

The emerging trend of theological inclusivism in contemporary Muslim thought: some key examples

This article provides examples of some of the key arguments employed by select contemporary Muslim scholars in support of theological inclusivism concerning the 'People of the Book', a term used in the Qur'an to refer mainly to Jews and Christians.

Theological inclusivism is understood as a positive attitude towards other religions with regard to theological matters such as salvation in the Hereafter, the validity of other religions, and whether followers of religions other than Islam should be considered as believers rather than *kafirun* (unbelievers) or *mushrikun* (polytheists). In contemporary scholarly literature about the People of the Book produced by a number of Muslim scholars, a line of thinking has emerged that strongly supports this theological inclusivism and makes a number of claims:

- the Qur'anic criticism of the People of the Book and terms such as *kafir* (unbeliever) and *mushrik* (idolator or a polytheist) should be applied only to certain individuals or groups of Jews and Christians, not all Jews and Christians;
- the Qur'an does not support supersessionism; and
- the Qur'an considers the possibility of salvation for the People of the Book in the Hereafter.

Muslim and non-Muslim scholars have produced considerable literature on Islamic theological approaches to the People of the Book in the modern period. The ideas of classical and pre-modern Muslim scholars about Jews and Christians and their religions have been addressed in the extant literature. Several scholars, including Jane D. McAuliffe, Juan Cole, and Moshe Sharon have explored how the People of the Book were treated in the Qur'an and whether they should be considered unbelievers (*kafirun*). Although classical Islamic theological tradition emphasised theological exclusivism, a trend of theological inclusivism is emerging which challenges theological exclusivism. Interest in a more theologically inclusivist view has become

more important with the significant increase in interfaith dialogues and forums over the course of the last 50 years or so. This inclusivist approach can be found in the works of Muslim scholars such as Fazlur Rahman (d. 1988), Nurcholish Madjid (d. 2005), Asghar Ali Engineer (d. 2013), and Imtiyaz Yusuf. Referring to the ideas of some Sunni and Shia inclusivist Muslim scholars, we present some of their key ideas that highlight this theological inclusivism.

People of the Book in the Qur'an

Ahl al-kitāb, which literally translates to 'the People of the Book', is a term used in the Qur'an to refer mainly to Jews and Christians (as stated earlier). The Qur'an states in several verses that the People of the Book received revelations before the Prophet Muhammad and that the revelations the Prophet received confirm the previous revelations granted to the People of the Book (Q 2:41; Q 3:3; Q 3:50; Q 5:48) in the same way that Jesus confirmed the revelations sent to prophets before him (Q 5:46). Indeed, the Qur'an states that 'God has ordained for you [Muhammad] that which He ordained upon' previous prophets, including Noah, Abraham, Moses, and Jesus (Q 42:13). In this sense, the Qur'an asks Muslims to say that 'We believe in what was revealed to us and in what was revealed to you [the People of the Book]; our God and your God are one [and the same]; we are devoted to Him' (Q 29:46). The Qur'an invites the People of the Book to find basic common ground with Muslims: 'Say, "People of the Book, let us arrive at a statement that is common to us all: we worship God alone, we ascribe no partner to Him, and none of us takes others beside God as lords'" (Q 3:64). More importantly, the door to salvation in the Hereafter is open to the People of the Book: 'The [Muslim] believers, the Jews, the Christians, and the Sabians - all those who believe in God and the Last Day and do good - will have their rewards with their Lord' (Q 2:62; see also Q 5:69).

Although the Qur'an contains positive commentary about the People of the Book, it also includes some polemical verses (especially Medinan verses). For example, some verses suggest that at least some of the People of the Book deny God's revelations (Q 3:70; Q 3:98) and mix truth with falsehood (Q 3:71). Jews are described as having compromised strict monotheism by treating their rabbis as 'lords' (Q 9:31) and by considering Ezra 'the son of God' (Q 9:30). Verses such as Q 5:17 and Q 5:72 seem to label Christians as unbelievers, for saying that God is the Messiah. In Q 4:171, Christians are asked not to commit excesses in their religion by attributing divine characteristics to Jesus, who, according to the Qur'an, was no more than a messenger of God (Q 5:75). According to Q 4:171, Christians must cease to say

‘three’, most likely referring to the doctrine of the Trinity, since God is far above begetting a son. People of the Book are also asked not to commit excess in their religion, which appears to be a reference to avoiding non-monotheistic beliefs or practices (Q 5:77).

