

## **Interfaith Dialogue and Salvation: Is there one Heaven in our Future?**

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Much of Interfaith Dialogue between Jews, Christians and Muslims rightly concerns those things they have in common. They do all claim to profess belief in the same one God. They all believe that this one God created all things, including human beings in His own likeness, and that there will be a Last Judgment for which all peoples will be held accountable for their beliefs and actions. The scope of this paper is to study how all three great Abrahamic religions understand salvation or life after death, the concept of heaven or paradise with the alternative concept of hell.

While it seems commendable, even civilized, for modern educated people to think that a belief in the same God should result in the belief that all peoples who believe in that God would find themselves in the same heaven, this has not been our history, nor is it the teaching of many believers in the God of Abraham today. While this should not be a cause for despair, it must be remembered that for Judaism, Christianity and Islam, the concept of who can be saved and thus in heaven is a limiting and nuanced question. Not all Jews even believe that there is life after death and, for those who do, whether non-Jews are in paradise is often not part of the question. Christianity has struggled with the classic question, “Is there salvation outside the Church?”, the famous dictum of Boniface VIII, taken from Cyprian of Carthage, “*Extra ecclesiam nulla salus*”.<sup>1</sup> How non-Christians can be saved is a topic of great contemporary interest, for which there are various theological understandings. While Islam speaks with some respect for the “Peoples of the Book”, how believers have been and are described in their writings would seem to leave Jews and Christians out of paradise. Our study will be to peruse both the history and the texts of these three religions in search of a clearer understanding of the question of salvation.

I will begin with Christianity since it is my faith and I speak as a committed Catholic priest and educator. The first statement that must be made is that for the early Church, the question of whether non-Christians, even Jews, would be saved and be part of the heaven to come, was a non question.<sup>2</sup> It simply was beyond the scope of their concerns. It was not that they were unconcerned about those who had not heard the Word, they took the great commission to preach to all nations seriously (Matthew 28), or that judgment was not real, but that they believed that judgment was God’s prerogative. The Christian would be judged on how they lived their life. God alone would deal with the others. Likewise, it was not that Christianity was unconcerned with the rest of the then known world. In fact, one of the most beautiful images of the Christian in the world comes from the famous second century letter to Diognetus which speaks of Christians being to the world as the soul is to the body. Justin writes of the Word as implanted in the whole human race. What was most helpful for the early Church was its understanding of Greek philosophy and how certain philosophical concepts could be used to explain Christian ideas, thus making them much more acceptable to a Greco-Roman world. While not all church leaders were as friendly to philosophy, it continues to be a major question, then as now; namely, whether the use of non-Christian concepts and terms can be helpful or harmful to Christian teachings as revealed in the Scriptures.

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<sup>1</sup> Much of what follows in the discussion of this question can be found in Francis Sullivan, *Salvation Outside the Church?*, Paulist Press, 1992.

<sup>2</sup> Much of this section comes from my upcoming book on the history of Evangelization.



A second point reminds us that, while from the earliest days of the Church there were groups labeled as “heretical”, Judaisers, Gnostics, etc., it was not until the Church began to evangelize peoples outside the confines of the Roman Empire, beginning with the Goths in the third century, that it became common practice to judge people who were not seen as orthodox Christians as worthy of damnation. This was followed by the growth of Christianity as the power of the post-Constantine Roman world, a power which grew in its judgment of Arian Christianity as heretical, as well as its judgment of Judaism as worthy of oppression. The theological bottom line was that only faith in Jesus Christ as Savior could bring salvation. Once the Gospel was preached, people had a clear choice.

A third point concerns the concept of faith as a gift from God, and the mystery that seemingly some, or even many, people do not have such a gift. While great thinkers like Augustine, in his *De doctrina christiana*, could write about teaching the faith based on a method of persuasion and sweetness, the pre-modern mind had no concept of atheism, much less agnosticism. One either believed or was guilty of the consequences.

