

## MUSLIM PERSPECTIVES ON HINDUISM

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### ABSTRACT

The present day world is a strange mixture of the vestiges and outposts of secular late/high modernity, postmodern mind-set and 'beyond the postmodern' frontier thinking with its divergent trends of engaging with the Sacred, its ideas about the human condition and dealing with the question of Reality. Cultures and their worldviews are ruled by their mandarins, the intellectuals, and they, as well as their institutions that shape the minds that ruled the modern world- and continue to hold sway in the postmodern (and beyond the postmodern) milieu- are unreservedly secular. One, therefore, often encounters the argument, and at times it turns into an objection, that a misleading picture is being presented by bringing in religion and spirituality as a stake holder in the present day discourse. Both within and without the Islamic faith, many would make such an observation and the secular mind-set is, obviously, averse to it. But if the ground realities are taken into consideration, these alert us to another situation.

We live for the first time in history in an age of multiculturalism and it is utterly important and central that we think in plural terms about faith. The most towering problem facing people in the 19<sup>th</sup> century was nationalism and in the 20<sup>th</sup> century it had been ideology as, for most of the century, the nations were located on the opposite sides of the ideological divide and the cold war conflict. But now when the war is gone and the ideological

conflict is over, the greatest problem that faces the 21<sup>st</sup> century is the ethnic conflict and because those conflicts are powered, in part, by multiple faiths clashing with one another it is important that we turn over attention to that danger and do our best to annihilate whatever problems in our human collectivities that we face now or that may come down the road.

I would offer a few observations in relation to the ground realities of the situation. Since everyone comes to the discussion with one's own specific tool kit and training I would exclude all practical considerations and try to say something philosophically or theologically as, like the medieval Muslims, Christians and traditional Hindus, I too consider philosophy to be the long arm of theology and see religious arguments at work behind attitudes and actions and societal behaviours that apparently seem to have nothing in common with religion. Moreover I do not agree with the way mostly common responses are made to the misplaced religious arguments and bad logic used by the present day extremist Hindus, Muslims, Jews and Christians.

I would, therefore, like to quote Schuon's timely remark at the start that 'if human societies degenerate on the one hand with the passage of time they accumulate on the other hand experience in virtue of old age, however intermingled with error their experience may be.' It is true that the world was already in extreme old age two thousand years ago, but that old age lay hidden under the youth of Christianity and then, subsequently, also under the youth of Islam. Nonetheless, its unseen presence below the surface has now precipitated those two latest religions towards itself, that is, in the direction of old age and "as such we have a choice between two attributes offered us by old age, namely senility and wisdom.

Despite the fact that the vast majority of our contemporaries have chosen the former of these – whence the present state of the world – it is nonetheless possible and even inevitable that some will choose wisdom, a wisdom that is calm and objective, free from the passionate prejudices which have previously been too dominant in human souls with regard to religions other than their own.<sup>1</sup> If we look at the two major houses of faith that share the mutual public space in Pakistan, that is, Islam and Christianity – and to some extent, Hinduism – and try to find the fault line that hampers the path of Peaceful Coexistence with reference to the three communities, it could be described in theological terms as follows. In the case of Islam it is *Misplaced Absolutes*<sup>2</sup> and *Supersessionism* and in the case of Christianity it is a monopolizing claim on the Divine Mercy through the notion of the One and Only, Unique Saviour. Both lead to religious exclusivism. Islamic *Supersessionism*, taking its point of departure in an apparently ‘benign Inclusivism’ ends up in exclusivism by interpreting the inclusivist verses of the Qur’ān in an exclusivist manner. The monopolizing claim of Christianity arrives at the same end as it classes Hinduism/Buddhism as ‘paganism’, Judaism as a superseded religion and Islam as a pseudo religion.

This point underscores the importance of another basic insight that informs the perspective we are considering here. We are conscious of the fact that a religion’s claim to unique efficacy must be allowed the status of half-truth because there is, in fact, in the vast majority of cases, no alternative choice. But in the ‘Post-Prophetic Age,’ conditions have changed. For those who

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1. Martin Lings, *A Return to the Spirit*, Fons Vitae, 2005, p. 28.

