

Religious Exclusivism and the Salvation of the Majority: An Islamic Approach

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Abstract

Islam adheres to a specific form of exclusivism wherein it asserts that the only religion that is true and offers salvation is Islam. However, those who are unable to discover the true religion will not be punished; rather, they will either be retested or granted entry into Heaven based on their good deeds. According to this interpretation of Islamic exclusivism, the majority of people following other religions may not be deprived of salvation, as it appears that most people are unable to find the truth. Even among the minority of people who can find the true religion but either do not seek it or find it and subsequently reject it, there is a possibility that after enduring limited torment in Hell, they may be saved.

Keywords: religious exclusivism, religious inclusivism, religious pluralism, salvation, Hell

1. Introduction

Regarding the relationship between different religious beliefs and the possibility of salvation, there are three views: exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism. Although these terms are defined in various ways, they can be specified for the purpose of this article as follows:

A: Pluralism holds, first, that all religions are true and equal in centrally valuable respects. Secondly, all religions provide salvation for human beings.

B: Inclusivism maintains, first, that although all religions may partially reveal the truth, the complete truth can be found only in one religion. Second, all religions can provide a means of salvation for human beings, with one religion potentially bringing salvation more perfectly.

C: Exclusivism holds, first, that only one religion is true and must be followed. Second, the true religion is the only one that can provide salvation for human beings. Salvation, in this context, encompasses liberation from the torments of Hell or any other form of punishment, as well as the attainment of entry into Heaven or any other form of ultimate felicity.

In Islamic theology, a unique form of religious exclusivism has been acknowledged, which bears resemblance, to some extent, to certain interpretations of inclusivism. In this article, my primary aim is to elucidate this perspective embraced by Muslim theologians and demonstrate its reasonableness. Additionally, I address the question of whether this exclusivism condemns the majority of people to Hell. In response to this objection, I first clarify that, according to the Islamic perspective, although Islam is recognized as the only true religion for salvation, most followers of other religions are not destined for Hell due to their inability to find the truth. Furthermore, I elaborate on the possibility that even the minority destined for Hell will attain salvation. Of course, this article only examines the salvation of the majority from the perspective of belief and doctrine. The relationship between sin/evil deeds and the salvation of either the majority or the minority falls outside the scope of this study.

The novelty of this article lies in three main respects. First, it demonstrates that exclusivism does not necessarily entail the eternal exclusion of the majority of human beings from salvation. Second, in contrast to the view that the consignment of the majority to Hell is compatible with the predominance of good over evil and with the divine attributes, this study argues that, on Shi'a premises, the final abode of the majority in paradise is in fact more consistent with Shi'a theological foundations. Third, it contends that the doctrine of the everlasting abode of obstinate unbelievers can establish, at most, the deservedness of

eternal punishment but not its necessity, for the possibility of divine pardon always remains open.

2. Religious Exclusivism in Islamic Theology

Religious exclusivism is typically defined as the belief that only one religion is true, and that specific religion can only lead to salvation. Muslim theologians have embraced this exclusivism, but they have incorporated elements that bring it closer to inclusivism. Before delving into this perspective, it is essential to elucidate the meaning and arguments supporting Islamic exclusivism.

When a Muslim exclusivist asserts that only Islam is true, it can be explained in two ways:

1. The first explanation contends that there is no true belief in other religions; all beliefs in other religions are deemed false.

However, the drawback of this assertion becomes apparent when considering that all religions share commonalities, and each may encompass some true beliefs. Even if someone were to create a new religion and falsely claim prophethood, while the religion itself is false, its content might still include accurate beliefs about God, the afterlife, morality, and more.

2. The second explanation, which can be advocated, posits that although some true beliefs exist in other religions, the only religion that must be adhered to as the true one is Islam. According to this view, each new religion revealed by God completes the preceding one, and God ordains all people to embrace only the most recent religion while abandoning previous ones in the new era.