A fourth issue revolves around the concept of crusade, of one people attacking another because of their belief, with the added concept that salvation might come to those who fight well or even die for the cause.<sup>3</sup> While the Catholic Church has much to answer for in terms of the atrocities perpetrated in the name of the Crusades,<sup>4</sup> it must also be stated that much of the idea of a crusade against the Muslims came from the fact that Islam saw its destiny in the spread of the true religion by means of war. When the spread of Islam was finally halted in Europe, it was easy for Christians to respond against Islam in the very same way. From 711, the year that Islam entered Spain, until the final repulsion of all Muslims from Spain in 1492, it was the concept of the Reconquista which colored the rationale underlying the crusades. What is also important to remember is that the Reconquista, as well as the Crusades, made little distinction between Muslims, Jews, heretics, Eastern Christians or any other group that was defined as different than Western Christianity. Whoever did not believe as the dominate group believed was worthy of attack and judgment here and now. While one can express horror that some people believed in such a concept; that is, a war can be seen as holy because of its intent, this concept is still very real in the mentality of some world, and some religious, leaders today. I will venture to suggest that a major part of this warlike mentality is a vestige of the tribal mentalities which dominated societies before the modern Western concept of a multi-ethnic society came about. This mentality is very much alive and well in many of the world’s tribes, ethnic groups and religious sects. The present situation of religious and ethnic strife can not be understood outside of the tribal issues which define them. Likewise, any future peace must take these issues into account.

A fifth point is needed to clarify some contemporary Christian issues of salvation and the role that both the Catholic Church and Jesus Christ might play. For many American Christians, who would describe themselves as Biblical or Evangelical Christians, the concept that non-Christians could be saved is beyond their understanding. One must accept Jesus Christ as their personal savior to be saved. There is no place in heaven for Jews, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, Mormons or any other group. Some even question if Catholics can hope for salvation. Catholics have a similar history. Up until most recently, Catholics had doubts that Protestants could be saved as they were considered schismatics. Likewise Catholics were certain that non-Christians needed baptism for salvation. True, there was the history of a theology of baptism by desire and

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<sup>3</sup> Much of this discussion comes from Joseph O’Callaghan, *Reconquest and Crusade in Medieval Spain*, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003.

<sup>4</sup> See Luigi Accattoli, *When a Pope asks forgiveness: the mea culpa’s of John Paul II*, Pauline Books, 1998.



baptism by blood, but for the normal person, once Jesus was known and preached, judgment was to be expected. One example of recent interest is the case of Fr. Leonard Feeney, a Jesuit from Massachusetts, who in the 1940's and 50's taught that only Catholics could be saved.<sup>5</sup> Both the local bishop, Archbishop Richard Cushing, and then the Vatican condemned this thesis in 1949. He was called to Rome before Pope Pius XII in 1953 but he refused to recant his belief and was thusly excommunicated.

The modern history of the Catholic Church is shaped by the teachings of the Second Vatican Council, 1962-65. While its teachings did not come out of thin air, there was a history and at least a scholarly preparation for its declarations, much of its theology concerning the salvation of those outside the Church is still being clarified. The passage of greatest interest is The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, 16. Here are the significant passages.

Those who have not yet received the gospel are related in various ways to the people of God. In the first place there is the people to whom the covenants and the promises were given....(the Jews). But the plan of salvation also includes those who acknowledge the creator. In the first place among these there are the Muslims....Nor is God himself far distant from those who in shadows and images seek the unknown God....Those also can attain to everlasting salvation who through no fault of their own do not know the gospel of Christ or his church, yet sincerely seek God....Nor does divine providence deny the help necessary for salvation to those who, without blame on their part, have not yet arrived at an explicit knowledge of God, but who strive to live a good life, thanks to his grace.

These passages contend that the covenant with the Jews is still viable and that Jews are still part of the plan of God. Muslims are likewise included in this plan for they acknowledge the creator. Those who seek the unknown God in shadows and images seem to include the many Eastern religions. Those who still have not heard the gospel will be judged by the sincerity of their seeking. Finally, those who have not explicit knowledge, perhaps agnostics, but live a good life have hope of salvation.

Yet the Second Vatican Council reaffirmed that, for Catholics, Jesus Christ is the sole savior of all peoples. This was clearly stated in the Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions, *Nostra Aetate* 2.

