

Heydar SHADI¹

RECOGNITION OF THE OTHER IN MUSLIM INTELLECTUAL HISTORY

“However, those who have become believers (the Muslims), and the Jews, the Christians and the Sabe'ns who believe in God and the Day of Judgment and strive righteously will receive their reward from the Lord and will have nothing to fear nor will they be grieved.” (Koran, 2:62).

“My heart has become capable of every form:
a pasture for gazelles, a temple for idols
a monastery for Christian monks,
the pilgrims' Ka'ba, the
tablet of the Torah, and the Book
of the Koran. I follow the
religion of Love; whatever way
love's camel takes, that is my
religion, my faith.”²

Ibn al-Arabi (1165-1240)

Introduction

Religious diversity can be a source of conflict and violence. Non-exclusivist approaches to religious diversity that enable the justification and recognition of religious other can be used for prevention of religious conflicts. This paper aims to introduce some non-exclusivist views on religious diversity from Islamic tradition. The paper is structured in two main parts. The first part will review some verses on religious diversity in the Koran and their both exclusivist and non-exclusivist interpretations in the Koran exegeses. The second part will introduce some non-exclusivist views about religions in classical Islamic tradition with a focus on Sufism and philosophy.

1. Religious diversity in the Koran and exegeses

The Koran has different and seemingly conflicting verses regarding other religions. These verses have been cited by both exclusivist and non-exclusivist interpretations. Before discussing the different interpretations of related verses, it could be useful to review some of the main verses of the Koran that are concerned with other religions.

² Muhyiddin Ibn Arabi, *Tarjuman al-Ashwaq: a collection of mystical odes*, ed., trans., and commentary Bernard Nicholson. London: Royal Asiatic Society, 1911, 69-70.

1.1. The Koran on religious diversity

1.1.1. Non-Exclusivist verses

The Koran regards revelation in many verses a universal phenomenon and states that God has sent messenger to all nations and communities. “To every nation We sent a Messenger who told its people, 'Worship God and stay away from Satan.'”(16:36).³ There are in Koran fairly many verses that promise salvation not just for Muslims but also for an extended circle of believers. For example, in the second Sure we read: “However, those who have become believers (the Muslims), and the Jews, the Christians and the Sabe'ns who believe in God and the Day of Judgment and strive righteously will receive their reward from the Lord and will have nothing to fear nor will they be grieved.” (2:62). This concept with almost same words has been repeated also in verse 5:69. These verses promise the salvation for all who believe in God, Last day and do good deeds, even they do not believe in Prophet Mohammad, a concept which could cover many religions. The Koran, in a more specific way, treats two other monotheistic religions. The Koran introduces Judaism and Christianity as its predecessors, which were revealed from God. It says: “(Muhammad), We have sent revelations to you just as were sent to Noah and the Prophets who lived after him and to Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob, his descendants, Jesus, Job, Jonah, Aaron, and Solomon. We gave the Psalms to David. (We sent revelations to) the Messengers mentioned to you before and also to Messengers who have not been mentioned to you. God spoke to Moses in words.”(4:163-4). In another verse but similar to the previous one the Koran says: “(Muhammad), say, 'We believe in God and in that which has been revealed to us and in that which was revealed to Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob, and

³ The English translation of the cited verses of the Koran in this paper are from the translation by Mohammad Sarwar in this portal: <http://corpus.quran.com>, unless another source is specified.

their descendants. We believe in that which was given to Moses, Jesus, and the Prophets by their Lord. We make no distinction between them and we have submitted ourselves to the will of God.”(03:84). Koran names Jewish and Christians as “The People of The Book,” which distinguishes them probably from Pagans of Arabian Peninsula, who did not have any holy text. The People of The Book are often recognized and promised the salvation. “The People of the Book are not all the same. Some of them are straightforward. They recite the words of God in prostration at night. They believe in God and the Day of Judgment. They command people to follow good, prohibit others from committing evil and compete with each other in doing good deeds. These are the righteous ones.”(03:113-4). Another verse indicates that the Muslims and The People of The Book worship the same God. “Do not argue with the People of the Book except only by the best manner, except the unjust among them. Tell them, "We believe in what is revealed to us and to you. Our Lord and your Lord is one. We have submitted ourselves to His will.”(29:46). In a very special verse, Koran criticizes the exclusivist position of Jewish and Christians: “The Jews accuse the Christians of having no basis for their religion and the Christians accuse the Jews of having no basis for their religion, even though both sides read the Scripture. The ignorant ones say the same thing. God will issue His decree about their dispute on the Day of Judgment.” (02:113).