2. See ‘In the Wake of 11th September,’ in M. S. Umar (ed.), *The Religious Other - Towards a Muslim Theology of Other Religions in a Post-Prophetic Age*, Iqbal Academy Pakistan, Lahore, 2009, p. 10.

come face to face with the founder of a new religion, the lack of alternative choice becomes as it were absolute in virtue of the correspondingly absolute greatness of the Divine Messenger himself. It is moreover at its outset, that is, during its brief moment of 'absoluteness', that the claims of a religion are for the most part formulated. But with the passage of time there is inevitably a certain levelling out between the new and the less new, the more so in that the less new may have special claims on certain people. This is not the place to address the implications- conceptual, theological as well as practical and legal- of this 'levelling out' but we felt that the point needed registration here for its importance.

For thousands of years already, humanity has been divided into several fundamentally different branches, which constitute so many complete humanities, more or less closed in on themselves; the existence of spiritual receptacles so different (and therefore original) demands differentiated refractions of the one Truth. The exclusivist claim thus seems contrary to the nature of things. The following observation, again from Frithjof Schuon, sums up the point well.

The ethnic diversity of humanity and the geographical extent of the earth suffice to make highly unlikely the axiom of one unique religion for all men, and on the contrary highly likely- to say the least- the need for a plurality of religions; in other words, the idea of a single religion does not escape contradiction if one takes account of its claims to absoluteness and universality on the one

hand, and the psychological and physical impossibility of their realisation on the other.<sup>3</sup>

If God had sent only one religion to a world of widely differing affinities and aptitudes, it would not have been a fair test for all. He has therefore sent different religions, especially suited to the needs and characteristics of the different sectors of humanity. In this regard the same author has observed that:

God could have allowed a religion that was merely the invention of a man to conquer a part of humanity and to maintain itself for more than a thousand years in a quarter of the inhabited world, thus betraying the love, faith, and hope of a multitude of sincere and fervent souls— this is contrary to the Laws of the Divine Mercy, or in other words, to those of Universal Possibility . . . . If Christ had been the only manifestation of the Word, supposing such a uniqueness of manifestation to be possible, the effect of His birth would have been the instantaneous reduction of the universe to ashes.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>. 'Not to mention the antinomy between such claims and the necessarily relative character of all religious mythology; only pure metaphysic and pure prayer are absolute and therefore universal. As for 'mythology', it is - apart from its intrinsic content of truth and efficacy - indispensable for enabling metaphysical and essential truth to 'gain a footing' in such and such a human collectivity.' Frithjof Schuon, 'Diversity of Revelation', in M. S. Umar (ed.), *The Religious Other- Towards a Muslim Theology of Other Religions in a Post-Prophetic Age*, Iqbal Academy Pakistan, Lahore, 2009, pp. 1-6.

<sup>4</sup>. *ibid*, p. 20. If Revelations more or less exclude one another, this is so of necessity because God, when He speaks, expresses Himself in absolute mode; but this absoluteness relates to the universal content rather than to the form; it applies to the latter only in a relative and symbolical sense, because the form is a symbol of the content and so too of humanity as a whole, to which this content is, precisely, addressed.

Faced with the fact that there are diverse religions, which apparently exclude each other, most people tend to think that one religion is right and that all the others are false; others conclude that all are false. 'It is as if,' Schuon remarked, 'faced with the discovery of other solar systems, some maintained that there is only one sun, ours, while others, seeing that our sun is not unique, denied that it is a sun, and concluded that there is no sun.'<sup>5</sup>

The analogy of the sun and the stars is encountered in the works of the greatest authorities of the Islamic tradition also, for example, Shaykh Ibn 'Arabī and Rūmī. Keeping in view the fact that the Qur'ān never criticizes the prophetic messages as such, though it often condemns misunderstandings or distortions by those who follow the prophets, one notes that Shaykh Ibn 'Arabī sometimes criticizes specific distortions or misunderstandings in the Qur'ānic vein but he does not draw the conclusion many Muslims have drawn- that the coming of Islam abrogated (*naskh*) previous revealed religions. Rather, he says, Islam is like the sun and other religions like the stars. Just as the stars remain when the sun rises, so also the other religions remain valid when Islam appears. One can add a point that perhaps Ibn 'Arabī would also accept: What appears as a sun from one point of view may be seen as a star from another point of view. Concerning abrogation, the Shaykh writes:

All the revealed religions [*sharā'i*] 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

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<sup>5</sup> Frithjof Schuon, 'De l'Alliance', *Etudes Traditionnelles*, Paris, June, 1940.