The Catholic Church rejects nothing of what is true and holy in these religions. She has a high regard for the manner of life and conduct, the precepts and doctrines which, although differing in many ways from her own teaching, nevertheless often reflect a ray of that truth which enlightens all people. Yet she proclaims and is in duty bound to proclaim without fail, Christ who is the way, the truth and the life.

How these religions have truth and yet Christ is the only savior are part of the ongoing development of the perceived tensions between salvation and evangelization. This is still a major part of the agenda of the Catholic Church today. Many of the recent authors whom the

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<sup>5</sup> See the beginning of Sullivan's *Salvation Outside the Church?*, pp. 1-4, and Richard Hogan, *Dissent from the Creed*, Our Sunday Visitor, 2001, pp. 299-304.



Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith, led by the then Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, have found suspect deal with this issue.<sup>6</sup> The most significant text from this congregation is the Declaration *Dominus Iesus* from 2000 which speaks of the relationship between the unique mediation of Jesus in evangelization and other religions. While confirming that unique mediation of Jesus, it speaks of the content of this mediation as a participated mediation, and that this content needs to be explored further.

The Second Vatican Council, in fact, has stated that: “the unique mediation of the Redeemer does not exclude, but rather gives rise to a manifold cooperation which is but a participation in this one source” (*Lumen Gentium* 62). The content of this participated mediation should be explored more deeply, but must remain always consistent with the principle of Christ’s unique mediation. (*Dominus Iesus* 14)

It is this further exploration that is so central to my study and my participation in this roundtable discussion. From my perspective, the ability to understand the concept of God and salvation as realities beyond the text, a metaphysics common to the practices of the early Christian Church which enabled them to see the Logos or Word as a transcendent reality greater than the words in the revealed text, is most helpful when discussing texts that differ, contradict or seem to portray God or religion as inhumane. Such a metaphysics should also enable us to avoid the pitfalls of textual literalism or religious fundamentalism.

Turning to Judaism, the first statement that needs to be made is that, like Christianity and Islam, there are various theological schools and traditions.<sup>7</sup> Among these, evident in both the Christian Scriptures from the time of Jesus and in the Jewish Talmud, we find the Sadducees who rejected the doctrine of the resurrection of the dead, mainly because it could not be found explicitly stated in the Pentateuch. Further there were the schools of Hillel and Shammai who believed in life after death but differed, amongst other things, on how the body would be reformed in the hereafter.

Of great interest to our discussion is the question whether Gentiles will share in the hereafter, to which there are differing opinions. While some would assign the Gentiles a place among the wicked who forget God, quoting Psalm 9:17, “The wicked shall return to the nether world, even all the nations that forget God”, others would maintain that “there are righteous people among the nations of the world who do have a portion in the world to come”.<sup>8</sup> This tradition in Judaism of accepting some who act justly into heaven is part of the great history of the Noahide or Noachide laws.<sup>9</sup>

While these laws predate the Talmud, the major study of these Noahide laws begins with the Babylonian Talmudic legal discussion of who was a resident-alien, the minimal requirements for citizenship in a Jewish state. Obviously this harkens back to pre-exilic times when Israel was

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<sup>6</sup> For example the appendix of the notification from the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith in Jacques Dupuis, *Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism*, Orbis Books, 2001.

<sup>7</sup> Much of this discussion is taken from Abraham Cohen, *Everyman’s Talmud*, Schocken Books, 1949, reprint 1995, pp. 346-389.

<sup>8</sup> Tosefta Sanhedrin 13:2, text in Jacob Neusner, “Theological Foundations of Tolerance in Classical Judaism”, *Gregorianum* 89, 1 (2008), p. 53. Also Cohen, p. 369.

