

Diversity and Exclusivity: A Religion Needs Both*

M. Ashraf Adeel

Abstract

It is argued that religions seem to insist, paradoxically, on both exclusivity and diversity to inspire passionate commitment on the one hand and to allow for genuine choice of religion on the other. The argument is developed with special reference to Islam, with hints of similar strands of thought in Judaism and Christianity. The paradoxicality of this position of religions is similar to Kierkegaard's interpretation of faith, as exhibited by Abraham in his sacrifice. Interpreting religions in this way provides us with a better context for understanding the exclusivism/pluralism debate.

Introduction

In a recent lecture entitled "Religious Pluralism and Islam," John Hick not only reiterates his pluralistic hypothesis,¹ but also calls upon adherents of different religions to develop pluralistic elements in their traditions in the interest of global peace and understanding. He agrees with Hans Kung's view that "[t]here will be no peace among the people of this world without peace among the world religions."² This, I think, is a noble call on the part of the most influential advocate of religious pluralism in recent decades. As he looks at it, a pluralistic theology of salvation needs to be developed at two

M. Ashraf Adeel has held a professorship in philosophy at the University of Peshawar, Pakistan; a senior visiting fellowship at Linacre College Oxford; and was the founding vice-chancellor of Hazara University in Pakistan. Currently with Kutztown University, his research and teaching interests include the contemporary philosophy of science and language and Islamic thought.

* I am grateful to George Rudebusch, John Lizza, and Yong Huang for their comments on an earlier draft.

levels. One level is to start from within one's own faith and work outwards, so to speak, for exploring its resources for an acceptance of the salvific parity of the other world faiths – the acceptance of them, in other words, as equally authentic paths to salvation. For each tradition does in fact have within it strands of thought which can be developed to authorize a pluralistic point of view.³

The other level is the sort of approach that Hick himself, as a philosopher of religion, has adopted in developing and advocating a pluralistic hypothesis that claims that the world's major religions are all equally authentic efforts, in different cultural and linguistic contexts, to capture the Ultimate Reality. The Ultimate Reality, however, being infinite, cannot be completely captured in our finite categories and concepts and, therefore, transcends all religions and categorizations. Hick believes that this idea of a Being that transcends all categories and thought is present in all major traditions (particularly the mystical traditions)⁴ and is not a creation of modern western thought. Indeed, it has a much longer history in the East than in the West.⁵

In this article, I am going to react to Hick's call by emphasizing the presence of both pluralistic and exclusivist strands in religions. In the first part, I deal with some of the important textual resources of the Islamic tradition, specifically the Qur'anic texts that address the issue of diversity of religions. The purpose here is to develop an overview of the Qur'anic attitude toward other religions. In the process of developing this overview, hints will be given about similar positions in other religions, particularly Judaism and Christianity.

In the second part, I address the issue of exclusivist strands of thought present in major religious traditions and argue that Hick's pluralistic hypothesis needs to recognize them as authentic strands. Simply put, the idea here is to come up with a pluralistic hypothesis that does not expect followers of major religions to take exclusivist strands of thought within their respective traditions to be just aberrations or things of the somewhat unenlightened past or a culturally limited worldview. My point is that Hick has rightly emphasized the pluralistic strands of thought present in the world's major religions and has rightly taken exclusivist strands of thought as resulting from the historical and cultural frameworks from which different religions have experienced the Real.

However, what is needed is to emphasize the essential need of all religions to make exclusivist claims and allow room for plurality of religions at the same time. What is needed is a view of religion that can explain pluralistic and exclusivist strands within major religions as essential to religious

life. If such a view can be developed with some degree of credibility, we will have succeeded in placing the pluralist/exclusivist debate in a religiously more acceptable context.