Muslim theologians have accepted this second interpretation. They argue that not only is Islam the sole true religion but it is also the only religion that offers salvation for human beings.

The Prophet of Islam invited people to abandon their previous religions and embrace Islam. This invitation by the Prophet of Islam does not simply indicate that Islam is more complete than the previous ones, as inclusivists maintain. Instead, it demonstrates that obedience to God's commands can be achieved only through Islam. Although other religions may contain some true beliefs, submission to God's commands can be accomplished only through Islam. Therefore, the Qur'an explicitly states that the condition for entering Heaven is faith in Islam: *"And if only the People of the Scripture had believed and feared Allāh, We would have removed from them their misdeeds and admitted them to Gardens of Pleasure"* (Qur'an 5:65)

Additionally, the Qur'an promises that if followers of other religions do not believe in Islam, they will be punished:

O you who were given the Book! Believe in what We have sent down confirming what is with you, before We blot out the faces and turn them backwards, or curse them as We cursed the People of the Sabbath, and Allah's command is bound to be fulfilled (Qur'ān 4:47)

Religious pluralists have provided arguments to refute exclusivism, all of which can be replied to by the principle of Islamic theology. The main arguments of opponents of religious exclusivism and their corresponding responses, according to Islamic theology, are as follows:

1. Religious pluralists hold that although the reality of God is unknown to human beings, they can attempt to know God through religious experience. Religions are human endeavors to find God, though no religion can fully grasp His reality. Religious experiences are culturally conditioned and shaped by the particular religious traditions in which they occur. Therefore, different religious traditions offer valid but culturally distinct paths to the ultimate reality or the Divine (Hick, 1985).

Muslim theologians disagree with the pluralistic position, holding that it is inaccurate to assert that God is unknown to human beings, as there are various rational arguments demonstrating the divine attributes of perfection and the divine nature (A. Al-Hilli, 1992; M. Al-Hilli, 1994). While there may be differences regarding certain details of God's attributes, as in any other subject, the nature of God's essence, to a large extent, can be understood through rational arguments.

Given that God's perfection necessitates wisdom, His wisdom entails the sending of prophets to guide people. Religions that represent solely human attempts to find God are not true; only a religion revealed infallibly by God can be considered true. Religions revealed by God are not influenced by cultural conditions; rather, they constitute pure revelations of God, infallible in their content. God's wisdom dictates that He does not abandon His creatures but guides them through infallible revelation (A. Al-Hilli, 1992). If prophets were to err in receiving God's revelation, it would contradict divine perfection. Therefore, religions, if indeed sent by God, convey the pure and infallible message of God.

2. Religious pluralists maintain that God desires that everyone knows, loves, and worships Him. This requires that God does not limit His revelation to a particular time, person, or community, but extends it to different cultures and times through different religions. Different religions help human beings to communicate with God in different forms, and this diversity of religions and revelation is more compatible with God's desire (Peterson et al., 2013).

Muslim theologians can respond that, according to Islamic narrations, at the time of prophets, their message was not limited to a specific time, person, or community. It is believed that, according to some Islamic narrations, God has sent either 124,000 or 8,000 prophets to different people in various communities (Majlesi, 1983). However, after the emergence of Islam, which is considered the most complete religion encompassing all the needs of human beings until Judgment Day, God decreed it to be the final religion to be followed by all people worldwide. It is reasonable to assert that God desires to be loved and worshiped through the most complete religion at this time, rather than through incomplete religions that are not considered revelations from God.

3. Religious pluralists contend that there is no way to determine which religion is true. All religions claim to be true, and there is no definitive method to ascertain the truth or falsehood of one religion over another (Byrne, 2020).

However, according to Islamic theology, there is a method to discern the true religion. Initially, religions devised by humans and not revealed by God must be deemed false, since the truth and infallibility of God's message necessitate divine revelation through prophets. Therefore, religions such as Hinduism and Buddhism, lacking a divine prophet, are considered untrue.

