormon polygamy, is not considered to impinge on religious freedom, for what is restricted is practice, not belief. Pluralism also emphasizes faith over practice in its very conception of the problem of religious diversity as one to be solved by an ultimate reconciliation of beliefs.

Liberalism and reductive pluralism both present themselves in the guise of neutrality while in fact they both exclude various religious systems of belief and practice. In some cases we may applaud the exclusions. No one should object to the fact that religions in which Human sacrifice is a central part are stifled in liberal societies. While Hick is willing to allow for a hidden compatibility among a wide variety of beliefs, exclusivist beliefs themselves are to be rejected rather than reinterpreted. Reductive pluralism dismisses the exclusivist claims of any religion as nonessential, no matter how important in that religion's own tradition.

Neither liberalism nor reductive religious pluralism are religiously neutral. Both discriminate against religious views in which there is a strong emphasis on the practical social dimension of religion. This line of criticism has been leveled against Hick's pluralism by Ninian Smart¹⁸ who points out that difference among religions in truth-claims are at least matched in importance by differences in practice-claims.

A similar critique of the religious pluralism of W.C. Smith has been presented by Ali Quli Qarai,¹⁹ who argues effectively that religion has been understood as law no less than as faith in most of the major religious traditions of the world. Even if an ultimate resolution of truth-claims were a plausible suggestion, this would not resolve the conflict of practice-claims. What are distinctive and important about religions are not only their particular systems of belief, but rituals, ethical ideals, and laws.

If a religion is valuable and worth preserving, much of its value would appear to stem from its practical side. A freedom of religion which was limited to freedom to believe as one chose, but not necessarily to practice the ordinances of one's faith would result in the devaluation of religion.

A number of recent critics whose views are presented and criticized by Peter Donovan²⁰ have taken note of the similarity between religious pluralism and political liberalism and reject both. Both involve compromise, accommodation, and the abandonment of tradition. Some conservative Christian thinkers contend that pluralism must be rejected because it threatens to undermine the doctrines of the Trinity and the Incarnation. As political liberalism undermines the political power of the Church, religious pluralism undermines its dogmas.

Jurgen Moltmann also likens pluralism in religion to the consumerism of Western society, and accuses it of a 'repressive tolerance', which allows everything a subjective possibility but is skeptical about any objective reality being adequately mediated by religious symbols.²¹

Many of the critics of whom Donovan reports find common cause with post-modernistic critiques of

liberalism and the Enlightenment. Donovan finds it ironic “to see the descendants of Calvin and of the Inquisition joining forces with the disciples of Nietzsche to give lessons on tolerance to the children of the Enlightenment”,²² and he observes that despite their common cause in attacking liberalism, the conservative Christian and the post modernist are fundamentally opposed on epistemological issues, with the postmodernist rejecting the realism of the conservative, while it is precisely because of his theological realism that the conservative cannot accept liberal religious pluralism.

Donovan himself seeks to defend some form of religious pluralism and liberalism, but only in the sense of respect for differences of belief, which he calls *epistemic liberalism* in contrast to the *ideological liberalism* of modernists who seek to bring the beliefs and practices of others into line with a secular, scientist and humanistic world-view to form a uniform global culture.

The culture of materialistic consumerism and extreme individualism associated with ideological liberalism threatens to destroy the Christian culture out of which it emerged, and which often seems to have been taken for granted by advocates of liberalism themselves, at least prior to the second Half of the twentieth century.

Although political liberalism arose out of an attempt to protect Christian culture from destroying itself through sectarian strife, the social changes which are justified by contemporary ideological liberalism are no less destructive, particularly the weakening of traditional familial relationships.

The Christian response to the onslaught of ideological liberalism and its attendant social changes has been divided between the resistance and accommodation characteristic of conservative and liberal Christianity respectively. In this conflict, the religious pluralism advocated by John Hick, W. C. Smith and others provides a theological basis for ideological liberalism because it is precisely the moral perspective of ideological liberalism that underlies its standards of reform.

Hick claims that on the basis of the common *ethical ideals* of the great traditions, beliefs may be discredited if they run contrary to the dominant ethical current, e.g. the Jewish doctrine of ‘the chosen people’.²³

Indeed, although Hick is willing to open the gates of heaven to the heathen, this does not mean that he is unwilling to pass moral judgment on religions. In fact, Hick argues that since reason cannot provide any useful criterion for grading religions, the standard against which they are to be measured is moral, although even here the great religious traditions of the world are so rich and varied that they cannot be judged as totalities:

“How do we weight the savage aspects of life in some Eastern and Middle Eastern countries—the bloody massacres at the time of the partition of India, the cutting off of a thief's hands under Islamic law—against the Christian persecution of the Jews throughout the ages and above all in our own century?”²⁴

It is clear from Hick's query; the fact that whole traditions cannot be graded effectively does not mean

that particular elements and practices are not to be judged. And what are the standards to be used for such judgments?

Hick's answer is clear. His preferred moral response to the Ultimate Reality is modern liberalism. He does not mean to claim that Christianity is preferable to other religions because of its liberalism, but rather he invites all to moral approbation under the wide umbrella of religious pluralism to the extent that they are willing to participate in the liberal agenda, about which Hick writes:

“These modern liberal ideas have indeed first emerged in the West; but they are essentially secular ideas, which have been and are as much opposed as supported within the Christian churches. Contemporary Marxist, humanist and feminist critiques of economic, racial and sexual oppression have become common currency in Western liberal thinking, and have evoked their echoes in liberation and black and feminist theologies.

But it would be erroneous to conclude, from the fact that these ideas have affected Western Christianity first among the religions, that Christianity has a proprietary interest in them. Our contemporary Western liberal–democratic, politically, racially and sexually liberated form of Christianity represents a creative synthesis of the Christian tradition with secular liberalism; and analogous syntheses are beginning to emerge within the other traditions.”[25](#)

Muslims will have no quarrel with the liberal's rejection of racism, but from the standpoint of Islamic morals (and for that matter, traditional Christian morals, as well), “sexual liberation” is an euphemism for licentiousness together with its public acceptance, which has profound social consequences. While the contemporary Western liberal assimilates condemnation of homosexual behavior to racism, the contemporary Muslim considers any sort of sex out of wedlock, like racism, to be sinful.

Hick's willingness to use his liberal standards to condemn the application of the shari'ah is also clearly stated:

“But, whilst the enshrining of detailed seventh–century Arabian laws as permanent divine commands for Islamic societies has hindered the development of more humane and sophisticated penal systems, fortunately it has not prevented many modern Islamic states from finding ways to depart in practice from the full rigor of the traditional Shariah. It has made penal advances difficult but happily not impossible.”[26](#)

We can summarize the criticisms of Hick's religious pluralism as follows.

First, it advertises itself as the toleration of different faith traditions while in fact it prescribes the mutilation of these traditions in order to eliminate the ultimate differences among them.

Second, it considers the apparent conflicts among religious traditions to be doctrinal rather than practical, thus ignoring the importance of religious law and community.

Third, by diminishing the importance of doctrinal differences it weakens the prescriptive force of religious

law.

Fourth, it dismisses the use of reason as a means to advance religious understanding and settle disputes, despite the fact that such rational argumentation has been prominent in the theological or scholarly traditions of all the major world religions.

Fifth, it construes mysticism as a means of obtaining personal religious experiences on the basis of which beliefs may be formed, while the very concept of religious experience is the invention of liberal Protestantism and is foreign to traditions such as Islam.

Sixth, it presupposes the correctness of the modern ethos of political liberalism despite the fact that this, too, is inconsistent with the moral traditions of the world religions as they have been understood for centuries.

On the other hand, it is part of the appeal of Hick's program that it does promise some form of reconciliation, some attenuation of the conflicts among religious believers which cause so much suffering in the world today, even as it has for centuries past. It would seem that an ideal approach to the problem posed by the variety of religious faiths would be one which both recognized and allowed for ultimately irreconcilable differences in practice as well as theory, while at the same time providing motivation for tolerance.

I believe that valuable suggestions for such an approach to the world's religions can be found within the Islamic tradition, which I shall dub *non-reductive pluralism*. Non-reductive pluralism is able to avoid the objections raised against liberal or reductive pluralism while maintaining an attitude of tolerance and rejecting prejudice.

In order to develop a non-reductive pluralism it will be helpful to reflect a bit more on why the sort of pluralism advocated by Hick might be expected to win little support among Muslims, and why it has won the support of an important, if small, group of Christians. The first difficulty has already been mentioned: Islam, like Judaism, features a legalistic form of piety. Its aspirations are social. No matter how miserably we fail, Muslims aspire to build a society founded on the example of the Prophet's just governance in accordance with Divine law.