In developing such a view, I make use of Kierkegaard's insights into the nature of religious faith. His interpretation of Abraham as the father of faith in his *Fear and Trembling* is the basis upon which I will build a hypothesis that, I believe, can accommodate both the pluralistic and exclusivist strands in different world religions without reducing faith to a mere rational status. Faith, as we know, is paradoxical in nature for Kierkegaard, and Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son because of God's command cannot be understood without understanding faith as paradoxical in the sense of being "beyond reason." In Kierkegaard's words, "[t]he story of Abraham contains ... a teleological suspension of the ethical. As the individual he becomes higher than the universal. This is the paradox which does not permit of mediation"⁶ We do not understand why God would command Abraham to violate the ethical. But by suspending the ethical under God's command, Abraham entered into the inexplicable realm of faith, which is not open to complete rationalization.⁷

My effort in this article is to point toward a similar paradoxicality of religious texts/traditions insofar as these couple both exclusivist and pluralist strands of thought. Since I have some familiarity with the Islamic tradition, I look basically into the Qur'an for a "beyond the pale of reason" approach to the problem of religious diversity. Similar views, I believe, can be found in Christianity and other religions. Once we understand that religions take a paradoxical approach to the diversity and exclusivity of religious truth, we can look for some explanations of this approach. I offer three: (1) all religions require exclusivity to inspire the kind of passionate commitment that religious faith requires; (2) religions require diversity in order to, at least theoretically, allow for a genuine choice of religion to individual human beings; and (3) faith is by nature paradoxical, not in the sense of being contrary to reason but of what falls "beyond reason" (in Leibniz's phraseology), and hence religious positions on many ultimate issues can be similarly paradoxical. It appears to be somewhat paradoxical on the issue of exclusivism and pluralism.

The Diversity of Religions

The major world religions seem to be quite alive to the presence of diverse religions in history and deal with this diversity in their own unique ways.

The Old Testament, for example, recognizes the presence of non-Jewish prophets and Moses refers to the “God of the spirits of all flesh” (Numbers 27:16).⁸ Similarly, Jesus’ parable of the Last Judgment (Matt. 25:31-46) appears to make salvation open even to atheists, so long as they are righteous. The ones who are saved had no idea that they were loving God when they loved their neighbors (25:37). Then salvation is linked to righteousness and justice in the following verses: “For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God unto salvation to every one that believes, to the Jew first, and to the Greek. For the justice of God is revealed therein, from faith unto faith, as it is written: The just person lives by faith” (Romans 1:16-17).

Even having the revealed law is not necessary for acceptance before God, as can be seen from the following verses: “For not the hearers of the law are just before God, but the doers of the law shall be justified. For when the Gentiles, who have not the law, do by nature those things that are of the law; these having not the law are a law to themselves” (Romans 2:13-14). Jesus appears to make the same sort of statement in the Sermon on the Mount: “Not everyone who calls me ‘Lord, Lord’ will enter the Kingdom of Heaven, but only those who do what my Father in heaven wants them to do” (Matt. 7:21). There is no sign in the text that those who call Jesus “Lord” are insincere. Rather, Jesus seems to recognize non-Christian ways to salvation here. Salvation is also linked to monotheism in some verses. For example “For there is no distinction of the Jew and the Greek, for the same is Lord over all rich unto all that call upon Him. Whosoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved” (Matt. 10:12-13).

The Qur’an is not any different in this regard. In fact, it appears to be very alive to the problem of diverse religious communities in history as well as in the immediate context of the society in which it was revealed. This section develops the Qur’anic position on the diversity of religions only. The idea is to have at least one exemplar of how the major world religions handle this issue. Other religions have their own unique way of addressing the problem. This article will primarily use Islam as the exemplar, for the simple reason that I am more familiar with Islam.

As far as the Qur’an is concerned, belief in the authenticity of earlier revelations is made out to be a condition of faith for Muslims right at the outset of its second *surah* (chapter). In addition, a kind of continuous dialogue seems to be unfolding throughout its major chapters between this new revelation and the earlier revelations granted to the Jewish and Christian com-

munities. Reference is also made to the Sabian religion and to the fact that all people in history have received some kind of guidance from God. This suggests that the Qur'an is not only mindful of the diversity of religious communities in history, but also deals with it directly.⁹

But the Qur'an also insists upon the ultimate nature of its own message in certain contexts. This claim to being God's ultimate message, or exclusivism, seems to be present in the sacred texts of the three Abrahamic faiths, not to mention non-Abrahamic religions. How does the Qur'an deal with this religious diversity along with its claim to be the ultimate/exclusive truth? After we look into its position on the diversity of religions, we will briefly discuss the issue of ultimate/exclusivist beliefs in religions.