Classical approaches to the People of the Book

In the classical period, most Muslim scholars supported theological exclusivism. According to Ibn Kathir (d. 1373), a commentator on the Qur’an, ‘Allah states that there is no religion accepted with Him from any person, except Islam. Therefore, after Allah sent Muhammad, whoever ... [follows] a path other than Muhammad’s, it will not be accepted of him’. Regarding this view, Yasir Qadhi, a well-known contemporary Muslim scholar, notes the following:

It shall come as no surprise to anyone familiar with the Islamic tradition that all of the major theological movements in classical and medieval Islam viewed their religion as being the sole path to God. This was, after all, a time in which such a particularistic view was the norm in other religious traditions. In fact, far from allowing salvation outside of the religion, most Muslim sects spent their energy debating whether members of other Muslim groups would be forgiven for their heresies.

The idea that Jews and Christians should be considered *kafirun* (unbelievers) or even *mushrikun* (polytheists) was also supported by many classical Shia and Sunni scholars, who referred to Qur’anic verses that criticise the religious beliefs and practices of the People of the Book. For example, Ibn Hazm (d. 1064) argues that Christians engage in polytheistic acts such as worshipping the images of Jesus, Mary, the Cross, and Gabriel in their churches, which, he argues, is a form of idolatry. Another scholar, Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328), argues that although the People of the Book should generally be distinguished from non-Muslims practicing other religions, religious beliefs of some Christians and Jews include polytheistic teachings: ‘God has sometimes categorised them [Christians] separately from the idolaters, and elsewhere cursed them for the *shirk* which they innovated’ (referring to Q 9:30-31). Likewise, classical Shia scholar Muhammad ibn Hasan al-Tusi (d. 1067) states that Jews and Christians are to be treated as *mushrikun* due to their beliefs regarding Ezra and Jesus. According to him, although the Jews of his day

denied compromising monotheism, they were not strictly practicing monotheistic because they called Ezra the son of God (based on Q 9:30). Based on Q 9:31, Tusi even claims that Jews and Christians consider their monks and rabbis to be lords besides God, which leads them to 'obey prohibitions and permissions contrary to what God has commanded'. Indeed, for al-Tusi, Jews and Christians are guilty of *shirk* (associating other beings with God) given 'their making lawful what God has forbidden'.

The following questions arise: How would contemporary Muslim scholars who adopt reformist approaches to theological matters respond to the criticisms of the People of the Book indicated in the Qur'an, especially those which label them as unbelievers? Should Muslims believe that all religions prior to Islam, such as Judaism and Christianity, are theologically invalid? Finally, does Qur'anic criticism of the People of the Book (such as the polytheistic acts attributed to them) preclude their salvation? The remainder of this article presents briefly arguments from a number of contemporary Muslim scholars, from Sunni and Shia backgrounds, who address these questions.

Labelling the People of the Book as unbelievers

Unlike many classical Muslim scholars who tended to consider non-Muslims, including the People of the Book, *kafirun* (unbelievers) or even *mushrikun* (polytheists) based on their interpretations of verses such as Q 5:17 and Q 5:72, some contemporary Muslim scholars have reconsidered attributing such terms to the People of the Book. Scholar and activist Farid Esack (b. 1955) notes that *kufr* is 'something conscious, deliberate and active rather than a casual ignoring or disregard of the existence of God'. *Kufr* is used in the Qur'an in relation to individuals who actively engage in acts such as attempts to assassinate prophets (Q 4:155; Q 5:70; Q 8:30) or refuse to spend one's wealth on the poor (2:254; Q 3:179; Q 9:34; Q 41:7). Therefore, while in the classical Islamic theological tradition, *kufr* is often associated with 'theological unbelief', Esack associates it with hostility towards Muslims and the oppression of marginalised people, especially the poor, and thus argues that being a Christian or a Jew is not sufficient to be labelled one as unbeliever (*kafir*), meaning that the People of the Book should not be called unbelievers (*kafirun*). Another scholar *Bediuzzaman* Said Nursi (d. 1960) argues that the term *kafir* should not be attributed to the Jews and Christians on the grounds

that:

The term kafir has two meanings. The first and most common one [refers to the] irreligious person, who denies the existence of God. In terms of this meaning, we do not have the right to call the People of the Book kafir. The second meaning is one who denies the prophethood of the prophet of Islam. In this case, we can call them kafir but since the first meaning is the most common one, it [would become] a hurt for them [and thus it is better to not call them kafir].