1.1.2. Exclusivist verses

However, there are also other verses that are appearing not-pluralistic. A verse introduces Islam as the abrogator to all previous religions: “It is He who has sent His Messenger with guidance and the true religion to make it prevail over all other religions. God is a Sufficient witness to this Truth.”(48:28). Another verse promises the salvation just to followers of 'Islam': “And whoever desires a religion other than Islam, it shall not be accepted from him, and in the hereafter he shall

be one of the losers.” (03:85). Some verses indicate that Islam or Muslims are the best community: “You are the best nation that ever existed among humanity. You command people to good and prohibit them from evil, and you believe in God. Had the People of the Book accepted the faith (Islam), it would certainly have been better for them. Some of them have faith, but most of them are evil doers.” (03:110). Some verses show no toleration towards pagans; “When the sacred months are over, slay the pagans wherever you find them. Capture, besiege, and ambush them. If they repent, perform prayers and pay the religious tax, set them free. God is All-forgiving and All-merciful.” (09:05). These are just some examples of related verses, but one could refer to much more verses for both pluralistic and non-pluralistic approaches.⁴

1.2. Koran exegeses on religious diversity

1.2.1. Exclusivist interpretations

Concerning this diversity in the Koran there have been different explanations by Muslim scholars. Exclusivists have used different concepts to justify the inclusivist or pluralist verses. Some of the exclusivists use the principle of *naskh* (abrogation). According to this principle, from two conflicting verses in the Koran, the earlier is delegitimized by the later. They argue that the exclusivist verses, for example (03:85), which were revealed mostly later in *Madina*, abrogate the pluralistic verses, which were revealed before and in *Mecca*. Some other exclusivists interpret the general concepts like “who believes” into “who believes in Mohammad” and argue that pluralistic verses are just invitation of non-Muslims to Islam.

⁴ For a more comprehensive discussion on the Koran and other religions, see: Abdulaziz Sachedina, *The Qur'an on religious pluralism*. Washington: The Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding, University of Georgetown, 1999; Mohammad Hasan Qaramaleiki, “Ta'mmoli dar Mostanadat-e Qor'ani-ye Pluralism,” (A Reflection on the Koranic References of Pluralism) *Ma'refat*, no. 34-35 (2010).

According to them the verse 2:62, for example, expresses that if Jewish, Christians and Sabe'ins believe in the new revelation to Mohammad they will have salvation.⁵ Some other exclusivist exegetes hold that the seemingly pluralist verses are about the pre-Islamic Jewish and Christians. In other words, the revealed religions before Islam were in their original time valid but were abrogated by the following religion and revelation. So, these exegetes believe in a kind of *vertical-historical* or *diachronic inclusivism* but not in *horizontal* and *synchronical inclusivism*. Therefore, the promised salvation in these verses do not include those Jews, Christians, and Sabe'ins who did not leave their 'abrogated' religions after the rise of Islam and did not believe in Mohammad. Ibn Kathir (died 1373) writes in his Koran exegesis *Tafsir al-Qur'an al-'Azim*: "So, the [valid] faith of Jews was believing in Torah and Moses' tradition until Jesus came. When he came, then whoever [still] believed in Torah and appealed to the tradition of Moses and did not leave it to follow Jesus, then he was damned. The [valid] faith of Christians is that those who believed in Gospel and law of Jesus was a believer and [his belief] was accepted until Mohammad (pbuh) came. Then whoever did not follow Mohammad (pbuh) from them and did not leave what he was once in the tradition of Jesus and Gospel, then he gets damned."⁶ Ibn Kathir quotes also a related hadith and adds: "Allah does not accept any deed or work from anyone unless it conforms to the Law of Muhammad that is, after Allah sent Muhammad. Before that, every person who

⁵ See for example the interpretation of the verse 02:62 in the Koran exegesis *Tafsir Kitab Allah al'Aziz* by al-Havvari (3rd century) and Zamakhshari (1070-1143). Accessed 10.03.2018, <http://www.altafsir.com>.