In the subsequent phase, among the religions revealed by God, each new religion calls upon people to forsake the previous one and embrace the new revelation. Consequently, although Judaism and Christianity were deemed true religions in their respective eras, with the emergence of Islam, they are no longer to be followed. Islam, being the new religion of God, beckons people to embrace it, signaling the end of the era of preceding religions.

In the final stage, Islam asserts itself as the religion revealed by God, proclaiming its finality and completeness (Qur'ān 33:40). Consequently, all religions following Islam are also considered false and unworthy of adherence.

Considering the aforementioned points, Muslims maintain that anyone can ascertain Islam as the only true religion.

4. Pluralists assert that it promotes tolerance and understanding among different religious groups. By recognizing the validity of multiple belief systems, it encourages people to engage in dialogue rather than conflict. If we accept that no religion is superior to others, it leads to religious tolerance (Quinn, 2001).

The above argument could be refuted by considering that epistemological exclusivism does not necessarily lead to conflict among religions. Rather, Islam, by considering itself the only true

religion, instructs Muslims to treat the followers of other religions with good manners and loving behavior. The Prophet of Islam commanded many treaties with the followers of other religions, and his loving behavior with them attracted many to Islam. The following verses of the Qur'an illustrate this:

"Thus it is due to mercy from Allah that you deal with them gently, and had you been rough, hard-hearted, they would certainly have dispersed from around you" (Qur'an 3:159).

"We did not send you but as a mercy to all the nations" (Qur'an 21:107).

In the above verse, the mercy of the Prophet has not been limited to Muslims; rather it has been extended to all nations.

3. The Difference between the Followers of other Religions based on Islamic Exclusivism

Though Islamic teachings advocate religious exclusivism, this exclusivism has a condition, making it close to inclusivism. Islam distinguishes two categories of people:

A: Ignorant people who lack the ability to find the truth, either because they do not have access to the true religion or because, despite having access, they lack the capability to uncover the facts.

B: Guilty people, either because they do not actively seek the truth or because they are aware of it but choose to deny it.

If someone knows the true religion but denies accepting it, or if they do not know the true religion due to a deliberate neglect of finding it, they deserve to be deprived of salvation. However, if one has no access to the ways of finding the true religion, or has access but is unable to discover it, they do not deserve to be deprived of salvation.

Distinguishing between these two groups is a rational principle accepted in Islam, derived from the perfect attributes of God. The wisdom and justice of God entail that He does not deprive those unable to find the truth of salvation. If someone is deprived of salvation due to their inability to find the truth, it contradicts divine justice and wisdom.

Some Muslim philosophers have suggested that when considering ordinary people, apparently, the majority adhere to a particular religion without entertaining the idea that it may be false. They are certain of the validity of their religion and the invalidity of all others. Similarly, most ordinary people who follow the true religion are confident in the validity of their beliefs and the invalidity of all other religions, with no doubt arising from indoctrination and from growing up in the environment of the true religion. The same holds for those following a

false religion. There is no difference between them in this regard. Therefore, individuals who are unable to identify the true religion—as they never consider the possibility that their own religion is false—should not be deemed disobedient or sinful. The punishment for following that religion is not in line with divine justice. Thus, it could be asserted that since most people do not think to the possibility that their religion may be false, their adherence to a false religion is not intentional and they are not guilty. Even some scholars of other religions could not be considered guilty; thus, they will not be punished (Khomeini, 1989).

This verse of the Qur'an indicates those who are unable to find the truth: *"Except the weak from among the men and the children who have not in their power the means nor can they find a way. So these, it may be, Allah will pardon them, and Allah is Pardoning, Forgiving"* (Qur'an 4:98-99).

This Qur'anic verse refers to those who are unable to find the truth. The Qur'an identifies these individuals as "*al-Mustad'af*," meaning the weak people who cannot find the truth. The Qur'an asserts that they will not be punished, as they are unable to find the truth.