Like Esack and Nursi, Muhammad Hussein Fadlullah (d. 2010) places Jews and Christians within the category of believers rather than *kafirun* or *mushrikun*. He reasons that their attribution of divine characteristics to Ezra and Jesus merely represents extreme veneration of them. In other words, although, for him, Jews and Christians have attributed divinity to Ezra and Jesus, respectively, based on the Qur'an, 'they may be excused, perhaps, for simply taking their admiration and respect for these individuals too far'. This means that 'it is not actually a matter of doctrine, but of exaggeration or extremism in practice only'. Fadlallah emphasises that the belief of Jews and Christians in one God is a certainty, which makes them allies of Muslims in matters of faith; the moral and spiritual world of the People of the Book is entirely different from that of the *mushrikun* and therefore is compatible with that of Muslims.

Validity of other religions

Two Qur'anic verses, namely Q 3:19 ('Indeed, the religion in the sight of God is *islam*') and Q 3:85 ('And whoever seeks a religion [*din*] other than *islam*, it will never be accepted of him'), have been used by most classical Muslim scholars and contemporary Muslims to support 'supersessionism'. Supersessionism refers to the view that Islam as taught by Prophet Muhammad has superseded all other religions and therefore those religions are invalid.

Several modern day scholars have reinterpreted these verses through a more theologically inclusivist lens. Seyyed Hossein Nasr (b. 1933) argues that when the Qur'an employs the term *islam*, it refers only to 'universal surrender' to God, which is a key characteristic of many religious traditions. In this sense, Abraham is considered a *muslim* (Q 3:67) who was 'upright and devoted to God'. According to Nasr, Abraham was obviously not a Muslim (with an upper case 'M') because he did not follow the religion of the Prophet Muhammad, but he was a *muslim* (with a lower

case ‘m’) because he surrendered to God. Mahmoud Ayoub (d. 2021) takes a somewhat similar approach, arguing that ‘*islam* applies to any human beings or human communities [who] profess faith in the one God and seek to obey God’. For Ayoub, ‘it is in this sense that the Qur’an speaks of Noah, Abraham, Moses and Jesus and his disciples as muslims’. Scholars such as Nasr and Ayoub take a theologically inclusivist position when interpreting verses such as Q 3:19 and Q 3:85, arguing against the idea that Islam, i.e. the religion preached by the Prophet Muhammad, is the only valid religion and that other religions such as Judaism and Christianity are invalid.

Muhammad Jawad Mughniya (d. 1979) has also argued against the idea that, with the emergence of Islam, previous monotheistic religions such as Judaism and Christianity should be considered abrogated. When interpreting Q 3:19, Mughniya interprets the term *islam* as submission to God. The Qur’an, as Mughniya explains, confirms that Abraham, together with Ishmael and Isaac, were *muslims*, as they believed in one God and devoted themselves to Him: ‘When his Lord said to him, “Submit”, he said, “I have submitted to the Lord of the worlds”. And Abraham instructed his sons [to do the same]’ (Q 2:131-132). In another verse, Joseph asks God to let him die as a *muslim* (Q 12:101). According to Mughniya, the Qur’an says that Moses asks his people to be *muslim*, meaning they are expected to believe in God and trust Him alone: ‘And Moses said, O my people, if you have believed in Allah, then rely upon Him, if you should be muslims’ (Q 10:84). Therefore, like Nasr and Ayoub, Mughniya concludes that when the Qur’an states that ‘whoever desires a religion other than *islam*, this will never be accepted of him’, it does not refer to a theory of supersession, but rather refers to the idea that people are expected to believe in one God and devote themselves to Him alone.

Salvation of the People of the Book

Theological inclusivist scholars often argue that salvation is open to the followers of other religions, including the People of the Book, and many refer to verses of the Qur’an such as Q 2:62 and Q 5:69, which consider the possibility of salvation for people of other faiths. The well-known Indonesian scholar Haji Abd al-Malik Karim Amrullah (d. 1981), better known as Hamka, considers Q 2:62 a ‘universal promise from God to all mankind that they will be rewarded, regardless of their religious adherence, provided they are sincere in their faith and perform righteous deeds’. For Hamka, this verse gives three main criteria for salvation: faith in one God, faith in the Hereafter, and doing good deeds. Hamka argues that the message of all prophets

is similar despite their differences in laws; therefore, if a believer adheres to the three principles mentioned above, he or she will find salvation in the afterlife.