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 light of the stars is actualized. 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 [*bāṭil*] by abrogation- that is the opinion of the ignorant.<sup>6</sup>

To maintain the particular excellence of the Qur'ān and the superiority of Muhammad over all other prophets is not to deny the universal validity of revelation nor the necessity of revelation appearing in particularized expressions. The plurality of revelations, like the diversity of human communities, then, is divinely-willed, and not the result of some human contingency. Universal revelation and human diversity alike are expressions of divine wisdom. They are also signs intimating the infinitude of the Divine Nature itself: *"And among His signs is the creation of the heavens and the earth, and the differences of your languages and colours. Indeed, herein are signs for those who know."* (30:22)<sup>7</sup> Just as God is both absolutely one yet immeasurably infinite, so the human race is one in its essence, yet infinitely variegated in its forms. Notwithstanding the many verses critical of earlier religious traditions, the fundamental message of the Qur'ān as regards all

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<sup>6</sup> Ibn 'Arabī, *Al-Futūḥāt al-Makkiyya*, Vol. III, p. 153, line 12, Dār Ṣādir, Beirut, (n. d).

<sup>7</sup> Let us note that this is not always a question of race, but more often of human groups, very diverse perhaps, but none the less subject to mental conditions which, taken as a whole, make of them sufficiently homogeneous spiritual recipients; though this fact does not prevent some individuals from being able to leave their framework for the human collectivity never has anything absolute about it.

previous revelations is one of inclusion not exclusion, protection and not destruction.

This is a problem of a particularly specific nature in the West, especially in America where there is a large presence of Christians<sup>8</sup> who hold that there is only one true faith and only they have it but, *mutatis mutandis*, the same thing is true of other faith traditions, especially of those parts of their exoteric aspect that has been moulded and influence by modernity. That makes it difficult as we work for harmony among the world's faiths. I would like to spell out my point by focusing on the Islamic perspective later.

In the Islamic perspective, the 'divinely ordained diversity' lies in the following verse, which many consider to be among the last Revelations received by the Prophet and which in any case

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<sup>8</sup>. The usual proof text/argument on the Christian side is that 'no one comes to the Father except through me' or some variation of these words. Jesus of Nazareth is gone so there is no way that people will come to God through that reference. Perhaps the verse refers to the Word (*logos*) as mentioned in the first four verses of the Gospel of John: 'In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God, the Word was God. Through him all things were made and without him nothing was made that was made.' If nothing in this whole world and history was made without the Word which was God, in God, this means that Buddha was created by God and Muhammad was created by God. If God made these prophets, these enlightened souls, it is up to me to honour the followers of those originators of the religions made by God. But it is inconceivable, as Frithjof Schuon has said, that in speaking of the future, Christ should have passed over in silence 'the one unique and incomparable apparition' which was to take place between his two comings. There can be no doubt, if the following passage from the Gospel of John be considered objectively, that it refers to the Prophet who was, in fact, shortly to be born. The words of Christ are as follows:

'I have more to tell you, but ye cannot bear it now. But when he, the spirit of truth, is come, he will tell you all things. He shall not speak of himself but what he shall hear that shall he speak and he will show you things to come. He shall glorify me.' (The Gospel of John 16:12-14)



belongs to the period which marks the close of his mission. As such it coincides with a cyclic moment of extreme significance – the last ‘opportunity’<sup>9</sup> for a direct message to be sent from Heaven to earth during what remains of this cycle of time. Many of the last Qur’ānic revelations are concerned with completing and perfecting the new religion. But this verse is a final and lasting message for mankind as a whole. The Qur’ān expressly addresses the adherents of all the different orthodoxies on earth; and no message could be more relevant to the age in which we live and, in particular, to the mental predicament of man in these later days.