This aspiration cannot be sustained if the *shari'ah* is nothing more than a byproduct of early medieval Arabia's cultural response to its Prophet's confrontation with Reality. In terms of the Christian experience, however, in which legalistic forms of piety are viewed at best with suspicion, if not condemned as outright Pharisaic hypocrisy, the idea that ritual laws and taboos are human constructs rather than Divine ordinances is much more likely to be welcomed.

Another difficulty is that its relationship to other religions is a matter treated fairly extensively within the *shari'ah* itself, and even in the Qur'an. Pre-Islamic paganism cannot be viewed as simply another way in which man relates himself to Ultimate Reality, reconcilable with monotheism since polytheism and

monotheism are conceptually different approaches to what is inconceivable.

This aspect of Hick's pluralism seems to be what is most repugnant to many Christian thinkers, as well as Muslims. Monotheism is inherently iconoclastic, but if monotheism and polytheism are just two ways to the Ultimate, how can we justify Abraham's breaking of the idols? Was his message really nothing more than that the worship of idols had become inappropriate in his time and locale? A non-reductive pluralism should respect the absolute claims of monotheism.

According to traditional Christian thinking, salvation is only possible through belief in Jesus Christ as Lord, and it is through this faith that one participates in the redemptive sacrifice of the Son of God. True belief is a necessary condition for salvation. Christians who are unwilling to go as far as Hick in their acceptance of nonbelievers yet who reject the dogmatic assertion of their damnation have found a third alternative in Karl Rahner's concept of *anonymous Christians* mentioned above.

According to these idea non-Christians who lead good lives about whom it seems monstrous to claim that they must be damned may be said to be Christians even though they do not recognize this themselves. Rahner goes on to assert that if such people were properly exposed to the true teachings of Christ, they would abandon their former beliefs and become official Christians.

Being an anonymous Christian is a bit like holding an honorary degree from a university, despite lack of training at the school, one's achievements are recognized by the university and the degree is awarded. Hick has argued that this view is unsatisfactory for a number of reasons. It is patronizing.

It fails to recognize the positive role a non-Christian faith may have in turning one from self-centeredness toward the Ultimate. It also substantially weakens the meaning of salvation through faith in the death and resurrection of Christ. If the university awards too many honorary degrees the value of its diploma will be deflated.

What is needed is a religious pluralism able to fully appreciate the significant differences among religions, able to recognize that different ways toward human perfection and ultimate felicity are offered by the religions, despite their differences, and yet able to grant these points without diluting the strength of the religious claim by any kind of relativism. This is the promise of the non-reductive religious pluralists of Islam proposed below.

The Non-Reductive Religious Pluralism of Islam

When we consider how a non-reductive religious pluralists might be formulated in the context of Islam, we must keep in mind that the issue of religious pluralism emerges in Christianity as a reaction to specifically Christian doctrines about salvation: that it is only through Christianity that one can benefit from the Redemption and gain salvation. A similar exclusivist doctrine can be found in some interpretations of the Jewish claim to be 'the chosen people'. These doctrines are thoroughly condemned

in the Qur'an:

“And they say none shall enter paradise unless he is a Jew or a Christian, these are their vain wishes. Say, ‘Bring your proof if your are truthful.’ Yes! If whosoever submits himself to Allah and he is a doer of good, for him there shall be his reward with his Lord, on such shall be no fear nor shall they grieve.” (Al-Qur’an, 2: 110–111)

Religious pluralism emerges in Christianity as a reaction against the very attitude so eloquently condemned in the verses cited above. According to traditional Christian teaching, there is no way to salvation aside from the redemption offered by Christ, and even the great prophets, peace be with them, must wait in limbo until the resurrection, after which Christ must come to release them!

Those Christian theologians who have opposed this line of thought and have sought to allow that non-Christians can achieve salvation have claimed that the saving faith either includes the unconscious acceptance of Christianity or is the common heritage of the world's major religious traditions.

Despite their differences, there is a common presumption shared by the various Christian parties to the dispute on pluralism. For Hick and Rahner, as well as the dogmatist, correct faith is necessary for salvation. In order to widen the opening of the gates of heaven, Rahner extends the notion of correct faith to those who live as if they were Christians and who would accept Christianity if properly exposed to it, while Hick goes further to deny that the apparent differences among the world's faiths are irreconcilable.

Hick's ultimate reconciliation is what makes apparently different faiths correct. What Hick does is to loosen the condition of correct belief so that it reduced to the common factor in all the world's religions, however abstract this may be; nevertheless, it remains as much a part of Hick's doctrine as Luther's that there can be no salvation without correct faith, even if the correct faith according to Hick is something of a least common denominator.

In order to understand how to approach the problem of religious pluralism in the context of Islam, the two issues of correct faith and salvation need to be clearly distinguished. According to Islam, the correct religion ordained by God is that revealed to the last of His chosen prophets, Muhammad (S); this and no other religion is required by Allah of all mankind. In this sense, Islam is exclusivist. However, at various times prior to His final revelation, God ordained other religions by means of His prophets.

So, the reason why the religion brought by Moses (‘a) is not acceptable today is not that what Moses taught was wrong or incompatible with the teachings brought by Muhammad (S), for they taught the same things, but because God has ordained the latter teachings for this era. The previous teachings were not incorrect, and they were sufficient to guide the people for whom they were revealed to salvation.

Although some scholars seek to minimize the importance, of this fact by appealing to *riwayat* (narrations) according to which the differences among the revealed religions amount to no more than the details of

ritual practice, such as how many prostrations occur in various prayers, the number of days on which fasting is prescribed, and the like, there can be no denying that different paths can lead to God, and in different circumstances have been ordained by Him.

All of the divinely revealed religions are called Islam in the general sense of complete submission to the commands of Allah; while Islam is used in a specific sense to refer to the final version of Islam (in the general sense) brought by Muhammad (S). The difference between general and specific Islam gives rise to a number of interesting questions.

How much variation can there be in the varieties of general Islam? Could God have ordained a version of general Islam for a people so different from us that we would not recognize it as such? Why did God ordain different versions of general Islam? The exact answers to these questions are with God alone.[27](#) But in the present age, general Islam implies specific Islam, and this must be understood if one is not to fall into error about the position of Islam with respect to religious diversity.

In the present human condition, it is specific Islam, Muhammadan Islam, and it is only Muhammadan Islam, which is the revealed religion which He calls upon us to follow. Nothing less is demanded and nothing better is possible. There are several good reasons for this exclusivist element of Islam. First, the call to Islam is a call to unity of belief:

“He has laid down for you the religion which He enjoined upon Noah, and which we revealed to you, and which we enjoined upon Abraham, Moses and Jesus: Establish the religion, and be not divided therein.” (Al-Qur’an, 42: 13)

Islam presents itself as a way to reconcile the differences between Jews and Christians. The compromise offered by Islam affirms common elements between Judaism and Christianity, and accepts Christ ('a) as one of the greatest prophets of all time, but not as “God the Son” or as “the Redeemer”. Christianity erred by failing to allow divine guidance as a means to salvation without the sacrifice of Christ on the cross.

The remedy to this error proposed by Hick has been recognized by many to amount to a dismantling of Christian theology. In Islam, on the other hand, from its very inception, there has been awareness of other revealed religions by which felicity was obtained during the periods of their validity.

So, the basic teachings of the Christian way are accepted by Islam, but the theological elaboration of those teachings in such doctrines as the Trinity, the Redemption and the Incarnation are rejected. Islam's willingness to accept the previous prophets as ordained by God comes with a demand that His final apostle Muhammad (S) also be accepted.

The form of pluralism suggested here is like the famous Muhammadan compromise about the placement of the black stone. When the Meccan tribes quarreled over who should have the Honor of placing the black stone during the refurbishing of the Ka'abah, the compromise offered by Muhammad (S) was that

members of the rival tribes could each hold a corner of the blanket by which the stone would be raised and then Muhammad (S) would set it in place.

It is because of the demand for the recognition of the Seal of the Prophets (S) that the reductive pluralists' solution to the problem of religious diversity cannot be accepted. To accept only some of the prophets (‘a) to the exclusion of others, particularly Muhammad (S), with the excuse that it makes no difference because all the religions are ultimately saying the same thing, is to fail to heed the divine call.