Mohsen Kadivar (b. 1959), arguing in favour of theological inclusivism, maintains that belief in a particular religion, such as Islam, does not necessarily guarantee salvation. According to him, the salvation of a Jew or a Christian who believes in the Day of Judgement and performs good deeds in accordance with their religious laws is guaranteed from an Islamic perspective. Kadivar supports his ideas by referring to another verse (Q 49:13): 'O humanity! Indeed, We created you from a male and a female, and made you into peoples and tribes so that you may get to know one another. Surely the most noble of you in the sight of Allah is the most righteous among you. Allah is truly All-Knowing, All-Aware'. According to Kadivar, this verse emphasises that all people are equal, and the only distinguishing criterion between them is their level of righteousness, which is the key criterion to salvation – not their belief in a particular religion. It is important to note that, as Feisal Abdul Rauf notes, when it comes to the matter of faith, some Muslims have also become subject to criticism by the Qur'an. For example, the Qur'an states, "'Some of' the nomadic Arabs say, 'We believe'. Say, 'You have not believed. But say, 'We have submitted,' for faith has not yet entered your hearts" (Q 49:14). That is, in the same way that the Quran condemns some People of the Book for their disbelief, some Muslims are also subject to reprimand – an idea which supports the argument that the Qur'anic criticisms of the People of the Book do not necessarily prevent them from salvation.

Abdulaziz Sachedina (b. 1942) takes a somewhat similar approach to that presented by Kadivar. Referring to Q 2:62, Sachedina argues that the Qur'an supports salvation of the righteous who are not Muslims or who do not affirm the Prophet Muhammad's prophethood. This idea is confirmed by another verse (Q 5:9), which reads, 'God has promised forgiveness and a rich reward to those who have faith and do good works'. For Sachedina, this verse explicitly guarantees the salvation of 'anyone who holds true belief and acts righteously', including non-Muslims. Indeed, belief in a particular religion does not necessarily guarantee salvation. To endorse this idea, Sachedina argues that it is God Himself, who has created different communities with different beliefs, ultimately promoting religious pluralism—an idea explicitly, he says, endorsed in the Qur'an: 'We have assigned a law and a path to each of you. If God had so willed, He would have made you one community, but He wanted to test you through that which He has given you, so race to do good' (Q 5:48).

Another idea in support of theological inclusivism is that the Qur'an considers it

unreasonable to claim that paradise and salvation are reserved for followers of a particular religion. From the Qur'anic perspective, Jews and Christians who meet certain conditions can also attain salvation. Q 2:112 reads, 'Any [persons] who direct themselves wholly to God and do good [deeds] will have their reward with their Lord'. It is important to note that this verse is preceded by one that repudiates the claims of the People of the Book that they alone are entitled to salvation: 'They also say, "No one will enter Paradise unless he is a Jew or a Christian." This is their own wishful thinking' (Q 2:111). Q 2:112 is also followed by another verse that reads, 'The Jews say, "The Christians have no ground whatsoever to stand on," and the Christians say, "The Jews have no ground whatsoever to stand on,"' which is then followed by the statement that 'God will judge between them on the Day of Resurrection concerning their differences' (Q 2:113). Indeed, the main message of Q 2:111-3 is that no group can make exclusive claims to salvation and that God alone can make the final decision about religious differences and salvation. As Munim Sirry argues, 'these passages ... reject this claim of the Jews and Christians that they are alone who would enter paradise', meaning that paradise cannot be monopolised by a certain group of people or followers of particular religions.

Conclusion

This article has highlighted some examples of theologically inclusivist positions about the People of the Book that are promoted by some contemporary Muslim scholars. They argue that terms such as unbelievers or polytheists should not be used to refer to People of the Book. They also reject the supersessionism adopted by many classical and modern Muslim scholars, according to which after the emergence of Islam, other religions, including Judaism and Christianity, have become invalid. Finally, according to them, the Qur'an considers that the door to salvation is open to Jews and Christians. The ideas presented in this article represent an emerging trend among some contemporary Muslim scholars, which rejects the dominant Muslim exclusivist positions on theological matters such as those covered here. Given the current emphasis on interfaith dialogue and understanding, one of the potential benefits of rethinking exclusivist positions that developed in the classical Islamic tradition is the possibility that this may lead to the promotion of a better understanding between Muslims and people of other major religions.

Image: 'Friendship tree'. Credit: Pixabay.