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Author: [Reza Shah-Kazemi](#)

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Beyond Polemics and Pluralism: The Universal Message of the Qur'an¹

Reza Shah-Kazemi

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And they say: None entereth Paradise unless he be a Jew or a Christian. These are their vain desires. Say: Bring your proof if ye are truthful.

Nay, but whosoever submitteth his purpose to God, and he is virtuous, his reward is with his Lord. No fear shall come upon them, neither shall they grieve.

(Surat al-Baqara, 2:111-112).

This passage from the Qur'an demonstrates clearly the spiritual sterility of polemics and the logical absurdity of religious chauvinism. The Qur'an does not allow us to play the game of polemics, it is not possible to claim that only those called 'Muslims' go to Heaven; rather, we are called upon to stress heartfelt submission to God, together with virtue in consequence of that submission. In other words, the logic of this riposte to narrow-minded polemics compels us to rise to a higher level of discourse, one which transcends theological perspectives based on sentiment and vanity; or on what the Qur'an refers to in this verse as *amani*, plural of *umniyya*, which can be translated as 'vain desire' — vain both in the sense of conceited, and in the sense of being 'in vain', that is, futile. It is important to note that this word is also used in relation to the Muslims, in the following passage, which reinforces the message of 2:111-112:

And those who believe and do good works, We shall bring them into Gardens underneath which rivers flow, wherein they will abide forever—a promise of God in truth; and who can be more truthful than God in utterance?

It will not be in accordance with your vain desires, nor with the vain desires of the People of the Scripture. He who doth wrong will have the recompense thereof ...

And whoso doeth good works, whether male or female, and is a believer, such will enter paradise, and will not be wronged the dint of a date-stone.

Who is better in religion than he who submitteth his purpose to God (aslama wajhahu li'llah), while being virtuous, and following the religious community of Abraham the unswervingly devout?

(An-Nisa, 4: 122-125).

Spiritual justice, stemming from divine wisdom, takes priority over selfish desire, stemming from religious chauvinism. These and similar verses invite us to rise above the vanity of particularist polemics and to contemplate the sphere of universal metaphysics. In effecting this shift of consciousness from form to essence, from the outward to the inward, from the particular to the universal, the Qur'an helps us to overcome the limitations of religious exclusivism, that is, the attitude expressed in the traditional Christian doctrine: *extra ecclesiam nulla salus* ('no salvation outside the church').

In our times, this attitude has resulted in countless intelligent people, in all parts of the world, losing their faith in their inherited religion. In traditional civilisations, such an attitude of exclusivism was perhaps more tenable, given the fact that religious communities were so clearly distinct from each other, and lived almost as self-contained worlds. However, the same attitude becomes difficult to maintain, if not completely untenable, in the contemporary world, where



religious boundaries have all but dissolved. We live in a global religious village, where different faith communities intermingle in a manner that would have been inconceivable in the pre-modern period. In this context, intelligent people cannot help perceiving virtue, faith, beauty and holiness in the adherents of religions other than their own. Are these people to deny the validity of the faiths which give rise to these flowers of holiness, in order to uphold their belief in the exclusive validity of their own faith, and risk violating the integrity of their intelligence? Or should they affirm the validity of other faiths, doing so at the price of the absoluteness of their commitment to their own faith?

Religious thinkers in the West have struggled with this ‘problematic’. Speaking in the most general terms, traditional polemics are being confronted by modern pluralism, the doctrine chiefly associated with the Christian scholar, Professor John Hick. According to Hick, all religions are equal, and equally salvific; one must abandon traditional claims to be sole possessors of the truth, and one must affirm the equal truth of all religions.² But this shift from polemics to pluralism has brought with it an inevitable dilution of commitment to the specific, unique forms of one’s own faith, as we shall see shortly.

The question which I intend to address in this paper, then, can be expressed as follows: how can one answer the urgent need to transcend conventional exclusivism and open up to the Other, without relativising or diluting one’s own faith and identity? How can one go beyond absolutist polemics without falling into the pitfall of relativistic pluralism?

The argument I make here is that the universality of the Qur’an provides us with the most effective answer to this question. This presentation of the universal message of the Qur’an is based on the tradition of Sufi metaphysics, in particular the school of thought deriving from Ibn al-‘Arabi; and it benefits from the insights of the contemporary school of thought known as the ‘perennial philosophy’, associated chiefly with the name of Frithjof Schuon (1907-1998), the most prominent exponent of which is [Professor Seyyed Hossein Nasr](#).