“Verily those who deny God and His apostles and desire that they differentiate between God and His apostles and say ‘We believe in some and we deny, some,’ and intend to take a course between this (and that), these are the infidels, truly, and we have prepared for the infidels a disgraceful torment.” (Al-Qur’an, 4: 150–151)

There can be no Islamic version of reductive pluralism because Islam directly addresses itself to the question of religious diversity and calls for the dominion of Islam over all other religions:

“He it is who sent His Apostle with guidance and the religion of truth, that He may make it prevail over all religions, although the polytheists may be averse.” (Al-Qur’an, 9:33)[28](#)

According to reductive religious pluralism there can be no better reason for adopting one religion rather than another than cultural affinity. As a result, the importance of the divine law is undermined. In the context of Islam, on the other hand, the *shari’ah* brought by God's final chosen Apostle (S) is understood as the perfection of all previously ordained ways. The divine call to follow the law of Islam is extended to all humanity, not merely to those of a specific cultural setting:

“And we did not send you but to all people as a bearer of good tidings and as a warner, but most people do not know.” (Al-Qur’an, 34:28)

With regard to the question of the correctness of faith, the position of Islam is clear. At various times in human history different faiths and laws were decreed by Allah. At present, however, there is but one divinely ordained religion, Muhammadan Islam, which requires belief in *tawhid*, prophecy (*nabuwah*), and the Resurrection (*ma’ad*), and according to Shi’i theology, *imamah*, and divine justice, as well. As God says:

“O you who believe! Believe in Allah and His Apostle and the Book which He has sent down to His Apostle and the Book which He sent down before; and whoever decries Allah and His angels and His books and His apostles and the Last Day has indeed strayed off, far away.” (Al-Qur’an, 4: 136)

Not only is a verbal or mental affirmation of these things required, for the divine call is a call to *iman*, which is not quite what is expressed by the English word “faith”. To have *iman*, to be a *mu’min*, is to be wholeheartedly committed, to believe *in* as well as to believe *that*, and to be ready to put one's beliefs

into action.[29](#)

“It is not righteousness that you turn your faces towards the East and the West, righteousness is rather one who believes in Allah and the Last Day and the angels and the Book, the apostles, and gives his wealth out of love for Him to the kindred and the orphans and the poor and the wayfarer and the needy and for those in bondage, and established prayer and pays zakat and those who fulfill their promise when they make a promise and the patient ones in distress and affliction and in the time of war. These are they who are the Truthful and these are they who are the pious.” (Al-Qur’an, 2: 177)

In sum, reductive pluralism is incompatible with Islam because according to reductive pluralism there is no requirement to accept all of the prophets ('a) and no requirement to obey the practical laws given through God's last chosen messenger (S), while according to the teachings of Islam, these divine prescriptions are clear. Reductive religious pluralism presents itself as an opening up toward other traditions, while from the standpoint of Islam, it is an attempt to open the way to *kuf'r*, a covering of one's eyes and ears to the truth of God's final revelation and its practical implications.

Hick is perfectly well aware of the inconsistency between Islam and the reductive religious pluralism he proposes. He admits:

“In Islam there is the firm belief that Muhammad was 'the seal of the prophets' and that through the Qur'an God has revealed to mankind the true religion, taking up into itself and fulfilling all previous revelations. 'thus, whilst a Muslim should give friendly recognition to those within the other Abrahamic faiths and may even, in some interpretations, extend the Qur'anic concept of the People of the Book to include those who encounter the divine through the Hindu, Buddhist, Confucian and Taoist as well as Jewish and Christian scriptures, yet he or she will retain a strong sense of the unique status of the Qur'anic revelation. Here is God's final, decisive and commanding word which all must heed and obey. And such a conviction, again, does not naturally encourage a full and unqualified acceptance of religious pluralism.”[30](#)

The solution proposed by Hick to this conflict is garbed in the euphemism “creative doctrinal development,”[31](#) which the scholars of Islam would call *bid'ah* (heresy). Hick also expresses his optimism that sufi ideas may help win acceptance for reductive religious pluralism in the Islamic world, so that Islam may take roughly the same course that he has charted for Christianity. (May Allah preserve us from such a fate!) The patronizing tone in the following passage is typical of the liberal mentality:

“Islam may be expected to go through essentially the same traumas as Christianity in its encounter both with modern science and with the emerging ecumenical outlook; only whereas the Christian trauma has been spread over a century or more Islam is having to adjust in a single generation to an already formed modern culture. It is to be hoped that the Muslim world will eventually find its own Qur'anic way of combining modern knowledge with its faith in the Transcendent and its commitment to a morality of

human community. And we may further hope that this development will also include an increased recognition of the ecumenical point of view that has already been so powerfully expressed within the Sufi strand of Islam.”³²

The final remark about ‘the Sufi strand of Islam’ requires a discussion more detailed than that to be offered here, but if Hick is under the impression that his reductive religious pluralism can find support in true *tasawwuf* or *‘irfan*, a fairly powerful argument can be given that he is mistaken, the outlines of which may take the following form. While there may be some degenerate sufi *tariqa* willing to play the role assigned for them by Hick, and there are orders in the West unto which non-Muslims have been initiated, the vast majority of the *‘urafa*– of Islam have required strict observance of the *shari’ah* prior to initiation into spiritual wayfaring (*sayr wa suluk*). Hick is fond of citing the following couplet of Jalal al-Din Rumi: “*The lamps are different, but the Light is the same.*”³³

But this is what the Qur’an also affirms:

“Verily We sent down the Torah in which there is guidance and light...” (Al-Qur’an, 5:44),

“And We caused Jesus son of Mary to follow in their footsteps confirming the Torah which was before him and We gave him the Evangel in which was guidance and light...” (Al-Qur’an, 5:46).

But the conclusion reached in the Qur’an is not that because all these religions have divine light that it makes no difference which we follow, nor that which we follow should be considered analogously to one’s ethnicity.³⁴ It is not as though we are presented with different lamps from which we are to choose in accordance with our own taste, background and the quality of our personal experiences; rather God presents the lamps to humanity in succession, and it is our responsibility to follow what God has assigned for us at the present age.

When in dispute with Rumi, the Christian, al-Jarrah, seeks to excuse his Christianity as the religion of his fathers, Rumi protests:

“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 which will destroy you and not guide you?”³⁵

Rumi goes on to give some examples of how reason dictates that we accept what is of superior benefit to us over that which our fathers had. He claims that even a dog who learns hunting for a king will no longer browse through rubbish as its sire had done.

If the intellect of the beast holds fast to what it has found better than what it inherited from its parents, it is monstrous and horrible that a man, superior to all the inhabitants of the earth in reason and discrimination, should be less than a beast. We take refuge with God from that!

Certainly it is right that he should say that the Lord of Jesus, upon whom be peace, honored Jesus and brought him nigh to Him, so that whoever serves him has served the Lord, whoever obeys him has obeyed the Lord. But in as much 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.[36](#)

Rumi was by no means a reductive religious pluralist of the sort Hick makes him out to be.

The sufis have sought to explain the fact that there are differences in the religions which have been divinely ordained with the distinction between the exterior (*zahir*) and the interior (*batin*) of the religions. The differences among them are exterior differences; the interior is the same. However, the vast majority of sufis have affirmed the duty to follow the prescriptions of the law of Islam with the slogan: no *tariqah* without *shari'ah*. There is no way to the interior except but through the exterior, and the exterior required in the current age is that of Islam.

“Just as a thug fails if it lacks a kernel, so too it fails without a skin. If you sow a seed in the earth without its husk, it fails to germinate, whereas if you bury it in the earth with its husk it does germinate and becomes a great tree.”[37](#)

Furthermore, the light said in the Qur'an to be found in the Torah and Evangel refers to these books as God gave them to the prophets, not in the adulterated forms in which, according to Islam, they are found today, and the light of the previous religions certainly does not refer to the doctrines explicitly rejected by the Qur'an, such as the Incarnation, the Crucifixion and the Trinity.

Rumi explicitly and strenuously rejects the claim that Jesus ('a) is God as contrary to reason in refutation of the claim made by al-Jarrah that some sufis had. Accepted the doctrine of the Incarnation.[38](#) The fact that there are many lamps but one light does not imply that it makes no difference which religion we follow or that we can rest content with what has been bestowed upon us by family and culture. For Rumi, as for all Muslims, there is but one right path, *al-sirat al-mustaqim*.

Nevertheless, a theme commonly found in the sufi poets such as 'Attar, Rumi and Hafiz is the expression of affinity toward Christianity or Zoroastrianism or idol worship. This might lead some to the mistaken conclusion that these poets considered the differences between Islam and the other religions to be insignificant.

What is really to be found in such expressions is the condemnation of the display of the outward signs of affiliation to Islam without any inward faith. It would be better to have nominal affiliation to an incorrect creed, but to believe sincerely in it and to follow the guidance in it for spiritual advancement than to be a hypocrite who outwardly professes Islam while inwardly he worships *taghut*. The condemnation of hypocrisy in the Qur'an is clear:

“Surely the hypocrites are in the lowest stage of the fire, and you shall not find a helper for

them.” (Al-Qur’an, 4: 145)

“And Allah has promised the hypocrite men and the hypocrite women and the infidels the fire of hell to abide in it forever; this is enough for them; and Allah curses them and for them is a lasting punishment.” (Al-Qur’an, 9:67)

If we are to compare different forms of *kufr*, surely that of the hypocrite is worse than that of the sincere Zoroastrian. The outward denial of orthodoxy found in Hafiz (and Imam Khomeini), e.g., staining the prayer mat with wine or having recourse to the Magi (*pir-e moghan*), becomes a means of indicating the interior dimension of religion and denying hypocrisy, but unless the hyperbole is understood in this symbolism, it will appear as apostasy.