⁶ The interpretation of 02:62 in: Ibn Kathir, *Tafsir al-Qur'an al-'Azim*. See also: the interpretation of the verse 02:62 in the exegesis *Ruh al-Ma'ani* by al-Alusi (1802-1854). Accessed 10.03.2018, <http://www.altafsir.com>.

followed the guidance of his own Prophet was on the correct path, following the correct guidance and was saved.”⁷

1.2.2. Non-exclusivist interpretations

There have been also some Koran exegetes who have interpreted pluralistic verses to their appearing pluralistic meaning. Ibn Arabi (1165-1240), Mulla Sadra (1572-1640), Allama Tabatabai (1904-1981) are among them. They usually interpret these verses as the stress on the role of the *content of beliefs* and the correctness of acts in salvation and remarking that names and labels such as Islam, Jewish, Christian, and Sabe'in do not play role in the salvation. Tabataba'i writes in the interpretation of verse 02:62: “So, the final meaning is that the names such as believers, Christians, Jews, and Sabe'in are not rewarded by God and do not save from the punishment [...] but the criteria and the cause of salvation is the truth faith in God and afterlife and good deeds.”⁸ Mulla Sadra disagrees with the idea of abrogation and argues that abrogation is valid just in shari'a and law affairs not in beliefs. He argues that the verse distinguishes between superficial and true faith and remarks that the salvation depends just on true faith and good deeds. According to Mulla Sadra whoever believes, from the usual believers, Jewish, Christians, Sabe'ins, if they have true faith, to be before the rise of Islam or in the age of Islam, they will be rewarded salvation. He writes: “It indicates that the main goal of sending the prophets and the holy books is faith on the beginning [God] and the end [Hereafter]. With good deeds, even we suppose that someone who has not seen any prophet from the prophets and he has not received their news. [...] If he knows God and hereafter and did good deeds then

⁷ Ibid. English translation quoted from the internet portal *qtafsir*, Accessed 10.03.2018, http://www.qtafsir.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=371.

⁸ The interpretation of the verse 02:62 in *Tafsir al-Mizan* by Allama Tabatabai (1904-1981). Accessed 10.03.2018, <http://www.altafsir.com>.

he will be among the saved people.”⁹ Another exegete, Al-Qushairi (986-1072) writes: “The diversity of [religious] paths in spite of the unity of the origin does not prevent the acceptance [of a faith]. Then all who admit the signs of the Real [*haqq*] and believe in what have received about Him and His attributes then they will have a good destination and will be rewarded. So, the dissimilarity of [religious] laws and diversity that occurs in [the] name[s] [of religion] is not a problem in terms of who merits [God's] good pleasure.”¹⁰

2. Non-exclusivist approaches in classical Islamic scholarship

Among different fields of classical Islamic scholarship, mysticism/Sufism and philosophy are two fields, in which the strong pluralistic views have been introduced. Some Sufis and philosophers, especially figures like Ibn Arabi (1165-1240) and Rumi (1207-1273), have been the pillars of the pluralistic views. They indicated very explicit pluralistic statements and have had a significant influence on the extension of pluralistic views in Islamic and other societies.¹¹

2.1. Philosophy

Falsafah is an intellectual tradition in the Islamic world that goes back mainly to the reception of ancient Greek philosophy that started in the late 8th century. Al-Kindi (801-873) and Farabi (872-950) were among the main philosophers of the early Islamic context. This Arabic-Islamic reception of Greek philosophy was flourished in the following

⁹ The interpretation of 02:62 in *Al-Tafsir* by Mulla Sadra. Accessed 10.03.2018, <http://www.altafsir.com>.

¹⁰ The interpretation of the verse 02:62 in *Lata'if al-Isharat* by Al-Qushairi (986-1072). Accessed 10.03.2018, <http://www.altafsir.com>.