1. Beyond Polemics

As regards the first issue, it is surely one of the greatest ironies of our times that the scripture which is most tolerant of other religions, indeed, which is unique in its recognition of, and reverence for, other religions, should be used as the basis for the most fanatical acts of intolerant violence. In the West, new interpretations of scripture are required in order to move away from traditional exclusivism. Now this exclusivism is based on the *literal* meaning of key verses of the Bible. By contrast, when we look at the Qur’an, it is precisely the *literal* meaning of dozens of verses which incontrovertibly uphold a universal perspective on religion; and one often needs to resort to complex strategies of interpretation and abrogation, in order to move away from the literal, universal meaning towards an imposed, exclusivist reading of these verses.

In order to highlight, as succinctly as possible, the universal message of the Qur’an, let us imagine an interview between a western inquirer and a Muslim. The interviewer asks the following six basic questions, and the Muslim must answer in the form of one or two verses from the Qur’an. It is striking that these simple short answers cannot avoid universality; they cannot but express some aspect of the universal scope of the Qur’anic message.



Question 1: What is your credo; what do you believe?

The answer to this must include verse 285 of the Surat al-Baqara:

The Messenger believeth in that which hath been revealed unto him from his Lord, and [so do] the believers. Every one believeth in God and His angels and His scriptures and His Messengers—we make no distinction between any of His Messengers ... (2: 285).

Here we should note that it is an essential part of Muslim belief to affirm the truth of all the Messengers of God, and even to make no distinction between any of them. Belief in all revealed religions is stressed here as an integral and not merely optional aspect of Islamic faith.

Question 2: According to your faith, who is saved?

Again, the answer is astonishingly universal: verse 62 of the Surat al-Baqara:

Truly those who believe, and the Jews, and the Christians, and the Sabeans—whoever believeth in God and the Last Day and performeth virtuous deeds—surely their reward is with their Lord, and no fear shall come upon them, neither shall they grieve (2:62).

Rather than give an exhaustive list of all religions, the Qur'an instructs us that the essential pre-requisites for salvation are faith and virtue. These are essential but not sufficient conditions for salvation, since, as the Prophet said, nobody enters Paradise on account of his deeds, but only through the mercy of God. But this verse informs us that faith and virtue will be rewarded by the Lord who is merciful and just.

Question 3: Why is there a diversity of faiths?

Again, rather than requiring some elaborate interpretive strategy, the Qur'an gives us the explicit divine purpose behind the diversity of revelations and religions. Verse 48 of the Surat al-Ma'ida:

For each We have appointed a Law and a Way. Had God willed, He could have made you one community. But that He might try you by that which He hath given you [He hath made you as you are]. So vie with one another in good works. Unto God ye will all return, and He will inform you of that wherein ye differed (5:48).

This view stands at the opposite of the pluralist thesis, according to which the diversity of faiths is the result of human responses to God. The Qur'an tells us on the contrary that God is Himself the source of religious diversity, and that we as members of different faith-communities should engage in healthy competition: to outstrip each other in goodness.³

Question 4: What is the quintessence of the religious message?

If one were to choose a single verse to answer this question, it might well be verse 25 of the Surat al-Anbiya':



And We sent no Messenger before thee but We inspired him [saying]: There is no God save Me, so worship Me (21: 25).

This quintessence is by definition universal; whatever is added to this message is specific to time and place and other conditions. Universality takes precedence over particularity, in the measure that essence takes precedence over form.⁴

Question 5: To whom is this message addressed?

The whole of humanity has received this message, according to the Qur'an:

*For every umma (community) there is a messenger (Yunus, 10:47).*⁵

Question 6: What is the purpose of warfare in your faith?

The answer to this question would have to contain what many commentators regard as the very first verse revealed in relation to warfare: Surat al-Hajj, verses 39-40:

Permission [to fight] is given to those who are being fought, for they have been wronged ... Had God not driven back some by means of others, monasteries, churches, synagogues and mosques—wherein the name of God is oft-invoked—would assuredly have been destroyed (22: 39-40).

This defence of *all* places of worship resonates with the explicit function of the Qur'anic revelation as a *musaddiq*, 'confirmer', and a *muhaymin*, 'protector':

And unto thee We have revealed the Scripture with the Truth, confirming whatever Scripture was before it, and a protector of it (Surat al-Ma'ida, 5:48).

In the light of these illuminating verses, the explicit denunciation of religious exclusivism in verses 111-112 of the Surat al-Baqara cited at the outset, assumes the dimensions of an irrefutable argument in favour of universalism. It remains to be seen how one is to integrate this universal vision within a framework which does justice to the specificity of the Islamic form.