The Meaning of Diversity

The Qur'anic position on the diversity of religions is itself "religious" to begin with, for it is linked with God's "will" and "word." The following two verses state this position in its essence: "If your Lord had so willed, He could have made humanity one *ummah* (community). But they will not cease to dispute" (11:118) and "Humanity was but one nation, but differed (later). Had it not been for a word that went forth before from thy Lord, their differences would have been settled between them" (10:19).¹⁰

These two verses seem to be of critical significance as far as the issue of religious diversity in history is concerned. It is God's "will" that humanity be diverse, and it is through His "word" that such diversity occurred. In addition, they seem to underscore the following points:

1. The original unity of humanity is emphasized. We are all one in God's eye. There is no question of any difference between human beings on the basis of race, color, religion, or any other discriminating mechanism. We are one and the same. This is an extremely important principle of the Qur'an and undercuts all discriminatory divisions of humanity as far as its origin is concerned.
2. God did not "will" humanity to be a single *ummah*. Thus, since God's will is eternal, we cannot expect it to change over time. In other words, in the Qur'anic view, humanity's diversity is a permanent feature of history. Since *ummah* has religious connotations as well, one can also take the verse as suggesting that humanity's religious diversity is a permanent feature of its history under God's will. This is a clear rejection of the notion, harbored by many religious people and communities

(including Muslims), that God wills only their particular religion to exist in history. The Qur'an is not exclusivist in this particular sense.

3. It is God's word or revelation that, after having been sent to humanity, has sustained the differences between human beings regarding religious matters. In other words God's word, which the Qur'an equates with revelation in general and (at least once) with Jesus, sustains religious diversity in history. This is the Qur'an's most important comment on this issue. Genuine religious diversity has been caused and is sustained by God's word "that went forth before." If God wills and sustains such diversity, then it must be a part of His plan for humanity and its history. It is critical to emphasize that the Qur'an does not explain religious diversity in terms of humanity's cultural diversity; rather, its causes are God's will and word themselves.

From the foregoing, it can be safely deduced that in the Qur'anic view, the diversity of religions is part of God's will or plan for humanity and, as such, has to be taken with great seriousness. Those with exclusivist instincts cannot lightly dismiss this divinely ordained diversity.¹¹

Why has God willed religious diversity? This question is answered by the Qur'an:

To you We sent the scripture in truth, confirming the scripture that came before it and guarding it in safety. So judge between them by what God has revealed and follow not their vain desires, diverging from the Truth that has come to you. To each among you We have prescribed a law and an open way. If God had so willed, He would have made you a single *ummah*, but (His plan is) to test you in what He has given you. So strive as in a race in all virtues. The goal of you all is to God, [and] it is He who will show you the truth of the matters in which you disagree. (5:48)

This verse clearly states why God has willed religious diversity; that each religious community has been given a law and an open way, and that God intends to test us in history on the basis of what "He has given" us. This test, in both its individual and collective forms, is rooted in the law that each community has been given. Nobody is to be tested on the basis of a law prescribed for a community other than his/her own.

Why did not God plan to test us all on the basis of a single law? One might respond that this is a divine mystery. The verse's early part, however, clarifies two points at least: (1) the Qur'an confirms the earlier scripture and (2) the People of the Book should not expect the Prophet to diverge from the Truth revealed to him. In other words, although the earlier revelations stand

confirmed, the new community (of Islam) has to follow its own scripture. The verses before 5:48 deal with the wrongdoings and rebelliousness of the Jewish and Christian communities in not following the “light” given to them through revelation. In this context, 5:48 clarifies the point that not following one’s scripture is the same as following one’s “vain desires.” Everyone is tested on the basis of his/her own law in the presence of other laws. The test seems to consist of following one’s law in the face of diverse possibilities. Diversity seems to be part of God’s test for two reasons: (1) its presence makes the choice harder for each person and (2) its absence would destroy the possibility of having a genuine choice as regards religion. If there were no diversity of religions, how could there be any genuine choice in religion? Everybody would do about the same thing. If that were the case, the human search and struggle to discover the genuine path to religious authenticity and spirituality would come to naught.¹²

A striking thing about this Qur’anic test is the paradox of an exclusive devotion to one’s own religion together with a willingness to recognize that other faiths might be authentic. The structure of this paradox is, in fact, similar to God’s test of Patriarch Abraham, who was exclusively devoted to his son and yet recognized by faith the validity of God’s call, seemingly, to destroy that exclusive devotion.