<sup>9</sup> What follows is taken from Steven Schwarzschild, “Do Noachites Have to Believe in Revelation?”, *The Jewish Quarterly Review*, New Series, vol. 52, 4 (1962), pp. 297-308 and David Novak, *Jewish-Christian Dialogue*, Oxford, 1989, pp. 26-41.



a sovereign country, but such discussions take on unique significance when Jews are resident-alien themselves. These requirements, as codified by the law, would include the acceptance of the seven Noahide laws; namely, 1) the law of adjudication or setting up courts that justly enforce social laws, 2) the law prohibiting idolatry, 3) the law prohibiting blasphemy, 4) the law prohibiting sexual immorality, 5) the law prohibiting bloodshed or murder, 6) the law prohibiting robbery, and 7) the law prohibiting the eating of a limb torn from a living animal. In general these seven laws were understood under the three cardinal prohibitions of idolatry, sexual immorality (incest, homosexuality, adultery and bestiality), and bloodshed. The underlying issue which concerned these Jewish scholars, and our discussion today, is whether these laws were a matter of revelation in the Torah or something inherent in human nature, the same nature which made the revelation of the Torah possible.<sup>10</sup> In other words, to be saved, must one follow the revelation of the Torah or can they follow the human wisdom of their heart and be judged accordingly?

With the rise of Christianity, the question for scholars of the Talmud became whether or not Christianity was form of idolatry. Part of the discussion turned on the idea that only Israel had a covenantal relationship with God. Thus only Jews could be guilty of idolatry. The nations of the world, being outside this covenant, are not wholly separated from God and are thereby justified in approaching God through visible intermediaries.<sup>11</sup> This covers general polytheism and comes out of a Neoplatonic metaphysics of the oneness of God and his accessibility to all. In this sense, Christianity could be part of the worship of the One God.

However, such a view was not so simply held. Maimonides is an excellent example of a very complex thinker.<sup>12</sup> In his early commentary, *Abodah Zarah*, he calls Christians idolaters because they make Jesus to be the Messiah, and he calls Christian churches houses of idolatry. He proceeds in *The Guide of the Perplexed* to find less fault with Islam than with Christianity because of the monotheism of Islam. However in the *Mishneh Torah*, Maimonides writes that both the words of Jesus of Nazareth and the words of the Arab Mohammad prepare for the messiah yet to come for the Jews. It is his writings in the "Laws of the Kings" in the *Mishneh Torah* that has caused the most controversy. After writing of the uniqueness of the revelation of the Torah to the Jews, Maimonides states one who does not wish to be converted must not be forced to accept the Torah. Rather, all human beings are compelled to accept the laws commanded of Noah and his descendents. Whoever does not accept these laws shall be killed.<sup>13</sup> Then the discussion moved to the question of the role of revelation and reason. Maimonides writes that if anyone accepts these laws because they are written in the Torah, they have a share in the world to come. If they practice these laws based on reason, they will not.<sup>14</sup> This teaching is upheld in the Mishnah of R. Eliezar where those who follow these laws based on their own intellectual cogitations, and not revelation, will have their reward limited to this world.<sup>15</sup>

One further issue is the concept of the oneness of the people of God, the oneness of Israel. Those gentiles who follow the Noahide laws and who can be saved are saved by entering into the concept or category of Israel; that is, they will enter Israel either now or later as people who worship the one and only God.<sup>16</sup> Salvation is based on living a just life and accepting the

<sup>10</sup> Novak, p. 35.

<sup>11</sup> Novak, p. 41.

<sup>12</sup> Novak, pp. 57-64.

<sup>13</sup> Schwarzschild, pp. 298-9.

<sup>14</sup> Schwarzschild, p. 301.

<sup>15</sup> Schwarzschild, p. 306.

<sup>16</sup> Neusner, pp. 64-5.



one God. Likewise, there is only one heaven, the heaven where only the Israelites find life, a salvation based on judgment.

This judgment is real for all peoples.<sup>17</sup> Especially Gentile nations who oppress God's elect will have a day of reckoning. There will be two judgments, one for each individual and one for the various peoples. In fact the judgments of the Roman people and the people of Persia are mentioned in tandem, one after the other, in the Talmud. While every human being will be judged, the Israelites, as recipients of the Torah, will have a greater responsibility.