2. Beyond Pluralism

The majority of Muslim scholars who have attempted to bring the message of the Qur'an into this debate have done so by submitting to the rules of the pluralist game. Several writers have stressed the universality of the message of the Qur'an, but in doing so they have truncated and reduced the message of the Qur'an in conformity with the pluralist model.⁶

For the pluralism of John Hick calls upon fellow pluralists in their own religions to dismantle those aspects of their beliefs which would assert the uniqueness of their religion: for to be unique is to lay claim to superiority, and to claim superiority breaks the rules of the pluralist game.⁷ The pluralist model thus aims at including all, but ends up excluding most: that is, the overwhelming majority of believers in any religion, those who practice that religion precisely because they believe it to be the only true religion, or at least the best religion.



In other words, the inclusivist excludes exclusivists, and thus ends up as an exclusivist himself, in a manner which logically undermines his claim to inclusivism. The universalist becomes a particularist precisely by excluding particularism. To give just one example, Hasan Askari, a notable Muslim scholar associated with John Hick, goes so far in asserting Islam's universality, that he claims that Islam in the sense of primordial and universal submission abolishes "the particular and the historical Islam".⁸

Instead of integrating the particular within the universal, and seeing the universal as embodied within the particular, the pluralist is forced to sacrifice or belittle the particular for the sake of the universal. If, however, one has recourse to Sufi metaphysics, one is able to transcend this false dichotomy between the particular and the universal, and to see each in the light of the other. This is the vision which flows from the spiritual perspective of Ibn al-'Arabi, for whom the universal has no meaning without the particular, and vice versa.

His great statement on the nature of being can furnish the foundation both for a resolution of the particular within the universal and for an effective mode of interpreting verses of the Qur'an in a manner that does not exclude exclusivism: "Part of the completeness of existence is the existence of incompleteness within it; otherwise, the completeness of existence would be incomplete by virtue of the absence of incompleteness within it."⁹

In the light of this metaphysical principle, Ibn al-'Arabi's hermeneutics can help us to present the universal message of the Qur'an in such a way as to transcend both the explosive fanaticism which is fed by conventional exclusivism, on the one hand, and the corrosive relativism which is the product of modern pluralism, on the other.

One key hermeneutical principle of Ibn al-'Arabi is expressed as follows:

"Every sense (*wajh*) which is supported (*ihimal*) by any verse in God's Speech (*kalam*)—whether it is the Koran, the Torah, the Psalms, the Gospel, or the Scripture—in the view of anyone who knows that language (*lisan*) is intended (*maqsud*) by God in the case of that interpreter (*muta'awwil*). For His knowledge encompasses all senses ... Hence every interpreter correctly grasps the intention of God in that word ... Hence no man of knowledge can declare wrong an interpretation which is supported by the words (*alfaz*). He who does so is extremely deficient in knowledge (*fi ghayatin min al-qusur fi l-'ilm*). However, it is not necessary to uphold the interpretation nor to put it into practice, except in the case of the interpreter himself and those who follow his authority."¹⁰

From this key principle one can approach the Qur'anic message of universality in a manner which is truly all-inclusive: one includes even the exclusivist reading as a legitimate possibility. This need not be seen as contradicting universality but, rather, as expressive of universality, and indeed proving its all-encompassing nature. For example, let us look at the verse; "Truly, religion with God is Islam" (Surat Al 'Imran, 3: 19).

The question as to whether 'Islam' is to be understood here universally (as the principle of universal submission, as Askari would stress) or only as the particular religion revealed to the last Prophet—this question can be resolved without any need for mutual exclusion. A truly universalist understanding of the meaning of 'Islam', or of religion as such, both affirms and transcends the particular meaning. One can see the particular religion not just as an embodiment



of the universal principle, but also as a path leading to that essence of which it is a formal embodiment. The universal essence manifests in and as the particular form; it is not contradicted by it.

This universalist hermeneutic of Ibn al-‘Arabi also helps us to address the problematic issue of abrogation. We cited earlier verse 62 of the Surat al-Baqara, in response to question 2: ‘Who is saved?’:

Truly those who believe, and the Jews, and the Christians, and the Sabeans—whoever believeth in God and the Last Day and performeth virtuous deeds—surely their reward is with their Lord, and no fear shall come upon them, neither shall they grieve (2:62).

The literal meaning of this verse cannot be disputed; however, for the majority of the classical commentators, the meaning is circumvented by recourse to the strategy of abrogation. The verse is deemed to have been abrogated by 3:85, which reads:

“And whoso seeketh a religion other than Islam, it will not be accepted from him, and he will be a loser in the Hereafter”.