It must be added here that in the overall Qur’anic scheme of things, religion truly is a matter of choice and not compulsion, be it the compulsion of birth in a particular religious community, I believe, or any of its other forms (Qur’an 2:256). Therefore, God’s “will” to have diversity of religions in history must be viewed as part of God’s scheme to allow a genuine choice of religion to humanity in history. Indeed, Islamic ethics seem to be based on the view that of all creatures, humanity has been given the “Trust” of free will by God to chose between good and evil.¹³

Salvation and Diversity

The Qur’an also addresses a huge problem in the context of religious diversity: the understanding of salvation. Historically, many religions and their followers have claimed that salvation is confined to their faith alone. Therefore, anybody falling outside of their religious faith, or even of a particular denomination,¹⁴ is doomed and will have no credibility before God. This is not the place to discuss the various positions on salvation adopted by religious communities. The point, however, is that such exclusivist claims have been rampant throughout history, which shows the issue’s critical nature.

Two Qur'anic verses, with very slight variation in wording, address this issue: "Those who believe (in the Qur'an) and those who follow the Jewish (scriptures) and the Christians and the Sabians – any who believe in God and the Last Day and work righteousness shall have their reward with their Lord. On them shall be no fear, nor shall they grieve" (2:62 and 5:69).

Muslims, Jews, Christians, and Sabians, the last one being an ancient religious community in Middle East whose true identity has remained a subject of some debate among scholars of the Qur'an,¹⁵ are mentioned here by name. But then the verse takes a general turn and lays down the criteria for salvation: belief in one God and the Day of Judgment and doing righteous works. Belief in God and accountability before Him, along with a morally righteous life, are the only things that seem to matter as far as human salvation is concerned. The key here seems to be faith in God, because final accountability and moral righteousness are natural concomitants of faith in the Qur'anic worldview, where God's attributes represent moral and aesthetic values. In whatever way we look at it, however, these are the only three things that the Qur'an seems to require in these verses for salvation – or, strictly speaking, an eternal life free from fear and grief. Therefore, the Qur'an does not really confine salvation, or at least freedom from fear and grief in the Hereafter, to its own community.

It must be added that the orthodox position has generally insisted that, along with these elements, a person needs to believe in Prophet Muhammad as God's messenger before he or she can hope for salvation. Obviously, such a person does so by becoming a member of the Muslim community. The Qur'an, however, is addressing the question of salvation as it relates to the Jews, Christians, Sabians, and the like in the verses quoted above. That is to say, the question before the Qur'an is not about members of the Muslim community, but about members of non-Muslim religious communities. Of course, some scholars have addressed the question as it pertains to other communities and have taken salvation to be a matter of different levels and gradations. This is understandable. What matters most, however, is the point that the Islamic tradition accepts salvation in some form for non-Muslims as long as they fulfill certain conditions.

Belief in God's Oneness is of critical significance for the Qur'an, as it deals with the issue of religious diversity. In addressing the Jewish and Christian communities, the Qur'an demands: "Say: 'O People of the Book! Come to common terms (*kalimah*) as between us and you: that we worship none but God [and] that we associate no partners with Him'" (3:64). When placed in the overall context of the Qur'anic attitude toward other commu-

nities, this verse means that belief in one ultimate Creator of the universe is of central significance. Such a Creator is, by definition, the ultimate judge on all His creatures as well as the center of all moral values.

What is important here is the Qur'anic principle that Muslims can come together with others on the basis of God's unity alone. Does this mean that the Qur'an rejects true religious diversity after all? No. Belief in God's oneness is one of Islam's ultimate (and exclusivist) beliefs. Diverse ways of reaching God, present throughout history in the form of different religions, are part of God's test. Therefore, these diverse ways will continue to remain a part of history, although Islam can insist on its ultimate beliefs just as other religions can. As noted below, these religions would not be truly different if there were no complete or partial differences among them as regards some of their ultimate beliefs and their adherents' insistence upon them. God Himself will settle, as verse 5:48 notes, the matter of differences between religions on the Day of Judgment.