*For each of you We have appointed a law and a way. And if God<sup>10</sup> had willed He would have made you one people. But (He hath willed it otherwise) that He may put you to the test in what He has given you.<sup>11</sup> So vie with one another in good works. Unto God will ye be brought back, and He will inform you about that wherein ye differed. (5:48)*

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<sup>9</sup>. God doth what He will. But it is clearly in the interests of man that a Divine intervention which founds a new religion should be overwhelmingly recognizable as such. The accompanying guarantees must be too tremendous, and too distinctive, to leave room for doubts in any but the most perverse, which means that certain kinds of things must be kept in reserve as the special prerogative of such a period. The Qur’an refers to this ‘economy’ when it affirms that questions which are put to God during the period of Revelation will be answered (5:101), the implication being that after the Revelation has been completed such questions will no longer be answered so directly. It is as if a door between Heaven and earth were kept open during the mission of a Divine Messenger, to be closed at all other times.

<sup>10</sup>. The change from first to third person with regard to the Divinity is frequent in the Qur’an.

<sup>11</sup>. If He had sent only one religion to a world of widely differing affinities and aptitudes, it would not have been a fair test for all. He has therefore sent different religions, especially suited to the needs and characteristics of the different sectors of humanity.

But while considering the limitations of Muslim exoterism, it must be remembered that from its stronghold of finality as the last religion of this cycle of time, Islam, unlike Judaism and Christianity, can afford to be generous to other religions. Moreover its position in the cycle confers on it something of the function of a summer-up, which obliges it to mention with justice what has preceded it, or at the least to leave an open door for what it does not specifically mention. There is a place for other religions within the Islamic civilization, and Muslims are obliged to protect the temples, synagogues and churches and other religious sanctuaries. It has to be admitted, however, that the authorities of Islam have been no less ready than their counterparts in other religions to fall prey to religious exclusivism. Muslims have been encouraged to believe, and the majority have been only too eager to believe, that Islam has superseded all other religions and that it is therefore the sole truly valid religion on earth. But however absolute the claims of Muslim theologians and jurists may be, they are shown in fact to be relative by the tolerance which Islam makes obligatory towards the religious other.

The intrinsic nature of the Muslim polity is derived from the Prophet's embodiment of the Qur'ānic revelation. His acts of statesmanship should not be seen in isolation as a series of historical events but as a series of symbolic acts which, more powerfully than words, uphold the inviolability of the religious rights of the Other and the necessity of exercising a generous tolerance in regard to the Other. The seminal and most graphic expression of this sacred vision inspiring the kind of tolerance witnessed throughout Muslim history is given to us in the following well-attested episode in the life of the Prophet. In the ninth year after the Hijra (631), a prominent Christian delegation from Najrān, an important centre of Christianity in the Yemen,

came to engage the Prophet in theological debate in Medina. The main point of contention was the nature of Christ: was he one of the messengers of God or the unique Son of God?

What is important for our purposes is not the disagreements voiced, nor the means by which the debate was resolved, but the fact that when these Christians requested to leave the city to perform their liturgy, the Prophet invited them to accomplish their rites in his own mosque. The Christians in question performed the Byzantine Christian rites.<sup>12</sup> This means that they were enacting some form of the rites which incorporated the fully-developed Trinitarian theology of the Orthodox councils, emphasizing the definitive creed of the divine 'sonship' of Christ-doctrines explicitly criticized in the Qur'ān. Nonetheless, the Prophet allowed the Christians to accomplish their rites in his own mosque. Disagreement on the plane of dogma is one thing, tolerance- indeed encouragement- of the enactment of that dogma is another.