Judgment also concerns the person as both a body and a soul. This is part of the Greco-Roman or Hellenistic concept of the person as a soul in a body. The question asked in the Talmud is whether the body and soul are punished in the same way. Part of the discussion involved a rather unique eschatological concept of a 12 month period of punishment during which the body is in Gehinnom, perhaps better known as Gehenna, and the soul ascends and descends between heaven and that nether world. This notion of 12 months is based the tradition that the punishment of the wicked would only last for a year. After this time the body will cease to exist. The school of Shammai further clarifies that there are three classes of people after judgment, the perfectly righteous, the completely wicked, and average people. The average people are those who will have a year of purification, ascending and descending between the two worlds. The final issue concerned the wicked and whether they would suffer eternal punishment or not. Some taught that the wicked would be there generation on generation, but others thought this was incompatible with Divine mercy.

Cosmologically, Gehinnom is divided into seven stories or divisions,<sup>18</sup> with one's wickedness determining the level. Further, the severities of Gehinnom may be mitigated by various means, the most interesting being circumcision. One tradition has Abraham sitting at the entrance of Gehinnom preventing any Israelite from descending into it. But if one has sinned unduly, Abraham takes the foreskin of children who died before circumcision and undoes the circumcision of such wicked Jews. On the other hand, the recitation of common prayers like the Shema and the study of the Torah will remit punishment. In essence, the fire of Gehinnom will have no power over a practicing Israelite.

Finally, the Garden of Eden also had seven stories with the more righteous in the higher levels. One characteristic of paradise is that those who suffered while on earth will now find much enjoyment in heaven. There are also seven classes of the righteous. Of interest are the martyrs who are the first class, penitents who are the fifth class, the unmarried who are the sixth class, and the poor who are the seventh class. But in all cases, the righteous are those who followed at least the spirit of the Law.

Now we turn to Islam, a religion, that while sharing much with Judaism and Christianity, is perhaps more different than similar to these. First of all, while all three have strong theologies declaring the words of their scriptures as divinely inspired, for Muslims Allah dictated every word of the Qur'an to the Prophet Muhammad through the angel Gabriel, and further, the Qur'an is a perfect copy of the eternal book, the umm al-kitab, or Mother of the Book, that existed forever with Allah.<sup>19</sup> Thus, for Muslims, the actual Arabic text is the sacred word of God which can not, or should not, ever be translated into another language. There are several scholarly

<sup>17</sup> What follows is found in Cohen, pp. 375-8.

<sup>18</sup> The Greco-Roman world had levels, generally seven, in heaven. Paul mentions he was in the third heaven in II Corinthians 12:2. However, both Dante and Milton had nine levels in heaven and hell.

<sup>19</sup> Much of what follows is from Robert Spencer, *The Truth about Muhammad*, Regnery Publishing, 2006.



issues here.<sup>20</sup> The first is that the definitive text of the Qur'an can not be dated before the ninth century. Secondly, classical Arabic was unpointed; it lacked the dots that distinguish many letters, allowing for many variant readings. Thirdly, so much of the Qur'an consists of variations of great parts of the Hebrew Scriptures, variations which most likely have their origin in the various Jewish and Christian peoples in which Islam found itself. Finally, and most important for our study, the Western philosophical concept of "truth" existing beyond the text and a reality able to be in dialogue with other cultures is foreign to Islam. For Islam there is only the sacred text of the Qur'an. Thus the Qur'an and the second major text for Islamic study, the Hadith, or traditions of the Prophet Muhammad, are the major sources for our study.

The Qur'an was written down after Muhammad died, in a final form perhaps two centuries later. It contains 114 Surahs, or chapters, ordered according to length, with the longest Surah first and the shortest Surah last. This is problematic because there is no temporal or historical connection between Surahs as printed. However, the major issue is that historically the early Surahs from the time when Muhammad was beginning his spiritual mission in Mecca are quite different in tone from the Surahs which come from the time when the Prophet was beginning his political mission in Medina. This change was brought about by the famous Hijra or flight from Mecca to Medina in 622 and accounts for the more tolerant verses from the first period, when Muhammad had need to live in peace with his neighbors, and the more war-like verses from the second period, when he began his mission to make Arabia a Muslim nation. For example, Surah 109, revealed at Mecca, entitled the Disbelievers, contains the famous tolerant "unto you your religion, and unto me my religion". This can be compared with Surah 2:193, revealed at Medina, "And fight them until persecution is no more, and religion is for Allah".<sup>21</sup>