Some Islamic narrations elucidate the meaning of this verse clearly. Imam Baqir (peace be upon him) said about the verse:

The weak (*al-Mustad'af*) is the one who neither has the ability to become a disbeliever nor finds the path of faith to become a believer. The responsibility has been lifted from children and men and women whose intellect and thoughts are as small as children (Ibn-Babawayh, 1982, p. 206).

Imam Baqir (peace be upon him) also commented on this verse: "They do not understand the reasoning that leads to disbelief, nor do they find the correct path to enter the realm of faith. Therefore, they do not benefit from disbelief nor faith" (Al-Hawāzī, 1994, p. 538).

This verse of the Qur'an, along with rational arguments considering the attributes of God's perfection, asserts that individuals should not be punished for their inability to find the truth. However, there are various ideas regarding their fate. The aforementioned verse of the Qur'an suggests that God's mercy may encompass them. Some Islamic narrations also suggest the possibility that divine mercy will cover them, and they will be rewarded solely due to their good deeds (Majlesi, 1983). However, other narrations indicate that they will undergo testing again in the afterlife (Ibn-Babawayh, 1977). If they embrace the true religion in the afterlife, they will be saved; otherwise, they will deserve Hell.

Therefore, it can be concluded that Islam differentiates between people. Islam advocates exclusivism with respect to those who can find

the truth or who know it but deny it, while it leans towards inclusivism with respect to those who cannot find the truth. However, this account of Islamic exclusivism differs from the typical accounts of inclusivism in two respects:

1. This account of exclusivism not only maintains that one religion is more complete than others but also emphasizes that only one true religion must be followed.
2. It suggests that adherents of other religions will not attain salvation if they have the capacity to discover the true religion but do not actively seek it or reject it.

4. The Immortal Punishment of the Majority in Hell

When considering the Islamic account of exclusivism, a significant objection arises concerning the immortality of the majority in Hell. Monotheistic descriptions of Hell may present three challenges:

The first challenge questions how the severity of the torment of Hell aligns with divine mercy.

The second challenge pertains to how the eternity of Hell, even for a minority, aligns with divine justice.

The third challenge questions how the mercy and wisdom of God are compatible with the exclusivist view of depriving the majority of salvation. How could it be accepted that most people, who lack faith in the true religion, deserve eternal Hell, thereby being deprived of Heaven?

Since the first and second challenges warrant separate articles, I do not address them in this article. The challenge discussed and addressed here pertains only to the third one.

One of the elements of perfection attributed to God by all monotheistic religions is benevolence toward His creatures. Exclusivists assert that only the followers of one religion, or according to some accounts, only one sect within a religion, will attain salvation, while others will be condemned to eternal Hell. The question that arises here is how the benevolence of God is reconciled with the notion of the majority of creatures entering Hell and remaining there eternally.

This argument can also be explained from the perspective of the attribute of wisdom. Divine wisdom requires that He creates a world in which its goods outweigh its evils. However, according to exclusivism, most people, due to following the false religion, will enter Hell. Though Hell is the consequence of the free actions of human beings, it does not seem compatible with divine wisdom to create a world in which evils ultimately outweigh its goods.

There are different approaches to addressing this objection. The

first response is that all people will ultimately achieve salvation and be freed from Hell.

The second response is that even if most people live eternally in Hell, it does not contradict divine attributes of perfection, as the minority entering Heaven makes it worthwhile.

The third response is that most people do not enter Hell, as they are unable to find the truth. Even the minority entering Hell have the possibility of being saved.

These three responses will be explained and analyzed as follows:

1.4. Final Salvation of All People in the Afterlife

The first response provided by some Muslim mystics and philosophers is that all people, after purification by the torments of Hell, will finally achieve salvation, albeit at a minimal level. According to this view, the pain in Hell is not eternal; rather, after a while, individuals become accustomed to the Hellfire and no longer feel pain. They remain in Hell but do not experience any pain; rather, they reach a state of relaxation, living in tranquility. Then, nothing remains of torment for them except the fear that torment may return to them in the future (Ibn-Arabi, n.d.). After becoming accustomed to Hell, they lose the feeling of pain in the same fire. Since they are never out of the fire, they do not die, but their limbs grow numb, removing from them the sensation of pain. Then, to a group among them, God grants, after some time, an imaginary bliss like what a sleeper dreams (Ibn-Arabi, n.d.).