Divine Guidance for All

Another set of verses clearly and unequivocally states that all *ummahs* (or communities) in history have received divine guidance through messengers of God and that there is a "book" for every period in history. The idea that all communities will be judged according to their own law (or guidance) is also reinforced, for: "To every *ummah* (was sent) a messenger. When their messenger comes (before them), the matter will be judged between them with justice, and they will not be wronged" (10:47). This verse notes that people of every community have had their own messenger from God and that on the Day of Reckoning they will be judged with justice in their messenger's presence. There will be no exceptions.

The Qur'an further notes that the messengers spoke to their people in their own language: "We sent not a messenger except (to teach) in the language of his (own) people, in order to make (things) clear to them. Now God leaves straying those whom he wills and guides whom He wills. He is exalted in power, full of wisdom" (14:4). This verse stresses that God has made His guidance clear to each people through the messengers who have presented it in their people's native language. Not only have all people received guidance, but it has been made abundantly clear to them. Given this reality, God intends to hold each individual accountable. This is a clear rejection of the idea that God will hold people accountable based upon a religious message of which they never heard.

Then there is the Qur'an's invitation to people to travel throughout the land and see what happened to those who received their guidance but denied it and refused to follow the Truth, which has been given to all:

For We assuredly sent among every people a messenger (with the command): "Serve God and abandon evil." Of the people were some whom God guided, and some on whom error became inevitably (established). So travel throughout the land and see what was the end of those who denied (the Truth). (16:36)

Verily We have sent you in truth as a bearer of glad tidings and as a warner. Never was there a people without a warner having lived among them (in the past). (35:24)

Two points come out forcefully here: (1) all people have received the message of serving God (and the goodness that flows from His Being) and abandoning evil and (2) the fate of those who reject this guidance, by deliberately pursuing evil is preserved somehow for all to see. As the distinction between evil and service to God (goodness) has been taught to all people,¹⁶ the choice has been made clear. Those who choose to fall into error (to pursue evil) are destroyed and serve as examples for others.

Overall, therefore, the Qur'an appears to note a divinely ordained religious diversity in history, allows for salvation outside of Islam under certain conditions, and acknowledges divine messages as given to all people. These strands of pluralistic thought are obviously congenial to Hick's perspective on religions. Such pluralistic strands are present in other religions as well. Christianity and Judaism, for example, have such strands of thought, as hinted earlier. Although the details of these strands cannot be worked out here, one feels tempted to mention, at least, some of them. However, this pluralistic strand is coupled with certain claims of exclusivity in the Qur'an. It is to this aspect of the Qur'an that we now turn.

Exclusivity or Ultimate Truth in Religions

Most religions have some beliefs or propositions that are ultimate and exclusivist or make claims of ultimate or exclusivist truth. These beliefs are held to be crucial for any meaningful adherence to religion. Many followers of religions believe that rejecting these exclusivist beliefs separates one from that particular religion. In a way, these beliefs are given a somewhat definitional status by the followers of each religion. For example, for a majority of Christian denominations, belief in Jesus' divinity is an ultimate and exclu-

sivist belief. Similarly, various Biblical passages seem to have strong exclusivist intent, among them “For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16); “whoever is not for me [says Jesus] is against me” (Matt. 12:30 and Luke 11:23); “I [Jesus] am the way, the truth, and life. No one comes to the Father except by me” (John 14:6); “For unless you believe that I am He, you will die in your sins” (John 8:24); “As we said before, so now I say again: If any one preach to you a gospel besides that which you have received, let him be anathema” (Gal. 1:9). Acts 4:12 also seems to link salvation explicitly to belief in Jesus: “Neither is there salvation in any other, for there is no other name under heaven given to humanity whereby we must be saved.” The collective import of these verses is obviously exclusivist.

Similarly, in Judaism, the belief that the Jews are God’s chosen people has led to various exclusivist interpretations: “If, therefore, you hear My voice and keep My covenant, you shall be My peculiar possession above all people, for all Earth is Mine. And you shall be to Me a priestly kingdom, and a holy nation. These are the words you shall speak to the children of Israel” (Ex. 19:5-6) and : “Be children of the Lord your God. You shall not cut yourselves nor make any baldness for the dead, because you are a holy people to the Lord your God, and He chose you to be His peculiar people of all nations that are upon Earth” (Deut. 14:1-2).