Among these commentators, however, it is noteworthy that Tabari (d. 310 AH/923 CE) and the Shi‘i commentator, Tabarsi (d. 548 AH/1153 CE) both reject the idea that the verse can be subject to abrogation. Before turning to Ibn al-‘Arabi’s view on abrogation in general, and applying his hermeneutical principles to this verse in particular, it is worth noting what Tabari says on this question. As regards the principle of abrogation (*naskh*) Tabari writes as follows, in his commentary on verse 2:106: *We abrogate no verse, nor do We cause it to be forgotten, but that We bring one better than it or like it.*

“Thus, God transforms the lawful into the unlawful, and the unlawful into the lawful, and the permitted into the forbidden, and the forbidden into the permitted. This only pertains to such issues as commands and prohibitions, proscriptions and generalizations, withholding and granting authorization. But as for reports (*akhbar*), they cannot abrogate nor be abrogated.”¹¹

In regard to verse 2:62, he writes that the literal meaning of the verse should be upheld, without being restricted in its scope by reference to reports of its abrogation, “because, in respect of the bestowal of reward for virtuous action with faith, God has not singled out some of His creatures as opposed to others.”¹²

Turning now to Ibn al-‘Arabi, let us note his position on the issue of abrogation in general. Most Muslim scholars assert that Islam ‘abrogates’ the previous religious dispensations, in the sense that its revealed law supersedes the laws promulgated in pre-Qur’anic revelations.¹³ Ibn al-‘Arabi accepts this position, but then nuances the notion of abrogation in such a way as to transform it into an affirmation of the continued validity of the ‘abrogated’ faiths. Abrogation does not imply nullification or invalidation; neither does it imply that the religions ‘superseded’ by Islam are rendered inefficacious in salvific terms. He stresses that one of the reasons for the pre-eminence (the ‘supercession’, literally, the quality of being ‘seated above’) of Islam resides, precisely, in the fact that Muslims must believe in all revelations and not just in that conveyed by the Prophet of Islam. We return to the universalist answer given to question 1 above: ‘What do you believe?’:



All the revealed religions are lights. Among these religions, the revealed religion of Muhammad is like the light of the sun 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 lights of the stars is actualized (muhaqqaq). 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.¹⁴

To believe that pre-Qur'anic religions lose their efficacy is thus to render meaningless the avowed function of Islam to be a 'confirmation' and 'protection' in relation to those religions: if the religions are inefficacious as vehicles of salvation, there is no point in confirming and protecting them. They should simply be cast into the dustbin of religious history along with other degenerate religious traditions, according to the logic of those who believe that 'abrogation' equals 'nullification'—the 'ignorant', as Ibn al-'Arabi calls them. In contrast to this logic, one should robustly argue as follows: the *shari'a* grants protection to believers of other religious traditions precisely because the essential, saving spirit of the revelations inaugurating those traditions is granted recognition, protection and confirmation by the Islamic revelation. If the revelations pertaining to pre-Qur'anic religions were rendered null and void by the Qur'an, the legal protection accorded to them by Islamic Law would be at best paradoxical, at worst, illogical.

However, when we apply the hermeneutical principle of Ibn al-'Arabi to the specific issue of the abrogation of 2:62 by 3:85, we observe that a universalist hermeneutic must allow for this particularist interpretation, even at the price of paradox. In other words, since the literal meaning of 3:85 does indeed allow for the interpretation which would deem all pre-Qur'anic revelations unacceptable to God, the universalist cannot simply dismiss this interpretation as being wrong or unfounded. For, to quote Ibn al-'Arabi again, "no man of knowledge can declare wrong an interpretation which is supported by the words. He who does so is extremely deficient in knowledge."¹⁵

In defence of this inclusion of exclusivism, one might say the following: there will always be a category of Muslims who must believe in this kind of exclusivism if they are to believe in Islam; and this exclusivist meaning, being supportable by the literal words of this and other such verses, was surely intended (*maqsud*) by God; that is, He wished this meaning to be inferred by those who need it in order to uphold key spiritual and intellectual concomitants of their faith in Islam. One might say that their faith in Islam is supported by pillars of exclusivism. Remove the exclusivism, and the edifice of faith collapses.

But let us also recall the words which complete this passage from Ibn al-'Arabi: "However, it is not necessary to uphold the interpretation nor to put it into practice, except in the case of the interpreter himself and those who follow his authority."¹⁶ So, the universalist will grant the exclusivist his right to interpret the words of 3:85 in this manner, while not being under any obligation to concede that this is *the one and only* meaning of the verse. Rather he would politely refer to the preceding verse, 3:84, and argue that the 'Islam' mentioned in 3:85 *can also be* understood as universal submission rather than simply as the particular religion inaugurated by the Qur'anic revelation; and that this universal submission is in fact described in the verse immediately preceding 3:85. This verse, 3:84, reads as follows:



Say: We believe in God and that which is revealed unto us, and that which is revealed unto Abraham and Ishmael and Isaac and Jacob and the tribes, and that which was given unto Moses and Jesus and the prophets from their Lord. We make no distinction between any of them, and unto Him we have submitted.