In the Qur'an, the most tolerant statement of salvation for the "Peoples of the Book" is found in 2:62. "Lo! those who believe (in that which is revealed unto Thee, Muhammad, and those who are Jews, and Christians, and Sabeans (perhaps Zoroastrians)— whoever believeth in Allah, and the Last Day and doeth right—surely their reward is with their Lord". However, belief in Allah is not exactly the same as belief in the Christian God or the Jewish God. 2:256 states, "There is no compulsion in religion. The right direction is henceforth distinct from error. And he who rejecteth false deities and believeth in Allah hath grasped a firm handhold which will never break". This Surah may just refer to pagans. However, Surah 9:30 deals clearly with the Christian belief in Jesus as the son of God and the Jewish notion of some prophets or priests being called sons of God. "And the Jews say: Ezra is the son of Allah, and the Christians say: The Messiah is the son of Allah. That is their saying with their mouths. They imitate the saying of those who disbelieved of old. Allah (Himself) fighteth against them. How perverse are they". This seems to limit salvation for People of the Book to those who accept Allah as the Allah of Muhammad. Belief that Allah had any sons denies true belief and most likely any hope of paradise.

Turning to the Hadith<sup>22</sup>, we find the theme of much feasting in paradise. One Hadith describes the destruction of the earth which will be turned into a single loaf of bread for all the people of paradise (6707). Paradise has not only a hierarchy of levels, but those in the lower

<sup>20</sup> See Ibn Warraq, *The Origins of the Koran*, Prometheus Books, 1998 where, in his introduction, pp. 9-35, he summarizes the studies of John Wansbrough, *Quranic Studies: Sources and Methods of Scriptural Interpretation*, Oxford, 1977.

<sup>21</sup> Qur'anic quotes from the translation by Muhammad Marmaduke Pickthall.

<sup>22</sup> An excellent short version of the Hadith can be found in Ram Swarup, *Understanding the Hadith: the Sacred Traditions of Islam*, Prometheus Books, 2002, especially pp. 200-16.



levels will be able to look up to the upper levels as one would see the planets in the sky (6796). There are many verses in the Qur'an which speak of many virgins in Paradise for those who are saved.<sup>23</sup> These virgins are all beautiful, with beautiful brown eyes, but the common saying that those who enter Paradise will find 72 virgins is not found in the Qur'an. However, one commentator in the Hadith, Abu Sa'id, wrote "the least amongst the people of Paradise shall have eighty thousand slaves, and seventy-two women".<sup>24</sup> Abu Huraira writes of mansions with 70 houses of rubies, each house with 70 couches, and each with a maid-slave. These texts may account for such a number. However there is a Hadith which says that each believer will have only two spouses in paradise (6797). What is curious is that the Hadith also says that there are more women in hell than in paradise (6595)! Plus there seems to be a tendency to exponentially exaggerate the numbers of both slaves and virgins. Abdullah b. Umar writes that every inhabitant of paradise will have 500 houris or virgins, 4000 virgins and 8000 women who have known men, and each will have the strength to have intercourse with them all!

Judgment day will bring two kinds of reckoning, an easy one for believers whose faults Allah wants to overlook, and a thorough one for unbelievers (6874). What is curious is that all Muslims must pass through Hell. Surah 19:71 states "There is not one of you but shall approach it (Hell). That is a fixed ordinance of thy Lord". But they will not stay there. Jews and Christians will suffer in hell not only for their own unbelief but they will act as proxies for any Muslims who happen to be sent there. "There would come people amongst the Muslim on the Day of Resurrection with as heavy sins as a mountain, and Allah would forgive them and he would place in their stead the Jews and the Christians" (6668).<sup>25</sup> Allah does not exactly forgive the sins of believers but visits their sins on unbelievers. "When it will be the Day of Resurrection Allah would deliver to every Muslim a Jew or a Christian and say: That is your rescue form Hell-Fire" (6665). Thus salvation can come to Muslims by sending Christians and Jews in their place to Hell. In fact there are seven regions of Hell. There is for Christians the blazing fire of Laza, which leaves nothing unconsumed, for Jews there is the more intense fire of Hutamah. Further Sa'ir is for the Sabians, Saqar for the Magi, Jahim for idolaters, and Maqiyah for the hypocrites.<sup>26</sup>