The exclusivist import of Jewish monotheism also comes out clearly in the following verses: “You shall fear [and stand in awe of] the Lord your God, shall serve Him only, and shall swear [only] by His name. You shall not go after the strange deities of all the nations that are round about you” (Deut. 6:13-14). In fact, those who serve the strange deities of other nations, or the Sun or the Moon, must be punished: “You shall bring forth the man or the woman who has committed that most wicked thing to the gates of your city, and they shall be stoned” (Deut. 17:5).

In the case of Islam, the idea of exclusivity is based on the belief that Islam is the last or ultimate revelation and that the followers of all revelations must turn to it. Such a claim appears to be inclusivist in its nature. But as noted earlier, we may avoid interpreting the Qur’anic position in this inclusivist way because such an interpretation clashes with the idea of the divinely willed genuine diversity of religions. The question, therefore, is how to reconcile the pluralistic and exclusivist strands present in the world’s major religions.

This is a crucial question for theology and philosophy of religion, because ignoring either the pluralistic or the exclusivist strands of belief

does not seem to do full justice to the content and practice of religions. Even with the best possible defense of pluralism only or of exclusivism only, we fail to address two extremely critical issues for religions: (1) that the choice of which religion to follow is a genuine choice because God does not insist that all people follow the same religion, and that (2) without claims to having the exclusive ultimate truth, no religion can possibly inspire the kind of deep conviction that is the bedrock of all religious life. The choice between religious pluralism and religious exclusivism is, however, a false dichotomy, for there are other options, such as atheism.¹⁷ The point, however, is to address the options available to the followers of world religions, which contain both pluralist and exclusivist strands. Such believers tend to take both strands seriously, and we need a view of religion that can handle these opposing strands judiciously.

Exclusivity within a religion appears to be important for several reasons. At least two of them come to mind immediately: (1) it holds the religion together by helping it function as the ultimate standard of spirituality and character for its followers, and (2) it helps shape versions of religious orthodoxies by laying down a set of minimum possible common denominators. As such, it also engenders controversies about orthodoxy versus heresy and feeds the notion of authenticity of belief and practices within its fold.

Both of these reasons for exclusivist ultimate beliefs seem to be related primarily to the problem of a religion's identity. Exclusivist beliefs are part of its core beliefs and, in combination with other beliefs, produce acceptable versions, sects, or denominations. In other words, a religion cannot have an identity, either conceptual or sociological, without such ultimate or exclusivist beliefs. If a religion made no claims about its being an ultimate truth in certain respects, it is not clear if it would even survive as a religion. As Paul Tillich puts it:

Faith is the state of being ultimately concerned: the dynamics of faith are the dynamics of man's ultimate concern. ... But it is not only the unconditional demand made by that which is one's ultimate concern, it is also the promise of ultimate fulfillment which is accepted in the act of faith. ... [I]t is "ultimate fulfillment" that is promised, and it is exclusion from such fulfillment which is threatened if the unconditional demand is not obeyed.¹⁸

Tillich's point here is critical for our argument. He seems to correctly capture the idea that religious faith involves commitment to some ultimate beliefs, the non-adherence to which implies exclusion [from religion] and

the adherence to which is an exclusive criterion for “ultimate fulfillment.” “[T]he demand of total surrender to the subject of ultimate concern”¹⁹ in a given religion implies exclusivity, for a religion cannot present itself as one truth among many and still hope to be accepted by any sizable following. Such an attitude toward all its beliefs will reduce a religion’s beliefs to the level of ordinary beliefs and opinion and thus remove the element of “faith.” In such a situation, the fundamental reason people become religious, namely, to base their lives upon something ultimately true, would be gone. It is hard to imagine anyone who seeks to be religious trying to live according to a set of beliefs that could be discarded like ordinary opinions or even revised like scientific beliefs. People tend to look for ultimate truth in religion, and religions supply such truth in terms of beliefs that are held to be of “ultimate concern” from a spiritual point of view. It is also important to realize that the sets of exclusivist ultimate beliefs are different, partly or completely, in the world’s great religions and that this is why they contradict each other on certain issues. Without such exclusive ultimate beliefs, there would be just one religion or, at most, various versions of it.²⁰