¹¹ see: Gregory Stone. *Dante's Pluralism and Islamic Philosophy of Religion*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan. 2006.

centuries by scholars such as Ibn Sina (980-1037), Ibn Rushd (1126-1198), and Mulla Sadra (1572-1640). A significant challenge of the philosophical tradition in Islamic context was the reconciliation of religion and philosophy or reason and revelation. Farabi's formulation of this challenge and the solution that he offered is regarded a distinguished achievement. Apart from Farabi's main goal of this reconciliation that was the justification of philosophy in the Islamic context, religious pluralism can be concluded from his theory as a by-product.

Farabi understood prophecy and philosophy as two parallel and equally valid paths to the truth, albeit with different methods and different target groups. According to this interpretation, philosophy uses reason while prophecy uses imagination. Prophecy, according to Farabi, is an easy-made philosophy making abstract philosophical truths accessible to the masses. Farabi explained both philosophy and prophecy as the result of human beings' connection to the 'Active Intellect' (*'aql-e fa'al*), the transcendental source of knowledge. The 'Active Intellect,' according to Farabi, inspires both philosopher and prophet with concepts. The difference is that the philosopher receives the concepts with the aid of his intellectual faculties and in abstract form, while the prophet receives them through his imaginative faculties and in symbolic form: "So, he [a human who has connection with Active Intellect] becomes sage (*hakim*), philosopher, and *intellectual in perfect* (*muta'addil tamaman*) through what emanates and gushes from him [active intellect] to his [human's] passive intellect; and he becomes prophet and *munzir* (who warns) through what emanates and gushes from him [Active Intellect] to his [human's] imaginary faculty.¹² According to Farabi, religion that uses metaphors and symbols functions as a philosophy for non-philosophers. "In everything of which philosophy gives an account based on intellectual perception or

¹² Abu Nasr al-Farabi, *Ara' Ahl al-Madina al-Fazila* (The views of the people of virtuous city), ed. Al-Bir Nasri Nadir. Beirut: Dar al-Mashriq, 1968, 125.

conception, religion gives an account based on imagination.”¹³ The images are tools for presenting the truths for non-philosophers.¹⁴

Another significant difference between philosophy and prophecy, according to Farabi, is the universality/unity of philosophy but locality/plurality of religion. Every nation and community has, according to Farabi, its own especial symbolic-linguistic system and different sets and sorts of images are appropriate for the peoples of different communities. Therefore, religions are different as in each cultural and social context one symbolic system is more practical and suitable. He writes: “These things are expressed for each nation (*ummah*) in symbols other than those used for another nation. [...] But what is best known often varies among nations, either most of it or part of it. [...] Therefore, it is possible that excellent nations and excellent cities exist whose religions differ, although they all have as their goal one and the same felicity and the very same aims.”¹⁵

However, Farabi does not maintain that all religions, symbolic systems of philosophical truth, are necessarily at the same level. According to Farabi, some religions are “nearer to the truth than others, some are better 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.”¹⁶ It is believed that Farabi's theory of religion and philosophy influenced Spinoza's historical con-

¹³ Farabi, *The Attainment of Happiness*, in: *Medieval Political Philosophy: A Sourcebook*, eds. Ralph Lerner and Muhsin Mahdi. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1961, 77.

¹⁴ Farabi, *Book of Religion*, in *Alfarabi, The Political Writings: “Selected Aphorisms” and Other Texts*. Trans. Charles E. Butterworth. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001, 97.

¹⁵ Farabi, *Principles of the Views of the Citizens of the Perfect State*, in *Al-Farabi on the Perfect State*, trans. Richard Walzer. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985, 279–281, 279.