Hypocrisy occurs with the outward affirmation of Islam and the inward denial. Imam Khomeini, following the example of Hafiz, wishes to emphasize the opposite of hypocrisy, sincere belief in Islam, so he exaggerates by invoking the opposite extreme, the outward denial of Islam with its inward affirmation; in this way *kufr* becomes a symbol for true *iman*!

Kiss the hand of the sheikh who has pronounced me a disbeliever.

Congratulate the guard who has led me away in chains.

I am going into solitary retreat from now on by the door of the Magus.[39](#)

In the school of Ibn al-’Arabi there is an emphasis on the way in which apparently contradictory beliefs may express a single truth from different perspectives. In this way, the differences in the divinely ordained religions are explained. Even though they contradict each other outwardly, each of them expresses a single divine truth. Other sufis have speculated that the sacred texts of Hinduism were based on divinely revealed scripture, and yet others have advanced the hypothesis that the Buddha was the prophet Dhu al-Kifl.[40](#)

However, the fact that God's truth can find expression in different, even apparently conflicting religions, does not mean that people are free to choose whatever religion suits their fancy. Ibn al-’Arabi himself, when asked by a Muslim ruler for advice about how to treat the Christians, responded that they should be treated as stipulated by Islamic law.[41](#)

And he asserts that it is incumbent upon people in the present age to follow the *shari’ah* brought by Muhammad (S)[42](#) and it is in this sense that all previously revealed religions become invalid (*batil*) with the revelation of the Qur’an, not that they become false, this, Ibn al-’Arabi says, is the opinion of the ignorant, but that it becomes obligatory to follow the *shari’ah* of specific Islam rather than that of a previous revealed religion. In this sense all previously decreed systems of religious law do become null and void, not because they are worthless, but because whatever is needed from them has been incorporated into the final revelation. He puts it as follows:

“All the revealed religions [*shara’i*] are lights. Among these religions, the revealed religion of Muhammad

is like the light of the still 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 Muhammad's revealed religion. Nevertheless, they do in fact exist, just as the existence of the light of the stars is actualized. 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 (*batil*) by abrogation—that is the opinion of the ignorant.”[43](#)

The difference between the sufis and the theologians on the diversity of religions is one of emphasis more than explicit doctrine. The sufis emphasize the inner unity of the revealed religions while the theologians emphasize the outward superiority of Islam, but there is no real difference on either point. The theologians admit that the previous revealed religions contain light and guidance, for this is explicitly stated in the Qur'an.

The fact that in the present age it is only the Islam revealed to Muhammad (S) that is valid and whose law is obligatory is also accepted by the sufis. Both groups hold that the previously revealed religions, including the Christianity brought by Jesus ('a), do not contain any doctrinal differences from Islam, but the *Sufi* is more willing than the theologian to look for insights contained in the other religions, despite what is considered by both the theologian and the sufi to be the accretion of doctrinal error, to the precise extent that the primary concern of the sufi is spiritual insight rather than doctrine.

Because of his attention to the inward dimension, the *'arif* is also willing to allow for greater variance in outward diversity as expressions of a single Truth than those whose major preoccupation is doctrinal and ritual detail. In any case, both groups hold that Islam brings to perfection all that was contained in the previously revealed religions, and is the sole religion prescribed by God for the present age until the end of time. However, the *arif* is willing to give poetic expression to his faith and to the rejection of hypocrisy through the symbols of the other religions, and even idol worship, as in the following lines from Baba Tahir and Imam Khomeini, respectively:

*Happy are they who don't know their hands from their feet,
those among the flames who know neither wet nor dry.
Synagogue, Ka'abah, idol-temple, monastery,
none are known to be empty of the sweetheart.* [44](#)
*At the door of the tavern,
temple, mosque and monastery,
I have fallen in prostration,
as though You had glanced upon me.* [45](#)

Another line of thought about the diversity of religions is to be found in the tradition of Islamic philosophy. After explaining that the common people whom the prophets ('a) sought to guide are not capable of appreciating philosophical wisdom, Farabi writes: “These things are thus allegorized for every nation or people in terms familiar to them, and it is possible that what is familiar to one people is foreign to

another.”[46](#)

In Farabi's view, which is to a great extent accepted by Ibn Sina, the religions all express a single philosophical truth in different symbols and through these symbols serve to organize society and lead humanity to felicity. Furthermore, each great religion contains, in its corpus of revelations, “sufficient glimpses of pure truth to lead the elect seekers of truth to pursue this truth itself and to be able to allegorically interpret the rest of the symbols.”[47](#)

According to Farabi, the spiritual content and background of all religion is identical, since this is universal, but it is equally true that the symbols employed by the religions are not at the same level. Because of this some religions are “nearer to the truth than others, some are more adequate than others in leading humanity to the higher truth, some, again, are more effective than others in gaining the belief of people and becoming the directive force of their lives. Indeed there are religions whose symbolisms are positively harmful.”[48](#)

Like the sufi position on the diversity of religions, nothing in the position of the philosophers contradicts the ideas emphasized by the theologians that in the present age the sole religion prescribed by God for mankind is Islam, that the previously revealed religions have become corrupted, that the beliefs associated with them differ from what was revealed to their prophets, and that Islam is the culmination of all previously revealed religions.

Where the *‘urafa* and the *filisuf* differ is on how to understand the interior (*batin*) of the revealed religions, through spiritual unveilings or through philosophical argument. What is most notable for its absence is the sort of view advocated by reductive religious pluralism, according to which religions are validated by personal religious experience, that since all the religions express a single interior truth it makes no difference which is followed, and that the common truth of the world's religions in their contemporary forms are sufficient as guides to ultimate felicity. None of these essential elements of reductive religious pluralism would be accepted by the theologian, the sufi or the philosopher.

Now we may return to the options for explaining religious diversity considered by Wainwright: (a) denial of conflict, (b) epistemic inferiority, (c) unreliable means of belief production. With respect to the interior of the revealed religions, Muslims deny that there is any real conflict; but they recognize and insist upon the importance of conflicts among the doctrinal claims issued by the believers in different creeds.

So, why do some people fail to accept the truth of Islam? The major reason given in the Qur'an is sin. Pride, contempt, prejudice, stubborn attachment to the 'faith of our fathers' and unwillingness to comply with the practical demands of Islam are all mentioned. Others may fail to accept Islam because they lack awareness of its teachings. Yet others may fail to see the truth of the teachings of Islam because that truth has not been made manifest to them for any of various reasons. Perhaps they are so impressed with the truth contained in their own creed that they become attached to its particular embodiment and cannot recognize its more perfect expression in Islam.

It is not that they are inferior to Muslims in their cognitive capacities, so that we should call them epistemic inferiors, nor that there is a methodological flaw in the way they generally form beliefs. Consider a group of physicists with different views. They are epistemic peers, and they share the same fundamental methodological principles. But one has insight and is able to formulate the correct theory, while the others continue to plod down dead ends. Perhaps some cases of religious disagreement are like this.

One is blessed with insight, and another is blind to it. Sometimes religious difference may turn on the presence of grace. Perhaps it is even possible that God should allow one to think that an incorrect creed is true because the incorrect creed may be better suited to that person's capacity for spiritual advancement. We cannot say. This requires knowledge into the unseen, into how God may extend His grace to His servants to guide them in His ways. But what has been said here should suffice to suggest how one might insist on the truth of Islam and yet be unsatisfied with the ways to explain religious diversity considered by Wainwright.

Given that in the present age, only one religion is ordained by God for mankind and in this sense only one religion is valid or correct, namely the religion revealed to the last of His chosen messengers, Muhammad, may the Peace and blessings of Allah be with him and with his folk, there remains the question of who is destined for heaven and who for the fire of hell, and whether damnation will be eternal or not for the adherents of any particular faith. This topic is discussed in detail in the final chapter of Shahid Mutahhari's *Adl Ilahi (Divine Justice)* and the position defended below is for the most part the same.[49](#)

The first thing that needs to be understood before an assessment can be made of whether non-believers can attain paradise is that disbelief itself is a major sin warranting eternal damnation. The verses of the Noble Qur'an attesting to this judgment are too numerous to mention, but the following are representative:

“and those who disbelieve, for them shall be the drink from the boiling fluids and a painful chastisement for that they disbelieved. “ (Al-Qur'an, 10:4)

“And whoever acts hostilely to the Apostle after guidance has become manifest to him, and follows other than the way of the believers, We will turn him to that to which he has turned and make him enter Hell; and it is an evil resort. “ (Al-Qur'an, 4:115)

These and similar verses issue a threat to the infidel, so to understand them properly, we need to examine three issues: (1) to precisely whom the threat is issued, (2) under what conditions it is issued and (3) whether it must be carried out.