Conclusion

In a way, the difference in ultimate religious beliefs and insistence upon their exclusive truth lend authenticity to religious diversity. But as we noted above, the Qur’an asks Jews and Christians to come to common terms with Muslims in worshipping one God only. This may be taken to mean that the Qur’an, after all, is not really giving full recognition to religious diversity. This, I think, is not a correct understanding of the situation. What the Qur’an is asking here is that God’s unity is an ultimate belief for Islam and that it will not compromise on this principle. This does not rule out the possibility that religions with different ultimate beliefs (e.g., the Trinity) will similarly refuse to compromise on their principle(s). It is this insistence on exclusivity, or the correctness of their respective ultimate beliefs, by religions that creates room for true diversity (of religions) in history and that the Qur’an seems to characterize as God’s will.

So we have a plurality of religions, all holding a number of core beliefs as ultimate and all contradicting each other in a number of places. Due to these contradictory positions on central issues, followers of these religions may (and at times do) consider each other as misguided, wrongheaded, and as having gone astray from the true path. Such an attitude, however, fails to take into account the need and presence of pluralistic strands in their respective religions.

Endnotes

1. Hick's pluralist hypothesis is the claim that the great world religions are different, culturally and conceptually conditioned, responses to the same transcendent reality: the Ultimate or the Real. They all help human transformation from self-centeredness to reality-centeredness and can lead to salvation/liberation or fulfillment in relation to the Ultimate. Given his "post-Kantian" approach, the world religions can only give a conceptually and culturally conditioned view of the Ultimate and not a view of it as it is (John Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion* [New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989], 241). This view is normally contrasted by philosophers with *exclusivism* and *inclusivism*. Exclusivism is the claim that only one particular religion happens to be the completely true and salvific one. Inclusivism, on the other hand, claims that there is only one uniquely true religion, but that elements of truth or salvation may exist in other religions as well. Karl Rahner is the leading figure for this point of view. See his *Theological Investigations*, trans. K-H Kruger (Baltimore: Helicon Press, and London: Dartman and Longman & Todd, 1966), 5:125.
2. John Hick, "Religious Pluralism and Islam," 2005. Online at: www.johnhick.org.uk/article11.html.
3. Ibid.
4. Hick makes the following remark about the world's mystical traditions:

I take my clue from something that is affirmed within all the great traditions. This is that the ultimate reality is in itself beyond the scope of human description and understanding. As the great Christian theologian Thomas Aquinas said, God "surpasses every form that our intellect reaches" (*Summa contra Gentiles*, I, 14: 3). God in God's ultimate eternal self-existent being is ineffable, or as I would rather say, transcategorial, beyond the scope of our human conceptual systems. And so we have a distinction between God in God's infinite self-existent being and God as humanly knowable. We find this in some of the great Christian mystics, such as Meister Eckhart, who distinguished between the Godhead, which is the ultimate ineffable reality, and the known God of the scriptures and of church doctrine and worship, conceived and understood in our limited human terms. We find parallel distinctions within the other great traditions. The Jewish thinker Maimonides expressed it as a distinction between the essence and the manifestation of God. There are also well known Hindu and Buddhist versions of the distinction, although there is no time to go into them now.

In the case of Islam, so far as my knowledge goes, the distinction occurs mainly within the mystical strand. The ultimate ineffability of God is declared by a number of writers. For example, Kwaja Abdullah Ansari says, in prayer to God, "You are far from what we imagine you to be," and "The mystery of your reality is not revealed to anyone." (*Intimate Conversations*, trans. W. Thackston, New York: Paulist Press, London: SPCK, pp. 183 and 203). Developing the implications of this, Ibn al-'Arabi distinguishes (like Maimonides) between the divine essence, which is ineffable, and God as humanly known. In *The Bezels of Wisdom* he says,