We thus return to the idea of ‘Islam’ as universal and primordial submission, and uphold this interpretation as being more satisfactory than the exclusivist interpretation. Let us recall that Askari argues that this universal Islam “abolishes the particular and the historical Islam.”¹⁷ Such an ‘abolition’ of particular and historical Islam ironically shares a great deal with the kind of exclusivism it is supposed to be transcending; for this ‘abolition’ is a kind of pluralist mirror-image of the traditional ‘abrogation’ resorted to by exclusivist Muslims: both pluralist ‘abolition’ and exclusivist ‘abrogation’ are avoided by the true universalist. The particular and historical form of Islam is doubtless to be situated at a lower level than the universal and timeless essence, but the particular is not to be trivialised, marginalised or invalidated by the universal. On the contrary, the particular is elevated and ennobled in the very measure that it is deemed to be an expression of the universal—the form becomes more, not less, *essential* to the extent that it is grasped as an embodiment of the essence and a vehicle leading to the essence.

In other words, a vision of the universal essence of Islam, its *haqiqa*, can, and indeed must, go hand in hand with adherence to the specific form of Islam, the *shari‘a*. The uniqueness and irreducible character of the Islamic form is thereby not sacrificed at the altar of universality, in the name of pluralism; rather, the uniqueness of its form is articulated, precisely, in terms of its universal ramifications. To apply a key principle expressed beautifully in a different context by Frithjof Schuon, referred to as a ‘formidable scholar’ by the late Shaykh of al-Azhar, ‘Abd al-Halim Mahmud,¹⁸ one might say: far from diminishing our participation in the particular treasures of the Qur’anic revelation, a universal perspective bestows upon those treasures a compass which touches the roots of existence.¹⁹

This conception of the relationship between the form and the essence is far more likely to engage the traditional exclusivist; it has more chance of persuading him to move from a ‘harsh’ to a ‘gentle’ form of exclusivism.²⁰ The Hickean pluralist is bound to provoke defensive reflexes from the conservative upholders of Islam, for this type of pluralism challenges the very normativity of Islam; the universalist, by contrast, upholds that normativity, while at the same time aerating it with a tolerant, respectful vision of the Other, a vision based on a plausible reading of many verses of the Qur’an, a vision made more acceptable for the exclusivist in that the normativity of Islam is not undermined, but rather enriched, by this perspective.

One of the most important concomitants of this presentation of Qur’anic universalism concerns the sensitive question of *da‘wa*. Traditional Muslims have shied away from presenting the universality of the Qur’anic message for fear of its implications regarding *da‘wa*: if all religions are still valid, on what basis do we invite people to Islam? However, those who wish to ‘bear witness’ to the normativity of the Islamic faith have nothing to fear, for the universalist will not deny the exclusivist the right to engage in *da‘wa*. For pluralists, of course, there can be no *da‘wa*, because the pluralist cannot assert that his religion is ‘better’ than anyone else’s. The Muslim universalist, however, can argue that one of the best forms of *da‘wa* lies, precisely, in expounding the universal message of the Qur’an: one’s invitation to Islam can be made all the more compelling in the measure that this universal dimension of the Qur’an is brought to the fore.



In an age dominated by the false dichotomy between fanatical exclusivism and secular inclusivism, the revealed universality of the Qur'an stands forth as the ideal antidote to both errors. Against so dark a background, it should stand out with dazzling clarity that the Qur'an is the only scripture in which other faiths are explicitly accorded spiritual reverence and not just juridical tolerance. Diatribe can thus give way to dialogue, and dialogue, in turn, can be appreciated as a form of *da'wa*, for those who feel the need to do so. The exclusivist can present Islam as the best religion, precisely because it recognises and respects all religion. This is one aspect of the shift from 'harsh' to 'gentle' exclusivism noted above: one encourages the exclusivist to move from the position which says 'Islam is the only true religion', to the position which says: 'Islam is the best religion'. The first is based on a harsh rejection of all faiths but Islam, while the second is based on Ibn al-'Arabi's principle: "We have been required in our all-inclusive religion to have faith in the truth of all the messengers and all the revealed religions."²¹

This combination of universalism and particularism permits those practising Muslims who are aware of the presence of holiness, truth, beauty, and virtue in religions other than Islam to do justice to what is perceived in the religion of the Other, without compromising fidelity to one's own religion. As noted at the outset, there are many believers in today's multicultural world who cannot, in good conscience, believe that the right to salvation and the realisation of spiritual truth is the preserve of one religion only, and that all other religions are intrinsically false. The Qur'an speaks to such individuals precisely through its universality, a universality that ensures that it also speaks to those who, on the contrary, cannot commit themselves to Islam unless they believe it to be *the best*, and, for yet others, the *only* religion. As Frithjof Schuon observes: "Every religion by definition wants to be the best, and "must want" to be the best, as a whole and also as regards its constitutive elements; this is only natural, so to speak, or rather 'supernaturally natural'."²²