(1) Infidelity

The threat of damnation is not issued exclusively to the infidels; rather, it is issued to all mankind, and

infidelity is stated as a condition whose recompense is hell. However, because of its importance as the primary condition for damnation under discussion, several points should be noted about the concept of infidelity before any other conditions regarding the damnation of the infidels are considered.

The term *infidelity* (*kufr*), and its cognates, such as *infidel* (*kafir*), have different meanings in different contexts. For example, there is a legal definition used with regard to such issues as inheritance and marriage.

It cannot be assumed, however, that in every verse in which these terms occur the legal definition gives the appropriate meaning. Even in different legal contexts, the meaning can differ. For example, the injunction to slay the disbelievers in time of war is generally interpreted as pertaining to combatant disbelievers, and not to women, children and the infirm. Some exegetes have claimed that legal condemnations of the pagans (*mushriqin*) in the Qur'an pertain only to the pagans of the Arabian peninsula during the time of the Prophet Muhammad (S), while others have offered broader interpretations.

The legal definitions of *infidelity* are not relevant to the question of salvation, for the legal definitions pertain to issues concerning how non Muslims are to be treated according to Islamic law, while the question of salvation pertains to the inner state of the individual.

The literal meaning of *infidelity* (*kufr*) is *covering*. The infidel is one who seeks to shield or cover himself from the truth of Islam. Infidelity is not a passive condition applying to all those who lack correct belief in Islam, rather it is an active inward opposition which prevents a person from accepting divine guidance. What damns the infidel is his own interior defiance of God and rejection of the divine guidance He sent through His prophets ('a). His own infidelity veils the infidel from God, and it is this separation which is damnation.

(2) Conditions

The Shi'i theologians generally agree that the threat of damnation does not apply to all who lack correct belief. The obvious exceptions are children who have not reached the age of reason, the insane and feeble minded. Other groups exempt from the threat of damnation for their incorrect beliefs mentioned in narrations are the deaf and dumb and those who died between the periods in which prophets were sent.⁵⁰

There is disagreement about exactly what is to happen to these groups, called *incapable* (*qasir*), in the afterlife. According to some narrations, there will be a trial on the Last Day for these people in which a prophet will be sent to them and will call them from within a fire. Those who enter the fire will be saved and those who do not will enter the fire of hell.

Shaykh Saduq, however, rejects these narrations on the grounds that they conflict with others according to which there are no responsibilities on the Day of Judgment. Others claim that those who were

incapable in this world are an exception. According to Fayd Kashani, the call from the fire is to be understood as the reflection in the other world of the trial in this world to live righteously, and the call of the prophet from the fire is the other worldly form of the call of moral conscience in this world.⁵¹ In any case, there is general agreement among the Shi'i scholars that the groups mentioned above may be spared from damnation despite their incorrect beliefs.

Those called *incapable* (*qasir*) are distinguished from the *negligent* (*muqassir*), who have incorrect beliefs through their own fault, because of prejudice, dogmatism, pride, laziness, and the like. Shahid Mutahhari's solution to the problem of religious pluralism is based on this distinction, however, he expands the category of the *incapable* to include all those who are unable through no fault of their own to admit the truth of Islam.

Those who are incapable may be divided into two groups: those who lack the mental capacity to discern the truth and those to whom the truth is not made manifest, although they are fully rational. The first group includes children, the insane and feeble minded. Of greater interest, however, is the second group, which includes the deaf and those, born between prophets, to which Shahid Mutahhari adds those whom he calls *mustad'af*, those made *unfortunate* either by oppression or other circumstances.

The extension of the class of the *incapable* is a natural result of rational reflection on the groups mentioned in the narrations. It is not deafness, *per se*, which excuses a person from heeding the call of Islam, but the result presumed to follow from deafness in centuries past, that the deaf would not be expected to have become familiar with the teachings of Islam.

If the deaf person, however, is able to read or sign and the person is educated and the teachings of Islam are made known to him, then he will become responsible for accepting or rejecting the truth. What is at issue is the manifestation of the truth, not deafness, as is indicated in the noble verse quoted above, in the phrase:

“after guidance has become manifested to him” (4: 115).

This is the central condition for responsible choice of creed. Likewise, those who were born between prophets are presumed to lack knowledge of the divine message they brought. But if such a person were a scholar and understood what had been previously revealed, it would be incumbent upon him to heed the divine call. On the other hand, one born in the present age, but in a remote area of the world to which the teachings of Islam had not reached, cannot be held accountable for his failure to embrace Islam.

Shahid Mutahhari extends this point to cover those who for any reason (for which they themselves cannot be held responsible) are unable to understand the message of Islam. Someone who has been brought up in an atmosphere poisoned by propaganda spread by the enemies of Islam may be no more capable of understanding the message of Islam than one living in a remote region physically cut off from all contact with the Islamic world. Even if that person is a scholar for whom a library of books about Islam

is available, still the comprehension of the message of Islam for such a person may be as difficult as for those who lack the requisite mental health.

Perhaps those whom Shahid Mutahhari castigates as “narrow minded dry holy ones” (*tang nazari khoshk muqaddasan*) will argue on the basis of the following noble verse that if one really sought the truth, God would somehow show the way to Islam (in the specific sense):

“And those who strive hard in Us, certainly We guide them in Our ways” (Al-Qur’an, 29:69).

However, such a conclusion cannot validly be drawn from this verse for two reasons. First, the guidance God may provide to the true seekers may be moral wisdom without the ability to arrive at information about the revelation given to the last of His prophets, as God may guide and grant wisdom to those who sincerely seek but who live in regions where the message of Islam has not reached.

Second, it is not clear that the phrase “those who strive hard in Us” is to be interpreted so as to include all sincere searchers, for similar words are used in the Qur'an in various places with a much more narrow meaning to signify only those who were already true believers and had struggled on behalf of Islam.[52](#)

Shahid Mutahhari argues that salvation is not a matter of an arbitrary decision by God, but is the natural result of one's life. It is not conventional (*qarardadi*), but ontological (*takwini*). He also emphasizes that both salvation and damnation come in various degrees, and that the latter is not always eternal. Likewise, Islam itself comes in degrees from the innate desire for truth and goodness found at least latently in all human beings to the faith and righteousness of the special friends of Allah, the *awliya*.

No one is locked out of heaven because they fail to subscribe to the right creed; but solve incorrect beliefs can prevent one from effectively purifying oneself, and thus, indirectly, lead to wretchedness.[53](#) Thus, in Islam we find a rationale for insistence on right belief as that which guides one toward felicity, while at the same time there need not be any rigid exclusivism based on creed.

To understand how it is possible to reach ultimate felicity even for those who do not follow the right path, the path made obligatory for all mankind in the present age, it should be recalled that what invalidates the previously ordained religions is not that they contain no truth. God revealed the previous religions with the capacity to guide man toward perfection and salvation. That inherent capacity is not destroyed with the arrival of a new covenant, yet one who clings stubbornly to the old after the revelation of the new is surely wretched, for in this case the failure to accept the new covenant becomes rebellion against God.

According to non-reductive pluralism, correct faith is required but not necessary for salvation. Correct faith *is required* in the sense that it is made obligatory by the command of God. Correct faith is not necessary in the sense that it is possible for a person to be saved by the grace of God even though this obligation is not fulfilled.

Different degrees of non–reductive pluralism will allow for more or less variance from correct belief. At the time of the Prophet of Islam, may the Peace and Blessings of Allah be with him and with his folk, Jews and Christians were considered to have incorrect beliefs, yet despite such incorrect beliefs God will not deny them their appropriate rewards. In two verses of the Qur'an, reward is even promised to the Sabeans, who many commentators agree were star worshippers, provided they believe in Allah and the Last Day and do good:

“Verily, those who believe, and those who are Jews, and the Christians, and the Sabeans, whoever believes in Allah and the Last Day and does good, they shall have their reward from their Lord, and there shall be no fear for them, nor shall they grieve.” (Al-Qur'an, 2: 62)[54](#)

As should be expected, there is some controversy about the correct interpretation of this verse among exegetes. Muslim exclusivists interpret it as meaning that the non–Muslims (in the specific sense) who were followers of other ways during the periods in which those ways were ordained have nothing to fear, while present day followers of other religions cannot achieve salvation. They argue that if the verse were interpreted to include non–Muslims during the period following the advent of Islam, it would conflict with the noble verse:

“And whoever seeks any religion other than Islam never shall it be accepted from him, and in the next world he shall be among the losers.” (Al-Qur'an, 3:84)

However, there is no conflict with the inclusivism reading of the former verse, provided the latter verse is understood as referring to Islam in the general sense of total submission to Allah. On the other hand, (2:62) is not to be interpreted as meaning that more than one religion is divinely ordained during the present age. Rather, (2:62) may be understood as allowing that those who are incapable (*qasir*) but who live righteously may be saved.