Mulla Sadra (1981) also, in some of his books, defends the position of Ibn-Arabi, asserting that the pain in Hell is not eternal. However, in his later books, he asserts that this view is not compatible with the Qur'an; therefore, it must be avoided (Mulla Sadra, 1962).

The main arguments provided for the position of the necessity of the ultimate salvation of all people are as follows:

A: One of the Islamic principles rooted in Islamic narrations is that God's mercy has overtaken His wrath. It indicates that while God's wrath in the form of Hell may cover some people for a while, ultimately, the all-encompassing mercy of God includes all mankind, leading them to reach happiness (Ibn-Arabi, 1946).

B: God has created all human beings for a purpose that everyone must fulfill. The people of Heaven aim to reach Heaven, while the people of Hell aim either to be released from pain or to be bestowed with a new, independent blessing by God (Ibn-Arabi, 1946).

C: All human beings have been created with a divine intrinsic nature. Disbelief in God or His prophets is something accidental that occurs within our nature. Therefore, after experiencing limited pain in Hell,

this accident will be removed, and the people of Hell will return to their intrinsic nature, necessitating the cessation of pain and suffering in Hell (Ibn-Arabi, n.d.).

This view suffers from incompatibility with the Qur'an. The Qur'an explicitly states that the people of Hell will face eternal torment. The idea that they will become accustomed to the fire of Hell contradicts Qur'anic verses. As God states: *"Surely the guilty shall abide in the chastisement of Hell. It shall not be abated from them and they shall therein be despairing"* (Qur'ān 43:74-75).

The arguments provided by Ibn-Arabi, while having some force, are not entirely convincing. The problem with the first argument is that although the mercy of God is comprehensive, it may not cover those who deny the true message of God. This mercy includes only those who provide the background for it, not those who deliberately set it aside.

The problem with the second argument is that the purpose of the creation of human beings requires felicity through free volitional actions and beliefs. If someone rejects the prophets and does not fulfill the purpose for which they were created, it becomes their problem. God intended that the purpose of the creation of human beings be accomplished through their free actions. Thus, if someone intentionally denies the true religion and fails to fulfill this purpose, it does not contradict God's intention for creation.

The problem with the third argument is that although the intrinsic nature of human beings is inclined towards God and religion, everyone has the ability to change their nature through their actions and beliefs. Thus, it is possible for someone to change their divine nature to a satanic one.

In conclusion, the theory that all people will ultimately attain salvation necessarily contradicts the Qur'an, in addition to lacking strong supporting evidence.

2.4. Salvation of the Minority in the Afterlife

The second response to the problem regarding exclusivism, stating that most people are deprived of salvation, is that the wisdom of God requires Him to provide a situation for human beings to achieve good and ultimately enter Heaven. If most people reject the call of God and leave His mercy by following the false religion, it does not contradict divine wisdom. What matters to God in creating the world is not merely the quantity of believers but their quality. Therefore, if God creates people with a strong belief in the true religion, even if they are fewer in number, the quality of their faith is sufficient to outweigh the evil of the majority of people entering Hell. According to this response, in

measuring the amount of good and evil, quantity alone must not be considered. Even if the quantity of evil committed by those entering Hell is greater, the quality of true faith among the minority outweighs the evil (Misbah Yazdi, 2014).

Though I do not entirely reject this response, the third response is more plausible, as will be explained, since it shows that most people will not be deprived of salvation.

3.4. Salvation of the Majority, with the Possibility of Salvation of the Minority

The third response, which is advocated in this article, is to reject the idea that the majority of people will enter Hell and remain there eternally. There are two points that can elucidate this position:

First, as explained, although most people may not embrace the true religion, the majority of them are not necessarily guilty; rather, they may be unable to discover the truth. Considering that most people may not be able to find the true religion, it can be concluded that most of them may achieve salvation, either by directly entering Heaven or by being tested again in the afterlife.