It is 'supernaturally natural' because of the element of absoluteness which makes religion what it is: that absoluteness has a right to impose itself upon the believer, and it does so in a myriad ways, including the universality which inheres in the mystical core of every religion. One of the distinguishing features of the Islamic revelation, however, is that this universality pervades even the exoteric form of the religion, that is, its very founding scripture. Martin Lings makes this point very clear:

All mysticisms are equally universal ... in that they all lead to the One Truth. But one feature of the originality of Islam, and therefore of Sufism, is what might be called a secondary universality, which is to be explained above all by the fact that as the last Revelation of this cycle of time it is necessarily something of a summing up. The Islamic credo is expressed by the Qur'an as belief in 'God and His Angels and His Books and His Messengers'.

He then proceeds to cite 5:48, saying that "nothing comparable to it could be found in either Judaism or Christianity". He continues this passage by pointing to another aspect of the universality of Islam, namely, its primordality:

There is a certain coincidence between the last and the first. With Islam 'the wheel has come full circle', or almost; and that is why it claims to be a return to the primordial religion, which gives it yet another aspect of universality. One of the characteristics of the Qur'an as the last Revelation is that at times it becomes as it were transparent in order that the first Revelation may shine through its verses; and this first Revelation, namely the Book of Nature, belongs to everyone.²³



This helps us to see the way in which adherence to a universalist perspective can go hand in hand with upholding the normativity of the Islamic faith. It can help us to see that universalists such as Ibn al-‘Arabi and Rumi are not compromising their universalism when they refer to Islam as the best religion, when they describe the Prophet as the best of all prophets, and when they invite non-Muslims to embrace Islam. In perhaps the most oft-cited of all Ibn al-‘Arabi’s lines of poetry in the West, we are dazzled by his description of the ‘religion of love’ (*din al-hubb*):

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 Torah and the book of the Koran.

*I follow the religion of Love: whatever way Love’s camels take, that is my religion and my faith.*²⁴

But much less well known is his interpretation of this ‘religion of love’:

“No religion is more sublime than a religion based on love and longing for Him whom I worship and in whom I have faith ... This is a peculiar prerogative of Muslims, for the station of perfect love is appropriated to Muhammad beyond any other prophet, since God took him as His beloved.”²⁵

Similarly, with regard to Rumi, we are presented with this paradoxical combination between universalist vision and an invitation to embrace Islam. He, also, refers to the ‘religion of love’ (*millat-i ‘ishq*), saying in his poetry:

*“The religion of Love is separate from all religions.
For lovers, the religion and creed is—God.”*²⁶

But this does not prevent Rumi from appealing to a Christian, Jarrah, to embrace Islam, and to cease believing that Jesus is God. When Jarrah says that he believes that Jesus is God because this is what ‘our books’ tell us, Rumi replies:

*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 that will destroy you and not guide you? ... Certainly, it is right that ... the Lord of Jesus, upon whom be peace, honoured Jesus and brought him nigh to Him, so that whoever serves him has served his Lord, whoever obeys him has obeyed his Lord. But inasmuch as God has sent a Prophet superior to Jesus, manifesting by his hand all that He manifested by Jesus’ hand and more, it behoves him to follow that Prophet, for God’s sake, not for the sake of the Prophet himself.*²⁷

To conclude: if one wishes to define the universality of the message of the Qur’an in a manner which appeals not only to liberals, pluralists and universalists, but also to the vast majority of practising Muslims, together with their conservative representatives, one cannot afford to ignore or belittle the principle and the power of religious exclusivism. If, on the contrary, one’s



universalism is predicated upon a truly inclusivist perspective, one which includes even the exclusivist perspective, then instead of alienating the exoteric scholars of Islam, one has at least some chance of winning over some of them. One also has some chance of changing the attitudes of those who adopt a harsh, intolerant attitude towards the non-Muslim other, encouraging them to take up a more gentle, tolerant attitude towards adherents of faiths which are granted recognition in the Qur'an and must be accorded protection according to the Shari'a.