¹⁶ Farabi. *Siyasat*, quoted from Fazlur Rahman, *Prophecy in Islam*. London: George Allen & Unwin, 1958, 40.

cept of religion. Abdolkarim Soroush says in this regard: “His [Spinoza's] ideas of prophethood are inspired in part by al-Farabi and Moses Maimonides. Like al-Farabi, Spinoza thinks that philosophy is prior and superior to prophethood: philosophers usually work with their speculative or intellectual faculty (*‘aql*), whereas prophets mainly work through the imagination; they cast the universal in particulars and symbols and thus make it accessible to the layman. All of this you can find in Spinoza, but the roots are in al-Farabi; Maimonides thinks that prophet Moses is above imagination, but for Spinoza, all prophets are on the same footing.”¹⁷

2.2. Sufism

A significant related concept in Sufism is *al-vahdat fi al-kethrat* (unity in plurality). They understand the visible conflicting diversity, including the religious one, as different names or forms of the one and unit Reality. Accordingly, diversity is an artificial and appearing reality, not the ultimate. In other words, the ultimate Reality, Being in itself, (*zat, batin*), is unit and one but it has different manifestations (*tajalli, tazahor*).¹⁸

Ibn Arabi, one of the outstanding Muslim mystics has a metaphysic that supports religious pluralism. He suggests that just God truly exists and the whole universe is his self-disclosure and manifestation. The Real, *Haqq*, has different manifestations, *tajalli*, in the heart of humans. To explain it in Corbin's words: “Divine Being [...] yearn[s] to be revealed in beings who manifest Him to Himself insofar as He

¹⁷ Abdolkarim Soroush, “Enlightenment & Philosophy in Islam,” an interview by Michiel Leezenberg, *ISIM Review*, no. 20 (2007), 36-37, 36.

¹⁸ One might use noumenon and phenomenon of Kant's philosophy to introduce the dichotomy of *batin* and *zahir* in Islamic mysticism.

manifests Himself to them.”¹⁹ Because of this metaphysic is that Ibn Arabi suggests an explicit pluralistic view in his following poem:

*My heart has become capable of every form:
it is a pasture for gazelles and a convent for Christian monks,
And a temple for idols,
and the pilgrim's Ka'ba,
and the tables of the Tora and the book of the Koran.
I follow the religion of Love, whichever way his camels take.
My religion and my faith is the true religion”.*²⁰

Ibn Arabi uses the same metaphysic to explain and justify the intra-religious diversity. Accordingly, different interpretations of a given religion are legitimate as being different self-disclosers of God. He says: “Each revealed religion is a path that takes to God, and these paths are diverse. Hence, the self-disclosures must be diverse, just as the divine gifts are diverse. [...] Moreover, people’s views of the revealed law are diverse. [...] That is why the schools of law are diverse, even though each is revealed law, within a single revealed religion. And God has established this for us on the tongue of His messenger.”²¹

Jalal al-Din Mohammad Rumi, is another Muslim mystic whose worldview welcomes pluralism. Rumi shares Ibn Arabi’s ontology and epistemology, however, he differs from Ibn Arabi in having a more practical approach, while Ibn Arabi had more a theoretical approach. Most of Rumi’s works are poems and he uses always metaphors and stories to express these ideas and wisdoms. The main concept of Rumi

¹⁹ Henry Corbin. *Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn ‘Arabi*. Translated by Ralph Manheim. Princeton: Princeton University Press. 1969, 145.

²⁰ Muhyiddin Ibn Arabi, *Tarjuman al-Ashwaq: a collection of mystical odes*, ed., trans., and commentary Bernard Nicholson (London: Royal Asiatic Society, 1911), 69-70.

²¹ William Chittick. *Imaginal Worlds: Ibn al-Arabi and the Problem of Religious Diversity*. Albany: SUNY Press, 1994, 160.

in supporting the pluralism is distinguishing between *batin* (noumenon) and *zahir* (phenomenon) and reducing all differences to the phenomena or manifestations of God. Rumi tells a story in *Mathnavi*, one of his poem collections, about four people who all want to buy grape, however, because of their different languages they disagree with each other and enter to a long debate.

Four people were given a piece of money.

The first was a Persian. He said: "I will buy with this some *angur*."

The second was an Arab. He said: "No, because I want '*inab*'."

The third was a Turk. He said: "I do not want '*inab*', I want *uzum*."

The fourth was a Greek. He said: "I want *stafil*."

Because they did not know what lay behind the names of things, these four started to fight.

They had information but no knowledge.

One man of wisdom present could have reconciled them all, saying:

'I can fulfill the needs of all of you, with one and the same piece of money. If you honestly give me your trust, your one coin will become as four; and four at odds will become one united.'