Second, though exclusivists hold that only one religion leads people to salvation and the followers of other religions deserve Hell, it does not necessarily mean that they, even if they are guilty, will eternally remain in Hell. To explain this point, two Muslim approaches regarding those entering Hell are elaborated. One theological denomination of Muslims, the Mu'tazilism, maintains that it is necessary for infidels, i.e., atheists or those who did not accept the Prophet of Islam, to necessarily remain in Hell; however, Shi'a Muslims hold that there is a possibility that even those entering Hell, due to their disbelief in God or in His prophets, will finally be pardoned and saved.

The argument provided by the Mu'tazilites is that God has promised that those who do not follow Islam will be eternally in Hell. If God does not fulfill His promises, it is morally bad. God never commits immoral actions (Abduljabbār, 2001).

Shi'a theologians disagree with this argument, holding that there are two types of divine promises:

A: Promises of good things, such as the promise of Heaven, which is morally necessary to act upon. The violation of these promises in these cases is morally bad, and it is clear that God never does something morally bad.

B: The promise of bad things, such as the promise of Hell. In these cases, it is not morally necessary to fulfill the promise, and it is not

morally bad not to fulfill the promises. Therefore, if God, by His grace, does not fulfill the promise of Hell, or if He takes someone out of Hell after they have entered, it is not morally bad. Therefore, although the people of Hell deserve Hell, it is rationally and morally possible for God to forgive them (A. Al-Hilli, 1992).

Therefore, it could be asserted that though, according to the Qur'an, some people deserve Hell, it is not necessary for God to punish them eternally; rather, God may pardon them. Therefore, we cannot surely judge what will happen to them since all or some may be pardoned after a limited time of pain and suffering.

A fundamental question arises here—one that Shi'a theologians have addressed only sparingly. The issue is this if we concede the possibility of divine pardon notwithstanding the threat of punishment, does this possibility potentially extend to all human beings—including those who deserve eternal Hell—such that everyone may eventually be delivered from punishment? Or must a minority necessarily remain consigned to Hell forever? The unqualified language found in Shi'a theological sources seems to suggest that deliverance is possible even for all, albeit not necessary.

Conversely, while classical Muslim theologians have not engaged with this question, a number of contemporary scholars maintain that the universal salvation of all human beings from Hell is impossible, as it would render futile the very purposes of legislation, the establishment of divine law, and the recompense of deeds, and would entail the violation of certain individuals' rights (Kharāzī, 2006).

A definitive resolution to this dispute is not easily attained, and the author does not adopt a firm position. Nevertheless, the above argument faces a significant challenge: even if all human beings are ultimately delivered from Hell, no futility with respect to rights would necessarily follow. This is because, in the first place, the differentiation among human beings may ultimately reside in their degrees in paradise, and this would not compromise the rights of the righteous—particularly if wrongdoers undergo a period of chastisement. In that scenario, the distinction between the virtuous and the wicked would consist both in their preliminary punishment and in their differing stations in paradise.

5. Conclusion

The Islamic position regarding the salvation of human beings lies between exclusivism and inclusivism. On the one hand, with respect to those who can find the truth but do not accept it, or those who can find the truth and then deny it, Islam adopts an exclusivist stance,

maintaining that if people do not accept Islam, they will not attain salvation.

On the other hand, Islam acknowledges that those who cannot find the true religion do not deserve Hell. Therefore, they will either be judged according to their good actions in this life, or they will be tested in the afterlife and, if successful, attain salvation.

From this explanation, the response to the question of whether the majority of people who follow other religions can be saved becomes clear. According to Islamic teaching, the majority of people, if unable to find the truth, will be saved by being judged according to their actions or by being tested again. Even the minority entering Hell have the possibility of being pardoned by God.

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