CHAPTER 7

The Islamic Problem of Religious Diversity

Imran Aijaz

Abstract

According to traditional Islamic theology, Islamic belief counts as an instance of knowledge or, at the very least, is accompanied by very strong epistemic justification. A consequence of this view is that there is no rational and inculpable non-acceptance of Islamic belief. But this seems grossly implausible, in light of very strong evidence to the contrary. Surely, some instances where people do not accept Islamic belief are rational and inculpable. Trying to resolve this problem constitutes what I call ‘The Islamic Problem of Religious Diversity’. In this chapter, I provide a critical discussion of the problem, considering but ultimately rejecting a standard Islamic response to it.

7.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I will discuss what I call ‘The Islamic Problem of Religious Diversity’. I shall use this label to refer to the specific problem of attempting to reconcile two claims that are inconsistent. The first claim is entailed by traditional Islamic theology and the other one by empirical observation and evidence that pertains to certain facts about religious diversity. In the following section, I will lay out The Islamic Problem of Religious Diversity as I understand it. In the section after that, I will consider a fairly typical Islamic approach to questions of religious diversity and explain how it may be used to question or criticize the problem that I am addressing. I shall argue that it does not succeed in solving the problem. Finally, I will end this chapter with some concluding thoughts and remarks about the problem and the prospects for a solution.

7.2 The Islamic Problem of Religious Diversity Stated

From the perspective of traditional Islamic theology, as informed by the Qur’an and the ahadith (reports of sayings and actions attributed to the Prophet Muhammad), there is very strong epistemic justification for Islamic belief
that is available to everyone. By ‘Islamic belief’, I mean belief in the existence of God and the Prophethood of Muhammad. Both the Qur’an and various *ahadith* make it rather clear that Islamic belief is at least very strongly epistemically justified, if not an instance of *knowledge*.

There is, to begin with, the Islamic view that belief in the existence and oneness of God is the natural disposition (*fitrah*) for all human beings from birth. We find this view in both the Qur’an and the *ahadith*. Qur’an 30:30, for instance, states: “So direct your face toward the religion, inclining to truth. [Adhere] to the *fitrah* of Allah upon which He has created [all] people.” And, in a well-known *hadith*, the Prophet Muhammad is reported to have said: “Every child is born with a true faith of Islam [*fitrah*]... but his parents convert him to Judaism, Christianity or Magianism, as an animal delivers a perfect baby animal. Do you find it mutilated?”1 For this reason, many individuals who decide to embrace Islam, after abandoning their non-Islamic worldview, refer to themselves as reverts, not converts. As Cafer S. Yaran rightly notes, the Islamic view on the nature of belief in God as innate and dispositional has strong parallels with Alvin Plantinga’s famous contemporary defense of theistic belief as ‘properly basic’.2 That is to say, belief in the existence of God can be held immediately and non-inferentially, or ‘basically’, much like our ordinary perceptual beliefs.3 Moreover, belief in God can be ‘properly basic’ by being caused in the right kind of way so that it constitutes an instance of knowledge.4 This view about the proper basicality of theistic belief can be extended to include specifically Christian beliefs, such as beliefs about the nature of God, atonement, salvation, etc..5 On Plantinga’s model of Christian belief, faith is nothing like a leap in the dark. As he states: “Faith... isn’t even remotely like a leap in the dark. You might as well claim that a memory belief, or the belief that 3 + 1 = 4 is a leap in the dark... The case of faith... [is of]... sure and certain *knowledge*”.6

It seems to me a plausible case can be made that something similar can be said about the nature of Islamic faith, as understood by a straightforward reading of the Qur’an and *ahadith*. This is especially so when we consider how religious anthropology is understood in traditional Islamic theology. According to the Qur’an, every nation on earth was sent a messenger calling people

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3 Plantinga 2000:175.
6 Plantinga 2000:263, emphasis mine.