“The Essence, as being beyond all these relationships, is not a divinity ... it is we who make Him a divinity by being that through which He knows himself as Divine. Thus he is not known [as Allah] until we are known” (*The Bezels of Wisdom*, trans. R.W.J. Austin, New York: Paulist Press and London: SPCK, p. 92). Again, he says, “In general, most men have, perforce, an individual concept of their Lord, which they ascribe to Him and in which they seek Him. So long as the Reality is presented to them according to it they recognize Him and affirm him, whereas if presented in another form, they deny Him, flee from Him and treat Him improperly, while at the same time imagining they are acting toward Him fittingly. One who believes [in the ordinary way] believes only in the deity he has created for himself, since a deity in ‘belief’ is a [mental] construction (Ibid., p. 137).” Ibid.

I have quoted Hick at length here because it is important for the thesis of this paper to emphasize that the mystical traditions are fully alive to the paradox of exclusivity and diversity in religion. The quote from Ibn al-`Arabi, for example, seems to capture that paradox. The only point that needs emphasizing is that these mystical traditions need not take this paradox as a defining feature of religion. These traditions generally ask the followers of various religions to transcend exclusivity in their religion and see the Ultimate as the one and only source of all religions. What is argued below, however, is the point that both exclusivity and diversity are essential for a religion.

5. Ibid.
6. Soren Kierkegaard, *Fear and Trembling*, trans. Walter Lowrie (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1973), 77.
7. For a further discussion on the role of paradox in Kierkegaard’s philosophy, see M. A. Adeel “Kierkegaard and the Paradox,” *Pakistan: Journal of the Pakistan Study Centre, Peshawar* (1990): 21-22.
8. All Biblical references are taken from *Holy Bible* (Baltimore: John Murphy Co., 1914).
9. Generally, the Qur’anic position is interpreted as inclusivist by Muslims. Earlier monotheistic religions are accepted as genuine, but Islam is taken as the final and perfect manifestation of God’s revelation to humanity. This is also taken to mean that after the Islamic revelation, everybody has to be exhorted to accept it and become Muslim. Many Christians take a similar position on the issue and declare Christianity the ultimate and unique religion, although other religions have reflections of the Truth in them.
10. All Qur’anic quotations are from Abdullah Yusuf Ali, *The Meaning of the Holy Qur’an* (Beltsville, MD: amana publications, 1999).
11. Given this Qur’anic view of divinely ordained diversity, it becomes impossible to interpret the Qur’anic attitude toward other religions as inclusivist if this divinely ordained diversity is a genuine and real diversity of equally authentic paths toward God. If diversity is not interpreted as authentic in this sense, we end up with the claim that God’s will is to have only apparent diversity insofar as He allows partially true religions along with the only true one.

12. This ethical need for the presence of genuine religious diversity is further evidence that inclusivism may not be a defensible interpretation of the Qur'anic position on this issue, insofar as inclusivism fails to give equal authenticity to the many paths toward God.
13. For some discussion of this basic point of Islamic ethics, see my "Islamic Ethics and Controversy about the Moral Heart of Confucianism," *Dao: A Journal of Comparative Philosophy* 7, no. 2 (June 2008): 151-56.
14. The issues involved in pluralism/exclusivism debate have a similar force at both the interreligious and the intra-religious levels. David Basinger notes and stresses this point in his *Religious Diversity: A Philosophical Assessment* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2002), 2-3, 16-17, and 24-25.
15. For some discussion on the Sabian's identity, see note no. 76 in Abdullah Yusuf Ali's commentary on the Qur'an.
16. For further discussion on this point, see my "Islamic Ethics."
17. I may add that some people take atheism to be an exclusivist position, insofar as it is presented as the only true position about God's non-existence.
18. Paul Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith* (New York, NY: Harper and Row, 1958), 1-2.
19. *Ibid.*, 3.
20. In contrast to Hick's pluralistic hypothesis, S. Mark Heim insists that all major religions work for different destinations or salvations for human beings and that in neglecting this plurality of salvations, Hick's pluralist hypothesis fails to be really pluralist. See his *Salvations: Truth and Difference in Religion* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997), 23-35 and chapter 5. This point, however, is not relevant here because religious diversity within the Judeo-Christian-Islamic tradition is apparently about paths, not destinations. In the case of these religions, the destination is ultimately God Himself.