Such a man would know that each in his own language wanted the same thing, grapes."²²

Clearly, Rumi aims here to say that the meaning is one and difference is just in words and appearing. This is exactly what some Koran exegetes like al-Quraishi and Tabatabai, as was mentioned above, said in their pluralistic interpretations. This pluralist wisdom has been actually well known in the Orient and was receipted also later in Christian context. *Nathan der Weise*, Lessing's book narrates indeed a different version of this old wisdom.²³ In another poem, Rumi narrates a modified version of the story of 'blind men and an elephant', originally a

²² Mathnavai II, 112

²³ Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *Nathan der Weise*. Reclam, 2000.

Hindu myth, to indicate that different ideas or religions are just different perspectives. According to this story, different people touched an elephant in a dark room and everybody described elephant differently according to the part that has touched. They introduced it as wall, snake, spear, tree, fan, or rope, depending upon where they touch.²⁴

At this point, it is important to remark that, it seems that for Rumi the diversity is epistemologically or phenomenologically justified but not ontologically. Rumi suggests seemingly that we can not reach the ultimate truth through sense and reason but through heart and spirituality. As Rumi concludes at the end of the *grape story* that if there was a wise man he could end the superficial debate of four men. Or he says at the end of *elephant poem* that if the people had a candle could have a holistic view. "If each of them held a candle in hand, the conflicts were finished."²⁵ He means by the candle, indeed, heart and spiritual lifestyle as the mean of true knowledge.

Conclusion

This paper introduced some non-exclusivist views on religious diversity from Islamic context. It showed that in both the Koran and classical Islamic scholarship there are significant inclusivist and pluralist theories. The Koran has explicit pluralist verses such as the 62th verse of the second sura. However, they have been often interpreted in the Islamic theology and Koran exegesis in exclusivist way or they have been regarded as abrogated (*mansukh*). Religious pluralism has been promoted mostly in Sufism or philosophy. This paper discussed some examples examples such as Farabi (872-950), Ibn Arabi (1165-1240) and Rumi (1207-1273).

²⁴ *Mathnavi* III, 1259-1269.

²⁵ *Mathnavi* III, 1270.

NJOHJA E TJETRIT NË HISTORINË INTELEKTUALE ISLAME

Abstrakti

Diversiteti fetar mund të jetë burimi i konflikteve dhe dhunës. Qasje jo-ekskluziviste ndaj diversitetit fetar e cila e mundëson justifikimin dhe njohjen e tjetrit fetar mund të shfrytëzohet si masa parandaluese e konflikteve fetare. Ky punim është strukturuar në dy pjesë kryesore. Pjesa e parë do t'i rishikojë disa ajete Kur'anore mbi diversitetin fetar, si dhe interpretimet e tyre ekskluziviste dhe jo-ekskluziviste të egzegjezës Kur'anore. Pjesa e dytë do të prezantojë disa mendime jo-ekskluziviste mbi fetë (religjionet) në traditën klasike Islame me fokous të veçantë mbi Sufizmin dhe filozofinë. Ky studim prezanton disa pikëpamje jo-ekskluziviste ndaj diversitetit fetar nga konteksti Islam. Ka treguar se egzistojnë teoritë inkluziviste dhe pluraliste të rëndësishme si në Kur'an ashtu edhe në diturinë klasike Islame. Kur'ani përmban ajete të qarta pluraliste siç janë ajeti i 63-të të surës së dytë. Mirëpo, në teologjinë Islame dhe në egzegjezën Kur'anore, shpeshëherë, këto interpretohen në mënyrën ekskluziviste ose konsiderohen si të shfuqizuara (mansukh). Pluralizmi fetar, është promovuar kryesisht në Sufizëm ose filozofi. Ky punim diskuton disa shembuj siç janë Farabi (872-950), Ibn Arabi (1165-1240) dhe Rumi (1207-1273)..

Fjalë kyçe: Tjetri, feja islame, sufizmi, filozofia

²⁶ Bashkëpunëtor hulumtues në Sankt Georgen Graduate School of Philosophy and Theology, Frankfurt, Gjermani.