One should also mention in this context the tolerance that is inscribed in the first Muslim Constitution, that of Medina. In this historic document a pluralistic polity was configured. The right to freedom of worship was assumed, given the unprejudiced recognition of all three religious groups who were party to the agreement: Muslims, Jews and polytheists- the latter indeed comprising the majority at the time the Constitution was drawn up. Each group enjoyed unfettered religious and legal autonomy, and the Jews, it should be noted, were not required at this stage to pay any kind of poll-tax. The Muslims were indeed recognized

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<sup>12</sup>. Ibn Ishaq gives the standard account of this remarkable event. A. Guillaume (trans.), *The Life of Muhammad – A Translation of Ibn Ishāq's Sirat Rasul Allah* Oxford, 1968, pp. 270-277.

as forming a distinct group within the polity, but this did not compromise the principle of mutual defence which was at the root of the agreement: Each had to help the other against anyone who attacked the people mentioned in this document. They must seek mutual advice and consultation and loyalty is a protection against treachery.<sup>13</sup>

I would, therefore, like to open up the subject of 'Muslim Perspectives on Hinduism' by bringing out what Islam has thought of itself and of the 'Religious Other' by presenting the details of the various legitimizing, often celebrating, perspectives within the Islamic tradition. By 'Islam,' we mean the source-texts i.e. the Qur'ān and the *Hadith* materials and the great texts that have been universally acknowledged as the highpoints of the tradition. Like any great religion, Islam has its towering landmarks, and it is from these that we have sought to understand it. Such texts are rooted in the Qur'ān. In a profound sense, Islam is the Qur'ān and the Qur'ān is Islam. The basic interpretation of the Qur'ān is provided by Muhammad himself. Following in his wake, numerous great figures – sages, saints, philosophers, theologians, jurists – have elucidated and interpreted the nature of the original vision in keeping with the needs of their times.

Three things need to be said clearly at the outset. Firstly, there are a number of Islamic or Muslim perspectives which not only legitimize Hinduism but go further and celebrate it as a manifestation and expression of a Divine Will for the diversity of religions. These perspectives have their different starting points and they bring different, though not mutually exclusive, sets of

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<sup>13</sup>. F. E. Peters, *Judaism, Christianity, and Islam*, Princeton, 1990, Vol. 1, p. 217.

values that bear upon the larger question of the Religious Other and the process of legitimizing Hinduism from a Muslim point of view, but they all converge on the 'common denominator' or the legal minimum of acknowledging Hinduism as an authentic, revealed religion.

Secondly, what follows in this presentation is informed by a very basic insight that has been eloquently articulated by Peter Berger in his typically 'clinical' and non-religious manner. Expanding on his famous dictum '*Homo Sapiens* has always been *homo religiousus*,' Berger went on to claim that

If anything characterizes modernity it is the loss of the sense of transcendence – of a reality that exceeds and encompasses our everyday affairs . . . A human existence bereft of transcendence is an impoverished and finally untenable condition.<sup>14</sup>

One can safely add that this assertion is not a theological statement but an anthropological one– an agnostic or even an atheist philosopher may agree with it!

Thirdly, and more importantly, another basic insight informs our discourse. In terms of etymology, religion is 'that which binds', specifically, that which binds man to God. Religion engages man in two ways: firstly, by explaining the nature and meaning of the universe, or 'justifying the ways of God to man' (this is *theodicy*); and secondly, by elucidating man's role and purpose in the universe, or teaching him how to liberate himself from its

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<sup>14</sup>. Peter L. Berger, 'Secularism in Retreat,' *The National Interest*, 1996/1997; 46, pp. 3-12.

limitations, constrictions and terrors (this is *soteriology*). In the first place, religion is a doctrine of unity, of the Ultimate Reality, the Absolute, the Principle which elucidates, to put it in a religious terminology, that God, who is both Creator and Final End of the universe and of man in it, is One. In the second place, religion is a method of union: a sacramental path, a way of return, a means of salvation. Whatever they may be called, these two components are always present: theodicy and soteriology; doctrine and method; theory and practice; dogma and sacrament; unity and union. Doctrine, or theory, concerns the mind; method, or practice, concerns the will. Religion, to be itself, must always engage both mind and will.