This reading of the verse is certainly more reasonable than the exclusivist's, for what is at issue is the manifestation of the universal call of Islam, and as far as the issue of salvation is concerned, it makes no difference whether the call has not become manifest to a person because of the time during which he has lived or because of the remoteness of the region in which he lives, or for some other reason.

The Christian doctrine of the Trinity, not to mention star–worship, is irreconcilable with Islamic monotheism, yet despite the recognition of irresolvable differences in belief, salvation is not to be denied on the basis of false belief alone. This, however, is not to say that all beliefs are equally conducive to salvation.

According to Islamic doctrine, ultimate felicity is most effectively promoted through belief in the teachings of God Himself in the Qur'an, as elaborated by the last of His prophets (S). Some forms of belief, on the other hand, like the worship of Lat and, Uzza by the pagan Arabs, are absolutely devoid of any truth and lead to wretchedness rather than to felicity.

The People of the Book, Jews and Christians, despite irreconcilable differences in their beliefs with the teachings of Islam, may also be saved, provided that their incorrect belief is through no fault of their own. Since their religions were originally divinely inspired, they may even be drawn nigh to God by means of the divine truth contained in their religions.

It is even possibly that in like manner the followers of Hindu, Chinese, Buddhist, and other ways may reach paradise provided that their rejection of Islam is due to ignorance of Islam rather than prejudice against Islam, i.e., that they are to be considered *qasir* (incapable) rather than *muqassir* (negligent), for we cannot definitively rule that the followers of religions other than Judaism, Christianity and Islam are not "People of the Book", because it is impossible to determine that the original teachings contained in these religions were not brought by a prophet of Allah.

The divergence between the content of their scriptures and teachings from those of Islam do not prove that the original teachings were not in essence the same. For although the scriptures and teachings of Christianity are inconsistent with those of Islam, this is explained by the erosion (*tahrif*) of the original teachings, and there is no reason why a similar strategy could not be used to explain the possibility that non Abrahamic religion might be divinely revealed religions.⁵⁵ So, one who is incapable (*qasir*) may be able to achieve salvation by means of the divine truth which is contained in the religion he falsely believed to be presently required by God.

However, the question of the salvation of the incapable (*qasir*) is not decided merely on the basis of the truth or falsity of the teachings contained in his religion or system of beliefs, but also on the basis of one's reasons for belief. No matter how aberrant one's faith, if it is accompanied by absolutely sincere intention this sincerity by itself may win the favor of God, for sincerity itself is at the core of submission (*islam*). This point is best illustrated by Rumi's famous story of Moses and the shepherd.⁵⁶ According to the story, God accepts the devotion of the shepherd despite the fact that he holds absurdly anthropomorphic beliefs about the deity, because of the simple purity of the shepherd's love of God.

A related point concerns the divine reward (*thawab*) granted to the expert in Islamic law, the *mujtahid*, for his legal decisions. If the *mujtahid* comes to a wrong decision by honest mistake rather than by negligence, then although his decision is wrong, it still merits reward, and it must be carried out. In this case, to act properly, if this is believed to be improper, will itself be wrong. Now, in matters pertaining to the fundamental principles of religion, imitation (*taqlid*) is forbidden, and all must use the best of their abilities to determine what the correct faith is. So, in this area, every one is a *mujtahid*.

In short, the threat of damnation is conditioned not merely on disbelief or incorrect belief, but on sinful disbelief or incorrect belief. Wrong belief is not sinful for those who are incapable (*qasir*), but only for the negligent (*muqassir*). The negligent are like the hypocrites, for both proclaim outwardly what they deny inwardly. The hypocrites proclaim Islam with their tongues, but deny it in their Hearts.

At the same time, the hypocrite knows in the depths of his heart that Islam is true, but he does not act in

accordance with it, so that his outward profession becomes a denial of Islam. Likewise, the negligent proclaim that they seek the truth with their tongues, but in their hearts they hide from the truth. At the same time, the negligent knows in the depths of his heart that there is a truth which he avoids, so that his outward profession of truth seeking coupled with his failure to actually pursue the truth becomes a denial of the truth. And so, it is appropriate that we find the promise of hell for the infidel so often joined with that of the hypocrite.

“Allah has promised the hypocrite men and the hypocrite women and the infidels the fire of hell to abide therein; this suffices for them, and Allah has cursed them, and for them is a lasting chastisement.” (Al-Qur’an, 9:68)[57](#)

There is no way for us to say of any given individual that his disbelief is sinful or not (except for a few individuals whose fates have been revealed). The difference between the incapable (*qasir*) and the negligent (*muqassir*) lies within the heart. This, too, is a point stressed by Shahid Mutahhari, who refers to the example of whether Louis Pasteur is damned despite his service to mankind:

“Not only with specific regard to Pasteur, but fundamentally, the reckoning of individuals is in the Hands of God. No one has a right to express a definite view about someone whether he is in heaven or hell.”[58](#)

Even the Prophet (S) did not have knowledge about what would happen to specific individuals in the hereafter except by divine revelation.[59](#)

Shahid Mutahhari's expansion of the concept of the incapable (*qasir*) marks a major moral advance in Shi'i theology, for it reaffirms the tie between moral responsibility and otherworldly rewards and punishments which had become endangered by overemphasis on doctrinal orthodoxy. Shahid Mutahhari ridicules the idea that heaven should be reserved only for that tiny minority of the human population which accepts all the doctrines of the Shi'i theologians, and while in hardly any particular instance can we claim to have knowledge about who is incapable and who is negligent, in the view of Shahid Mutahhari it is not unlikely that great numbers of infidels are incapable.

The Threat

The question to be raised next is whether eternal damnation is the necessary consequence of sinfully incorrect belief, the incorrect belief of the negligent (*muqassir*). On the general issue of whether God must carry out His threats and promises it is customary to divide the theologians into three groups.

According to the Ash'arites, whatever God does is to be considered just by virtue of accordance with the divine will. If the ultimate purpose were decadence and pain, then they would be just and good. Hence, they field that there is no need for God to keep his promises. If He decided to reward the disbelievers and punish the believers, this would be no less just than the opposite policy.

According to the Mu'tazilites, on the other hand, God is necessarily just, and therefore He cannot break

His promises of heavenly reward nor can He fail to carry out His threats of eternal damnation.

The Shi'i theologians, for the most part, have taken a third position. They hold that since His mercy has precedence over its justice, God cannot break His promises of rewards, but He may forgive those who are threatened with eternal damnation. No one can place any limit on the extent of the grace of God. Even though the hypocrites are consigned to the lowest level of hell, the possibility of divine mercy is explicitly stated in the Qur'an.^{[60](#)} Nevertheless, unrepentant sinful infidelity is usually treated as an exception and is considered to result in eternal damnation without hope of reprieve.^{[61](#)}

There has been some disagreement over whether the infidels will be rewarded for their good deeds. Some have held that there can be no reward for the negligent infidel at all. Others have held that reward may take the form of a decrease in the torments of hell.^{[62](#)} On the other hand, from the time of Shaykh Mufid the theologians have generally held that no one with orthodox Shi'i beliefs will suffer eternal damnation.^{[63](#)}

Thus, the concept of divine rewards and punishments degenerated to the point that it was imagined to turn entirely on one's doctrinal allegiances. However, *this idea is* not firmly grounded in the Qur'an and *ahadith*, but is claimed to be supported by rational argument, and the rational argument is far from convincing. It is held that the sinful orthodox must be rewarded for their orthodoxy (which is mistaken for faith) and that if the reward were to come prior to eternal punishment, the reward would be spoiled, and if it comes after punishment, the punishment cannot be eternal.^{[64](#)}

However, God could make the sinner forget that eternal punishment was coming during the period of reward, and He could alternate a year of punishment with a year of reward, so that both could be eternal, or He could limit the reward to a reduction in the intensity of the torments of hell.

A better reason for holding that reward must follow punishment is to be found in the idea that reward in the afterlife is conditioned by a level of perfection and purification of the soul which is reached only after some burning. However, the reward for faith will guarantee eventual salvation despite major sins only if faith is understood as something much deeper than doctrinal affiliation, and in that case, the commission of major sin which is not absolved by repentance casts doubt upon the presence of real faith. The sinner must fear eternal damnation, and should not find any solace in the orthodoxy of his beliefs.

The story, no doubt apocryphal, is told that when Shaykh Bayazid enjoyed great popularity among the people, God said to him that if He were to reveal his secrets, the people would stone him. Bayazid replied that if he told the people the secret of the abundance of His mercy, none would obey Him. God agreed that the secrets should be kept! Rather than resting confident with the implications of such stories, it would seem more reasonable to hold that all responsible human beings, whatever their beliefs, should live in fear of the divine punishment they deserve, and in hope of God's grace.