Finally there is the issue of Jihad and its relationship to those who enter paradise. Jihad is a difficult term to translate. It means literally to "strive" or seek the will of Allah in spreading Islam.<sup>27</sup> The Qur'anic verses which are most helpful are 4:92-95, which prohibits the killing of believers or the seeking of selfish wealth. However it is an active striving which rewards one who strives harder with a higher place in paradise.

"It is not for a believer to kill a believer unless (it be) by mistake" (92). "Whoso slayeth a believer of a set purpose, his reward is Hell for ever" (93). "O ye who believe! When ye go forth (to fight) in the way of Allah, be careful to discriminate, and say not unto one who offereth you peace: "Thou are not a believer," seeking the chance profits of this life (so that ye may despoil him)" (94). "Those of the believers who sit still, other than those who have a (disabling) hurt, are not on an equality with those who strive in the way of Allah with their

<sup>23</sup> 2:25, 4:13, 9:111, 10:9-10, 38:52, 47:15, 52:17-24, 55:46-76, 66:8, 76:12-22.

<sup>24</sup> Swarup, p. 208.

<sup>25</sup> Swarup, p. 18.

<sup>26</sup> Swarup, p. 212.

<sup>27</sup> An excellent study is Andrew Bostom, ed., *The Legacy of Jihad*, Prometheus Books, 2005.



wealth and lives. Allah hath conferred on those who strive with their wealth and lives a rank above the sedentary” (95).

In the Hadith we find further texts which deal with those who die in Jihad or in battle. One text, speaking of one who dies in the Way of Allah, states his body will not decay, but on the Day of Judgment, every wound will be in the same raw and bloody condition it was at death, but its smell will be that of musk (4630). Further, the Hadith states that those who are slain in Allah’s way are not dead but that the souls of martyrs live in the bodies of green birds who have their nests in the chandeliers hung from the throne of Allah. These have no other desire than to be reborn so they can fight and be slain again (4651).<sup>28</sup> Finally, concerning the size or shape of paradise, there are texts which speak of paradise as having a hundred grades or intervals as wide as the distance between earth and sky. And there is a Hadith which speaks of a hundred stages in paradise.<sup>29</sup> Paradise is thus beautiful and large.

We have seen texts that speak of killing unbelievers as meritorious for the winning of paradise while the killing of a believer is heinous and sends one to hell. But this does not seem to apply to the early Muslim heroes who engaged in wars against other Muslims,<sup>30</sup> which continues today with the inter-sectarian wars of Islam. There are two points that seem to be true. First, while there are Qur’anic texts which speak of Islam as a peaceful religion whose war-like tendencies are only defensive, this is not true of the entire textual evidence of the Qur’an nor is this true of the history of Islam.<sup>31</sup> Secondly, the human issue of tribalism can not be overlooked. One of Muhammad’s true successes was his creation of one people out of the many tribes of Arabia. This creation of a people with one language and one religion and a mission to spread the true belief in Allah is the only explanation for the rapid growth of Islam. Within two years of Muhammad’s death, Abu Bakr, the first caliph, launched the great jihad<sup>32</sup> which did not cease its momentum until stopped by the Christians at the gates of the heart of Europe.

This brings us to our specific question; namely, can there be salvation for non-Muslims? From an Islamic point of view, can there be one heaven in our future for at least the Peoples of the Book? Abdulaziz Sachedina is more hopeful than most Islamic scholars. Among his points, two are most helpful for our discussion. First there is the question of salvific supersession. Did the revelation of Allah to Muhammad supersede the previous revelations given to the Jews and Christians?<sup>33</sup> He quotes 2:213 of the Qur’an which is replete with a certain moral universality.