The aforementioned second, or practical, component of religion may be broken to two: namely, worship and morality. Worship, the sacramental element, generally takes the form of participation in the revealed rites (public or private) of a given religion, the purpose being the assimilation of man's will to that of God. Morality, the social element, is 'doing the things which ought to be done, and not doing the things which ought not to be done'; the Decalogue of the Judo-Christian Tradition or its exact equivalent in the Qur'ān and the Hindu Tradition. Some of the contents of morality are universal: 'thou shalt not bear false witness', 'thou shalt not kill', 'thou shalt not steal', etc.; and some of the contents are specific to the religion in question: 'thou shalt not make a graven image', 'whom God hath joined together, let no man put asunder', etc. We have thus reached the three elements which Rene Guenon considered to be the defining features of every religion: *dogma*, *worship*, and *morality*. When raised to a higher or more intense degree, namely that of spirituality or mysticism, they become, in the words of Frithjof Schuon: truth, spiritual way, and virtue. We mention this here

because, as we mentioned earlier, the issue would be approached from multiple Muslim perspectives. Last but not the least, the most important single point about religion is that it is not man-made. Religion is not invented by man, but revealed by God. Divine revelation<sup>15</sup> is a *sine qua non*; without it, there is no religion, only man-made ideology, in which no sacramental or salvational element is present. In summary: religion's essential contents comprise dogma, worship, and morality; and religion's indispensable 'container' or framework comprises revelation, tradition, and orthodoxy.

#### THE QUR'ANIC PERSPECTIVE - GENERAL

Throughout Islamic history, Hindus, together with Buddhists and Zoroastrians, not to mention other religious groups, were regarded by Muslims not as pagans, idolaters, or atheists, but as followers of an authentic religion, and thus to be granted official *dhimmi* status, that is, they were to be granted official protection by the state authorities and any violation of their religious, social or legal rights was subject to the 'censure' (*dhimma*) of the Muslim authorities, who were charged with the protection of these rights.

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<sup>15</sup>. Revelation has shaped human history more than any other force besides technology. Whether revelation issues from God or from the deepest unconscious of spiritual geniuses can be debated but its signature is invariably power. The periodic incursions- explosions, we might call them- of this power in history are what created the world's greatest religions and by extension, the civilizations they have bodied forth. Its dynamite is its news of another world. Revelation invariably tells us of a separate (though not removed) order of existence that simultaneously relativizes and exalts the one we normally know. It relativizes the everyday world by showing it to be less than the 'all' that we unthinkingly take it to be and that demotion turns out to be exhilarating. By placing the quotidian world in a vastly more meaningful context, revelation dignifies it in the way a worthy setting enhances the beauty of a precious stone. People respond to this news of life's larger meaning because they hear in it the final warrant for their existence.

This legitimizing perspective is squarely rooted in the Qur'ān, where the fundamental message with regards to the Religious Other, the previous revelations, is one of inclusion not exclusion, protection and not destruction, based as it is on the twin principles of *diversity* and *universality* of revelation and prophecy. Before we present the proof texts for these twin principles from the Qur'ān, it is interesting to note how the Qur'ānic usage of the very word *islām* itself provides us the first instance of these twin principles of *diversity* and *universality* at work.

#### FOUR MEANINGS OF THE WORD ISLAM

The Arabic word *islām* means 'to turn oneself over to, to resign oneself, to submit.' In religious terminology, it means submission or surrender to God, or to God's will. The Qur'ān uses the term and its derivatives in about seventy verses. In only a few of these verses can we claim that the word refers exclusively to 'Islam,' meaning thereby the religion established by the Qur'ān and the Prophet Muhammad. Moving from the broadest to the narrowest, the Qur'ānic narrative uses the word *islām* in four basic meanings:<sup>16</sup> (1) the submission of the whole of creation to its Creator; (2) the submission of human beings to the guidance of God as revealed through the Divine messengers; (3) the submission of human beings to the guidance of God as revealed through the prophet Muhammad; and (4) the submission of the followers of Muhammad to God's practical instructions. Only the third of these can properly be translated as *Islam* with an uppercase I. The other three have to be referred to as submission'

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<sup>16</sup> For details see Sachiko Murata and William C. Chittick, 'The Word *Islam*,' in *The Vision of Islam*, Paragon House, New York, 1994, pp. 54.



or *islām*.<sup>17</sup> And the second, 'the submission of human beings to the guidance of God as revealed through the Divine messengers' is the grand portal that leads to the Qur'ānic universe of diversity and universality of Revelation.