As regards dialogue with the West, such a nuanced presentation of universalism will serve two causes: first, it will demonstrate the unparalleled breadth of vision opened up by a spiritual perspective on the Qur'an, doing so in a manner which avoids both the pitfall of secular pluralism and the polemics of religious fanaticism, showing that fervent faith in one's religion can go hand in hand with a universal vision of all revealed religions. Second, it will disprove the argument made by those who claim that Islamic 'universalism' is but the preserve of a privileged elite, having no resonance with grass-roots Muslims. In this connection, the following argument by Richard Neuhaus should be noted:

As for conferences, it is not hard to get 'Muslim spokespersons'. There are teams of them flitting from conference to conference all over the world ... I have met them in Davos, Switzerland, where top CEOs and heads of state annually gather with select intellectuals to chatter about the state of the world in the esperanto of an internationalese that is not spoken by real people anywhere. The Muslims in such settings are for the most part westernized, secularized, academic intellectuals who are there to 'represent the Muslim viewpoint', but have little more connection with living Islam than many Christians and Jews.²⁸

A pluralist presentation of the universal message of the Qur'an falls into precisely this trap. The result is that non-Muslims in the West cannot take seriously the supposed universality of a message which is apparently upheld only by a tiny minority of western-educated liberal Muslims. By contrast, one cannot fail to take seriously this universal message if it be presented in terms which are truly universal, and not simply nominally so. To be truly universal is to open up to the Other, but not at the expense of the Self—the community of believers to which one belongs, and which one ostensibly represents in dialogue. Universality comprises and is expressed by specificity; it is not undermined or contradicted by it, as Ibn al-'Arabi's metaphysical and hermeneutical perspectives demonstrate with such compelling force.

On the one hand, we have the universal principle of the divine ubiquity: "Wherever ye turn, there is the Face of God" (2: 115); and on the other, the specific—exclusive—orientation which expresses, embodies and helps to enliven the realisatory force of the universal principle: "Turn thy face toward the Sacred Mosque, and wheresoever ye may be, turn your faces [when ye pray] toward it" (2:144).

Islam, like God, is an inalienable dimension of being; to realise the depth of that being, though, one has to submit to it, according to the specific forms and rhythms by which Being has revealed itself: "For each We have appointed a Law and a Way" (5:48).

¹ This paper summarises the principal points in my *The Other in the Light of the One—The Universality of the Qur'an and Interfaith Dialogue* (Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 2006).

² Thus, Hick cannot affirm belief in the Christian dogma of Jesus being God incarnate, for this would be making a claim to uniqueness: 'If Jesus was God incarnate, the Christian religion is unique in having been founded by God in



person.’ *The Metaphor of God Incarnate—Christology in a Pluralistic World* (London: SCM Press, 1993), p. 87; cited by Adnan Aslan, *Religious Pluralism in Christian and Islamic Philosophy—The Thought of John Hick and Seyyed Hossein Nasr* (Richmond, Curzon Press, 1998) p. 250.

³ Cf. “Unto each community We have given sacred rites (*mansakan*) which they are to perform; so let them not dispute with thee about the matter, but summon them unto thy Lord” (Al-Hajj, 22: 67).

And each one hath a goal (*wijha*) toward which he turneth. So vie with one another in good works ... (Al-Baqarah, 2: 148).

⁴ One might also add these verses, which further confirm that the message conveyed to the last Prophet contains nothing essentially new:

Naught is said unto thee [Muhammad] but what was said unto the Messengers before thee (*Fussilat*, 41:43).
Say: I am no innovation among the messengers ... (Al-Ahqaf, 46:9).

⁵ Cf. *We sent Messengers before thee; among them are those about whom We have told thee, and those about whom We have not told thee* (Al-Mu’min, 40:78).

⁶ See for example, Farid Esack, *Qur’an, Liberation and Pluralism* (Oxford: Oneworld, 1997); Abdulaziz Sachedina, *The Islamic Roots of Democratic Pluralism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001); and Hasan Askari, ‘Within and Beyond the Experience of Religious Diversity’, in *The Experience of Religious Diversity*, eds. J. Hick, H. Askari (Aldershot: Gower Press, 1985).

⁷ Thus, Hick cannot affirm belief in the Christian dogma of Jesus being God incarnate, for this would be making a claim to uniqueness: ‘If Jesus was God incarnate, the Christian religion is unique in having been founded by God in person.’ *The Metaphor of God Incarnate—Christology in a Pluralistic World* (London: SCM Press, 1993), p. 87; cited by Adnan Aslan, *Religious Pluralism in Christian and Islamic Philosophy—The Thought of John Hick and Seyyed Hossein Nasr* (Richmond, Curzon Press, 1998) p. 250.

⁸ Hasan Askari, ‘Within and Beyond the Experience of Religious Diversity’, op.cit., p. 199.

⁹ Cited in William Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge—Ibn al-‘Arabi’s Metaphysics of Imagination* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), p.296.

¹⁰ Cited in *ibid.*, p.244. .

¹¹ *Jami’ al-bayan* (Beirut: Dar Ihya’ al-Turath al-‘Arabi, 2001), vol.1, p. 546.

