Islam and the Salvation of Others

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Abstract

A prevailing view in Islamic thought is that at least some non-Muslims will be saved in the afterlife. I submit that the most often-cited scriptural justification for this inclusivist doctrine has been Quran 17:15, specifically the declaration that God does not punish individuals until He has sent them a messenger. Yet since it is not entirely clear what this entails (at what point does one qualify as having received God's message, and specifically the final message revealed to Muhammad?), Muslim theologians have arrived at a plurality of inclusivisms. In the present article I examine three particularly influential premodern versions of Islamic inclusivism, all of which are commonly cited in modern Muslim writings. Two of these, one espoused by Ibn Taymiyya and the other by Ibn Arabi, correspond roughly to opposing ends of the inclusivist spectrum. The third, championed by Ghazali, represents a middle-of-the-road approach.

What happens to non-Muslims in the afterlife? Are they all doomed? Or are they just as likely as Muslims to inhabit Paradise? The disparate responses that Muslim theologians provide to these and related questions reveal the great soteriological schisms that exist in Islamic thought: Exclusivists hold that only Muslims will be saved; inclusivists maintain that salvation may be attained by “sincere,” “righteous” non-Muslims, who, for whatever reason, could not have been expected to recognize the truth of Muhammad's message; and pluralists assert that, whatever the circumstances, there are multiple paths that are equally salvific.

Those seeking to lend credence to an exclusivist reading of the Quran often point to its proclamation that forgiveness will not be granted to those who ascribe divine attributes and powers to entities other than God (4:116) – a cardinal transgression known as *shirk*, which is often (though controversially) translated as polytheism; its censure of various beliefs and practices of Jews and Christians (for example, 9:29–33); and its declaration that ‘islam’ is the only acceptable way (3:19, 85). Others, however, object that the term ‘islam’ in its Quranic usage simply means ‘submission’ to God; it necessarily encompasses more than the religion established by Muhammad. The Quran itself refers to the pre-Muhammadan prophet Abraham as a ‘muslim’ – linguistically
related to the term ‘islam’ – because he was a ‘submitter’ to God (3:67). As for scriptural condemnations of non-Muslims and those guilty of shirk, one could argue that these are directed at specific, antagonistic individuals and groups that were in conflict with the Prophet. In other words, these condemnations are not strictly doctrinal.

Those advocating a pluralist reading typically highlight Quranic passages that present diversity in a positive light. A good example of this is the latter half of Quran 5:48, in which God (speaking in the royal plural) addresses humanity as follows:

> We have assigned a law and a path to each of you. If God had so willed, He would have made you one community, but He wanted to test you through that which He has given you, so race to do good: you will all return to God and He will make clear to you the matters you differed about (Quran 5:48).1

The most often-cited passages in pluralist discourse, however, are Quran 2:62 and 5:69, both of which promise heavenly rewards to righteous Jews, Christians, and “Sabians” (the precise identification of which is uncertain):

> The believers, the Jews, the Christians, and the Sabians – all those who believe in God and the Last Day and do good – will have their rewards with their Lord. No fear for them, nor will they grieve. (2:62)

> For the believers, the Jews, the Sabians, and the Christians – all those who believe in God and the Last Day and do good – there is no fear: they will not grieve. (5:69)

Historically, however, exegetes have negated the universality of these verses, limiting their applicability to a specific period of time (before the completion of Muhammad’s mission), or claiming that they are in reference to Muslims of Jewish, Christian, and other backgrounds. Along these lines, the reference in Quran 5:48 to religious diversity is not widely regarded as a vindication of each and every faction and their respective laws and paths in a post-Muhammadan world.

Whatever the Prophet’s own views, I submit that the dominant soteriological paradigm throughout most of Islamic history – among exegetes,  