“Mankind were one community, and Allah sent (unto them) Prophets as bearers of good tidings and as warners, and revealed therewith the Scripture with the truth that it might judge between mankind concerning that wherein they differed. And only those unto whom (the Scripture) was given differed concerning it, after clear proofs had come unto them, through hatred one of another. And Allah by His Will guided those who believe unto the truth of that concerning which they differed. Allah guideth whom He will unto a straight path”.

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<sup>28</sup> Swarup, p. 131.

<sup>29</sup> Bostom, p. 167 and p., 317.

<sup>30</sup> Swarup, p. 214.

<sup>31</sup> See Sayyid Qutb, “Jihad in the Cause of God”, in Bostom, especially pp. 232-3.

<sup>32</sup> Bostom, p.39 and p. 104.

<sup>33</sup> Abdulaziz Sachedina, *The Islamic Roots of Democratic Pluralism*, Oxford, 2001, p. 30.



This text seems to state that Allah will continue to judge the Peoples of the Book according to their own Scriptures. While hopeful, other texts and other Islamic schools take a dimmer view. Sachedina puts the question in the context of how Allah can provide guidance toward salvation for all humanity. It is a question of divine omnipotence. Does salvation demand that humans accept the revealed guidance of the prophets, now finished in Muhammad, or is the human intellect capable of attaining godly life?<sup>34</sup> Some Islamic schools believe the former, others the later. But Sachedina, quoting 4:165, “Messengers of good cheer (Noah, Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob, Jesus, Job, Jonah, Aaron, Solomon, David and Moses—as found in 163-4) and of warning, in order that mankind might have no argument against Allah after the messengers”, posits that in order for mankind to have no argument against Allah, Allah could not “confer His revelatory truths upon one community while excluding others”.<sup>35</sup> But would most Muslims agree?

The second point Sachedina makes which is important to our study is a philosophical one. Can Islam trust the various schools of philosophical and epistemological thought, mainly western, to investigate and restate the truths found in its Qur’anic Arabic texts? Or will it lead to a certain “faithlessness that dominates, for instance, similar studies of Judaism and Christianity?”<sup>36</sup> He goes on to remind us that the transmission of even an immutable text is in the hands of humans. As he writes, “today there is no guarantee that a shared belief in the immutability and completeness of the Qur’an would eliminate differences without earnest interpretive endeavors that incorporate the wisdom of our cumulative experience of earthly life”. However, I know educated Islamic scholars, friends of mine, who do not believe Islam is in need of any dialogue with modernity. The wisdom of the seventh century of the Qur’an is perfect and ideal. Their acceptance of the possibility of my salvation is based on our mutual respect and in their belief that salvation is up to Allah. He will save whom He will.

With what can we conclude? Concerning the salvation of peoples outside their group, all three Abrahamic religions have both a universalistic and an exclusionary strain. While it is helpful to remind ourselves of the universalistic schools of thought, it seems far from evident that these schools dominate or even form part of an object of prayerful seeking. Part of the issue concerns the operative theology of inspiration. If every word of the sacred text is inspired, whether in the original or in translation, then how can one take one text, one which is more universal, over a text which is much more severe and exclusionary? Part of the western answer to such dilemmas has involved the use of philosophy. Can we understand certain truths, which lie beyond the text and which can be expressed in language different than the text, as somehow still faithful to the truth which God intended? Certainly not all schools of Christian thought, especially those who believe in the literal interpretation of biblical texts, would aspire to this positive view of modern translations or philosophy. For many Jews, and perhaps all Muslims, the manner in which the sacred texts are interpreted is an essential part of being a faithful Jew or Muslim. Can we hope that a modern dialogue would include a philosophical dialogue based on a common metaphysical and epistemological understanding of reality? Finally, a word must be said concerning our still virile tendency to act out of tribalism, defining ourselves in terms of who talks and lives as we do and as opposed to those who speak and live differently. What is the modern antidote to tribalism? Unless some insight is found here, not only is there no possibility

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<sup>34</sup> Sachedina, p. 33.

<sup>35</sup> Sachedina, p. 37.

<sup>36</sup> Sachedina, p. 46.



of imaging one heaven for us all, but also there is no possibility of living in peace here and now. May mercy be the foundation of our thinking and living.

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