¹² —, vol. 1, p. 373. Tabarsi, for his part, argues in his commentary, *Majma’ al-bayan fi tafsir al-Qur’an*, that ‘abrogation cannot apply to a declaration of promise. It can be allowed only in respect of legal judgements which may be changed or altered with any changes in the conditions of general welfare.’ Quoted by M. Ayoub, *The Qur’an and Its Interpreters* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1984), vol. 1, p. 110. In the contemporary period, both Rashid Rida and ‘Allamah Tabataba’i likewise uphold the literal meaning of the verse, and reject the possibility that it is subject to abrogation. See the discussion of this issue in Farid Esack, *Qur’an, Liberation and Pluralism*, pp. 162-166; and in Abdulaziz Sachedina, *The Islamic Roots of Democratic Pluralism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. 29-34.

¹³ See the article ‘Abrogation’, by John Burton in *Encyclopedia of the Qur’an*, ed. J.D. McAuliffe (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 2001), p.13.

¹⁴ Cited by Chittick, *Imaginal Worlds: Ibn al-Arabi and the Problem of Religious Diversity* (Albany, NY: State University of New York, 1994) p. 125.

¹⁵ William Chittick *ibid.*

¹⁶ William Chittick *ibid.*

¹⁷ Hasan Askari *ibid.*



¹⁸ See ‘Abd al-Halim Mahmud, *Qadiyyat al-Tasawwuf—al-Madrasat al-Shadhiliyya* (Cairo: Dar al-Ma‘arif, 1999), p. 297. It is interesting to note, especially for the participants in this conference organised by al-Azhar, that Shaykh ‘Abd al-Halim, one of the most highly revered Shaykhs of al-Azhar of modern times, spoke in glowing terms about the founder of the Perennial school of thought, René Guénon (1886-1951). He went so far as to say that Guénon was one of those personalities who have rightfully taken up their place in history, and that ‘Muslims place him close to al-Ghazali and his like (*yada ‘uhu al-muslimun bi-jihar al-imam al-Ghazali wa amthalihi*)’, p.301.

¹⁹ See F.Schuon, *Light on the Ancient Worlds* (Bloomington: World Wisdom, 2006), p.57 for the full citation in context.

²⁰ See *The Other*, op. cit., chapter 4 ‘Dialogue, Diatribe or Da‘wa?’, pp.210-278 for elaboration on this argument.

²¹ Cited by Chittick, *Imaginal Worlds*, op.cit., p. 125.

²² Frithjof Schuon, ‘The Idea of “The Best” in Religions’, p. 151 in his *Christianity/Islam—Essays on Esoteric Ecumenism* (Bloomington: World Wisdom Books, 1985). Recent works in religious philosophy in the West have been re-evaluating the intellectual credibility of religious exclusivism. See for example, David Basinger, *Religious Diversity—A Philosophical Assessment* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002). The most salient point made in this book seems to be the following, which develops some powerful arguments made by Kelly James Clarke in ‘Perils of Pluralists’ (*Faith and Philosophy*, vol. 14, no. 3, 1997, pp. 303-320): exclusivism is justified insofar as the grounds for affirming the truth and validity of one’s own tradition are stronger than those for affirming the ‘transformational parity’—the equality of the power to transform and re-centre consciousness, the central function of religion—posited by the pluralists as the premise for their acceptance of all religions as equally true and valid. Basinger proceeds to argue “while an exclusivist can never justifiably deny that there is actual transformational parity among diverse religious perspectives on the basis of experience alone, she [sic] can justifiably deny such parity if the denial follows from (or is required by) other beliefs within her perspective that she justifiably affirms.” (p. 64). See our forthcoming article ‘Sufism and Civilizational Dialogue’ to be published by the Iqbal Academy, Lahore in 2009, for discussion of the possibility of an esoteric re-valorisation of religious exclusivism.

²³ Martin Lings, *What is Sufism?* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1975), pp. 22-23.

²⁴ Ibn ‘Arabi, *The Tarjuman al-Ashwaq—A Collection of Mystical Odes* (tr. R.A. Nicholson), (London: Theosophical Publishing House, 1978), p. 52.

²⁵ Ibid., p.69.

²⁶ *Mathnawi*, II, 1770. The following line from Rumi’s *Diwan-i Shams al-Din Tabrizi* is also to be noted here: ‘O lovers! The religion of love is not found in Islam alone.’ Quoted by Ashk Dahlen, ‘Transcendent Hermeneutics of Supreme Love: Rumi’s Concept of Mystical Appropriation’ in *Orientalia Suecana* (vol. 52, Uppsala, 2003).

²⁷ *Discourses of Rumi* (tr. A.J. Arberry) (London: John Murray, 1961), pp. 135-136.

²⁸ From his review of “The Decline of Eastern Christianity Under Islam: From Jihad to Dhimmitude” by Bat Ye’or in *First Things*, no. 76, October 1997, p.93.