It has been argued that since it is stated in the Qur'an that idolatry (*shirk*) *will* not be forgiven,^{[65](#)} at least the unrepentant sinful idolater must suffer eternal damnation. However, the verse alluded to does not, by

itself, prove the point, for without further evidence, whether rational or transmitted, it cannot be assumed that God's refusal to forgive the idolater must result in His failure to offer him any grace.

The refusal to forgive idolatry would be preserved even if it only prevented the idolater from reaching some high station in heaven. If idolatry will truly prevent one from salvation, it must be understood in a way more profound than the acceptance of a pantheon of deities to be worshipped.

What may be called *ontological idolatry* must be understood in a manner more clearly expressed by the Arabic *shirk*, which is usually translated as 'assigning partners to God'. Then the strategy for showing that *shirk* prevents one from attaining salvation would be to show that *shirk* is incompatible with the kind of purity of heart required for salvation.

In any case, the above discussion pertains only to negligent infidelity, not incapable infidelity. God does not reward sin of any sort, let alone sinful infidelity; but to insist that His grace is unlimited is to indicate the room for hope that even those considered most wicked may, by the grace of God, find the way to true repentance. No one can put limits on the grace of God,

“and that grace is in the hand of Allah, He bestows it on whom He will, and Allah is Lord of Mighty Grace.” (Al-Qur’an, 57:29)

Conclusion

There remains one more important question related to the topic of religious pluralism which will only be touched upon here: its practical implications. One of the major motivations for liberal Christian religious pluralists was to provide the theological groundwork for better relations between Christians and non-Christians.

Instead of viewing the non-Christian with contempt as damned, he is seen by the Christian pluralist as in essential agreement with Christianity, for all the major religions are held to differ only in their external aspects. Differences in religion are to be understood on the model of ethnic differences, and relations among the participants in different faith traditions are presumed to take shape within the framework of the liberal state, which proclaims complete religious neutrality while in fact it embodies the values of the dominant strand of main stream Protestant thinking.

In Islamic thought, to the contrary, religious differences are not seen as a matter of personal preference, but as expressions of communal loyalty grounded in spiritual insight and critical evaluation. Those who chose a religion other than Islam are making a mistake, either sinfully or excusably.

Since there is no way for us to tell whether or not the mistake is excusable, where good relations with non-Muslims are possible without condoning injustice, the presumption of an honest mistake is morally incumbent upon us.

Good relations with non-Muslims are to take place either through agreement contracted by the parties

involved, in the case of Muslims and non-Muslims of different countries by observing the courtesy prescribed by Islamic etiquette (*adab*), or within the framework of Islamic governance, which has traditionally offered semi-autonomous status to the non-Muslim communities living within its jurisdiction who submit to its authority.

Due to the force of European arms and the weaknesses of rival Muslim powers, whatever traces of the system of Islamic governance that remained in the nineteenth century, were effectively wiped out and replaced by the system of nation-states. Muslims are only beginning to regain control of their lands, and the first steps toward Islamic governance are being taken, the most prominent such step being the Islamic Revolution of Iran.

The system of tribute (*jizyah*) and protection for semi-autonomous communities of free non-Muslim citizens (*ahl al-dhimma*) has not been revived yet, and while it may have been abused in some cases in the past, it holds the promise of greater freedom than that available within the framework of the liberal state.

In Christianity, especially in Protestant Christianity, there is a strong link between salvation and true belief, because it is through faith that one participates in the Redemption, which alone is believed to afford salvation. This link between true belief and salvation survives among Christian proposals for religious pluralism, like those of Wilfred Cantwell Smith⁶⁶ and John Hick, in the idea that ultimately the variety of religious beliefs is a matter of surface differences over a fundamentally single faith, which may not even be expressible in human language.

If one denies the doctrine of Redemption, and with it the link between faith and salvation which features so prominently in Christian thought, the obvious alternative, at least obvious in a Christian context, is the idea that faith is to be purchased through good works, an idea emphatically denounced by Luther and by the majority of Christian theologians, including Catholics, after him.

The Islamic tradition appears to offer another approach to the problem. Muslims, like Christians, reject the idea that good works alone are sufficient for salvation. Like Christian writings on the subject, it is not difficult to find Muslim expressions of the idea that there is nothing one can do through one's own efforts to make oneself worthy of salvation without the grace of God.

This is a theme which runs throughout Imam Zayn al-'Abidin's *Sahifat al-Sajjadiyah*.⁶⁷ Good works without faith appear ungrounded, for faith provides the cognitive framework in which the final good is to be understood and intentions to do good works are to be formed, and it is through such orientation and intentions that God draws His servants toward Him by His Mercy. But faith is more than the mere acceptance of a list of doctrines; it is a spiritual readiness to fare the way toward Allah and wholehearted submission to His will.

In Islam, salvation is seen in terms of the movement of the soul toward God, a movement which in turn is explained in terms of the acquirement of the Divine attributes, and whose aim is a beatific encounter

with Divinity, *liqa' Allah*. To achieve this, God demands faith and good works, and in the present age, this means the acceptance and practice of Islam as revealed to the last of His chosen messengers (S); ultimately, however, it is neither by faith nor good works that man is saved, but by the grace of God.

An Islamic non-reductive pluralism may be contrasted with Hick's pluralism and Rahner's inclusivism in terms of the place of ignorance in the three views. In Hick's view every major creed, no matter how different, expresses an ultimately single faith.

That ultimate faith may not be expressible in human language, so there is a sense in which believers are ignorant of what they really believe. On Rahner's view Christians know what they believe and it is only others who may be ignorant of their latent Christian belief.

On the non-reductive view, there is no attempt to reinterpret apparently conflicting beliefs to reveal some hidden agreement. Instead of positing ignorance about what we believe, we are to admit our ignorance of how God may guide the sincere, and what beliefs are the result of a sincere quest for the truth..

The identities of all the prophets are not known, and in the most famous *hadith* about the number of the prophets, Abu Dharr reports that the Prophet told him there were one hundred twenty-four thousand prophets. Corrupted forms of the teachings of these prophets may survive in any number of the variety of the world's religions. The admission of ignorance in this matter is an expression of humility before the judgment of Allah; such humility has featured prominently in the Islamic tradition, and it may provide a basis for an Islamic form of a non-reductive religious pluralism.

After mentioning some of the good people who will be saved and the hypocrites who will receive a double chastisement, the Qur'an mentions that there are others who must await the command of God. Until then, we cannot say whether they will be rewarded or punished:

“And others must await the command of Allah, whether We will chastise them or whether He will turn to them. And Allah is all Knowing, all Wise.” (Al-Qur'an, 9: 106)[68](#)

John Hick's religious pluralism is to be lauded as a great improvement over its exclusivist and inclusivist predecessors in Christian theology, and Muslims will be impressed by the fact that the denial of the traditional Christian dogma of the Incarnation brings Hick's theology much closer to Islamic doctrine.

Nevertheless, Hick's reductive pluralism hides a set of moral and political values which are at odds with Islam. They are at odds with Islam not only because of the detail of the judgments they inform, but, even more significantly, because of where they set their standards. Islam teaches that we are to look to the Qur'an and the teachings of the Prophet (S) to find guidance in politics and morals, while Hick would have us turn to the worldly currents of modern thought, which are more often than not decidedly opposed to Islam.

And although a severe punishment awaits the enemies of Islam, as for those who honestly accept an

invalid creed, it must be admitted that this invalid creed itself may be the vehicle through which God extends to them His grace and leads them to salvation. What is truly of value in Hick's religious pluralism is a tolerance which can be found more completely, in a sense, within the Islamic tradition, and may be formulated along the lines suggested above as a non-reductive religious pluralism.

[1.](#) See Richard Vernon, "John Stuart Mill and Pornography: Beyond the Harm Principle", *Ethics*, Vol. 106, No. 3, (1996), pps. 621–632.

[2.](#) See Stephen Muthall and Adam Swift, *Liberals and Communitarians*, 2nd ed., (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996) and Ronald Beincr, *What's the Matter with Liberalism?* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992).

[3.](#) The topic of religious pluralism is taken up in almost all of Hick's major works, cited individually below. In addition to these, there are the anthologies, *Truth and Dialogue in World Religions*, ed. John Hick (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1974) and *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness*, ed., John Hick and Paul Knitter (London: SCM Press, 1988).

In response to the latter anthology, there is *Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered; The Myth of a Pluralistic Theology of Religions*, Gavin D'Costa, ed., (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1990). The topic of religious pluralism has become one of the most widely discussed issues in religious studies. To mention just a couple more of the collections of essays devoted to the topic, there are *Religious Pluralism*, Leroy S. Rouner, ed., (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984) and *Religious Pluralism and Unbelief*, ed. Ian Hamnett (London: Routledge, 1990).

[4.](#) John Hick, *Problems of Religious Pluralism* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1985), p. 34.

[5.](#) Just as the Arabic word for martyr, shahid, derives from the verb shahada, meaning he bore witness, the English word martyr is derived from the Greek, martyrs, meaning to witness (and not from the Latin mort, as erroneously stated by Dr. Shari'ati. See *Jihad and Shahadat Struggle and Martyrdom in Islam*, ed. Mehdi Abedi and Gary Legenhausen (Houston: IRIS, 1986), pps. 230, 242).

[6.](#) John Hick, ed., *The Myth of God Incarnate* (London: SCM Press, 1977). The controversy spawned by this book is described by Hick in the opening essay, "Three Controversies", of his *Problems of Religious Pluralism*.

[7.](#) John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), p. 233.

[8.](#) William J. Wainwright, *Philosophy of Religion* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1988), p. 158.

[9.](#) Frithjof Schuon, *The Transcendental Unity of Religions*, revised edition, (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1975).

[10.](#) See the articles by Katz in *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978) and *Mysticism and Religious Traditions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983).

[11.](#) John Hick, *Art Interpretation of Religion* (New Haven: Yale, 1989), p. 243.

[12.](#) From the *Mathnavi*, Book III, line 1259 ff..

[13.](#) Peter Byrne, "John Hick's Philosophy of World Religions," *Scottish Journal of Theology* 35, no. 4, (1982), p. 297, cited in Michael Peterson, William Masker, Bruce Reichenbach and David Basinger, *Reason and Religious Belief*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 227. See Hick's response to Byrne in *Problems of Religious Pluralism*, 102–107

[14.](#) In his *Perceiving God* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), pps. 255–285.

[15.](#) *Ibid.*, p. 266.

[16.](#) *Ibid.*

[17.](#) Peterson, et. al., (1991), p. 227.

[18.](#) Ninian Smart, "Truth and Religions," in Steven M. Calm and David Shatz, eds., *Contemporary, Philosophy, of Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), pp. 291–300

[19.](#) See his lengthy review of Wilfred Cantwell Smith's *The Meaning and End of Religion* (New York: Harper & Row, 1978) in *Al-Tawhid* Vol. 3, No. 3, pp. 163–189, concluded in Vol. 3, No. 4, pp. 154–196.

[20.](#) Peter Donovan, "The Intolerance of Religious Pluralism," *Religious Studies*, 29 (1993), pp. 217–229.

[21.](#) *Ibid.*, p. 218. Donovan here reports on the views of Moltmann expressed in his contribution to *Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered*, Gavin D'Costa, ed., (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1990).

[22.](#) *Ibid.*, p. 219.

- [23.](#) John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, (New Haven: Yale, 1989), p. 339.
- [24.](#) John Hick "On Grading Religions" in *Problems of Religious Pluralism*, p. 85.
- [25.](#) *Ibid.* pps. 86–87.
- [26.](#) John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, p. 336.
- [27.](#) The question of religious diversity is taken up by Ibn al-ʿArabi, in chapter 48 of the *Futuhat*, in which he explains that religious diversity is the product of the diversity in the divine relationships. Cf. William C. Chittick, *Imaginal Worlds: Ibn al-ʿArabi and the Problem of Religious Diversity* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994), 155–160.
- [28.](#) Similar ayat are (48:28) and (61:9).
- [29.](#) "The desert Arabs say, 'We believe.' Say, 'You did not believe, but say, "We submit," for faith has not yet entered your hearts; and if you obey Allah and His Apostle, He will lessen naught of your deeds; verily Allah is oft-forgiving, Merciful.'" (Al-Quran, 49:14)
- [30.](#) John Hick, *Problems of Religious Pluralism*, 48–49.
- [31.](#) *Ibid.*, 50
- [32.](#) John Hick; *An Interpretation of Religion*, p. 378.
- [33.](#) John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, p. 233; *Problems of Religious Pluralism*, p. 108; the original may be found in Nicholson's edition of the *Mathnavi*, Book III, line 1259.
- [34.](#) Hick considers religious affiliation analogous to ethnicity in *Problems of Religious Pluralism*, p. 47.
- [35.](#) *Discourses of Rumi*, tr. Arthur J. Arberry (Richmond: Curzon, 1993), p. 135.
- [36.](#) *Ibid.*, p. 136.
- [37.](#) *Ibid.*, . 31.
- [38.](#) *Ibid.*, 29, p. 134f.
- [39.](#) From *Saba-ye 'Ishq*, translated as, *A Jug of Love: Eight Ghazals of Imam Khomeini*, tr. Muhammad Legenhausen and Azim Sarvdalir (Tehran: Islamic Thought Foundation, 1994).
- [40.](#) See Seyyed Hossein Nasr, "Islam and the Encounter of Religions" in *Sufi Essays* 2nd ed. (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991), 123–151.
- [41.](#) See Claude Addas, *Quest for the Red Sulphur: The Life of Ibn 'Arabi* (Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 1993).
- [42.](#) *Futuhat*, III 311.23, sec *Imaginal Worlds*, 155.
- [43.](#) *Futuhat*, III, 153.12, translated by William Chittick in *Imaginal Worlds*, 125.
- [44.](#) From the *Divan* of Baba TAhir, translated by Muhammad Legenhausen and 'Azim Sarvdalir.
- [45.](#) From *Saba-ye 'Ishq*, translated by Muhammad Legenhausen and 'Azim Sarvdalir.
- [46.](#) From his *Siyasat*, cited and translated by Fazlur Ralunan in his *Prophecy in Islam* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1958), 40.
- [47.](#) Fazlur Raliman, *ibid.*, 40
- [48.](#) *Ibid.*, 41. A view similar to Farabi's is endorsed by Ibn Sina in his *Risalah al Aehawiya*
- [49.](#) Murtadha Mutahhari, 'Adl Ilahi, 10th printing (Qum: Intisharat Sadra, 1357/1978), 287–381. I have also benefitted from discussions with Ayatullah Javadi 'Amuli, Aqa-ye Mustafapur, Aqa-ye Husaynzadeh, Aqa-ye Muhammad Baqir Kharazi, Aqa-ye Qummi, and others, although the position defended here is not to be attributed to any of them, and I bear the responsibility for whatever errors the position contains. May Allah forgive its for our shortcomings, and bless us with knowledge from Him!
- [50.](#) See *Bihar al-Anwar*, Vol. 5, p. 289.
- [51.](#) See Fayd Kashani, 'Ilm al-Yaqin, Vol. 2, (Qum: Bidar), p. 1054.
- [52.](#) See, for example, (8:74) and (9:20).
- [53.](#) Murtadha Mutahhari, 'Adl 'Ilahi (Divine Justice), (Qum: Intishairat Sadra, 1357/1978), p. 352 ff.
- [54.](#) Also see (5:69).
- [55.](#) There is also the issue of whether or not the non-Abrahamic sects are to be considered religions. Some Buddhists, for example, claim that what they teach is merely a philosophy and method of meditation, and that one could be, for example, a Jew and a Buddhist at the same time, just as there are Christian Platonists and Christian Aristotelians.
- [56.](#) See Nicholson's edition of the *Mathnavi*, Book II, line 1720f.

- [57.](#) Also see (9:73), (33:73), (48:6) and (66:9).
- [58.](#) Murtadha Mutahhari, 'Adl Ilahi, p. 293.
- [59.](#) Cf. (46:9) and (7:188).
- [60.](#) God's threat to the hypocrites may be found at (4:145) and the possibility of mercy for them is stated at (33:24).
- [61.](#) See Shaykh Saduq, *Al-Itiqadat fi Din al Imamiyah* (Qum: Muhaqiq, A. H. 1412), p. 45, translated by Asaf A. A. Fyzee, *A Shi'ite Creed* (Tehran: WOFIS, 1982), p. 63–64.
- [62.](#) ee Ayatullah Abu al Hasan Sharani, *Sharh-E Tajrid al-l'tiqad* (Tehran: Kitabfurushi Islamiyah, 1991), p. 577f..
- [63.](#) See Martin J. McDermott, *The Theology of al-Shaikh al-Mufid* (Beirut: Dar el Machreq, 1986), Ch. X.
- [64.](#) See Allamah Hilli, *Kashf al-Murad* (Qum: Mu'assesah al-Nashr al-Islami, n.d.), p. 414–415
- [65.](#) (Al-Quran, 4:48)
- [66.](#) See *Religious Diversity*, ed. Willard G. Oxtoby (New York: Harper & Row, 1976) and *Towards a World Theology* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1981).
- [67.](#) Zayn al-Abidin, *Sahifat al-Sajjadiyah*, tr. William Chittick (London: Mohammadi Trust, 1989).
- [68.](#) See the discussion of this ayah and related ahadith in `Allamah Tabataba'is *al Mizan*. Also see (Al-Quran, 5:118) and (Al-Quran, 33:24).

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