The term Islam itself can be taken in a universal sense to include all true religion. The Qur'ān makes it clear that the religions of Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses and Jesus may be called 'Islam' in its literal meaning of 'submission to God'. In this sense Islam may be said to have been made to *prevail over all religion*.<sup>18</sup> It could be detailed further through a number of proof texts from the Qur'ān, and we shall come to it shortly. A pertinent quote from the *Ḥadīth* (sayings of the Prophet) captures the idea. 'God sent 124000 messengers for human guidance. Out of these divine messengers 313 were given a scripture.'<sup>19</sup> Keeping in view the fact that the Qur'ān mentions only about 26 prophets and messengers by

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<sup>17</sup>. It should not be imagined that these four meanings are clearly distinct in the minds of Muslims, especially those who live in the ambiance of their religion. It is common for Muslims to think of Islām as their own practices and to think of their practices as the same as the practices of all religions (since all religions are *islām*). If other practices are different, it must be because they have become corrupted. In the same way, it is common for traditional Muslims to think that their own religious activities are the most normal and natural activities in the universe, since they are simply doing what everything in creation does constantly, given that 'to Him has submitted whoso is in the heavens and the earth.' In other words, the various meanings of the term become conflated and it is not always easy to separate them.

<sup>18</sup>. The verse we are considering is parallel to the words of Christ, 'This Gospel of the Kingdom shall be preached in all the world. Then shall the end come,' which likewise admit of both a limited and a universal interpretation, according to what is understood by *world*. In its wider sense (as well as in the narrower one), the first part of this prophecy has now come true inasmuch as every people on earth is now within easy reach of the gospel of the Kingdom, that is, the religion of Truth, in at least one of its modes.

<sup>19</sup>. *Musnad Aḥmad Ibn Ḥanbal*; Muhammad Ḥamīdullah, *Khutbāt-i Bahawalpur*, Islamic Research Inst., Islamabad; English Translation: *Emergence of Islam*, Islamic Research Inst., Islamabad, 1993.

name or by allusion, the following Qur'ānic verses make it quite clear that the Qur'ānic perspective accommodates non-Abrahamic religions.

*Verily We have sent messengers before thee [Muhammad]. About some of them have We told thee, and about some have We not told thee. (40:78)*

*For every community there is a Messenger. (10:47)*

*Naught is said unto you [Muhammad] but what was said unto the Messengers before you. (41:43)*

*They believe, all of them, in God and His Angels and His Books and His Messengers. And they say: We make no distinction between any of His Messengers. (2:285)*

## THE QUR'AN CONFIRMS ALL DIVINE REVELATIONS

These verses, supplemented by a number of other proof texts (quoted below), establish four crucial principles that enshrine the Qur'ānic Vision, which both fashion and substantiate an open-minded approach to all religions and their adherents and inculcate the attitude that if God is the ultimate source of the different rites of the religions, no one set of rites can be legitimately excluded from the purview of authentic religion:

*There is no compulsion in religion. (2: 256)*

*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, then indeed monasteries, churches, synagogues*

*and mosques—wherein the name of God is oft-invoked—would assuredly have been destroyed. (22:39-40)*

The very plurality of these revelations is the result of a divine will for diversity of human communities.<sup>20</sup>

*So set your purpose firmly for the faith as an original monotheist, [in accordance with] the fitra of God, by which He created mankind. There can be no altering the creation of God. That is the right religion, but most people know it not. (30:30)*

The diversity of religious rites is also derived directly from God, affirmed by the following verses:

*Unto each community We have given sacred rites which they are to perform; so let them not dispute with you about the matter, but summon them unto your Lord. (22:67)*

*For every community there is a Messenger. (10:47)*

*We never sent a messenger save with the language of his people, so that he might make [Our message] clear to them. (14:4)*

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<sup>20</sup> The plurality of revelations, like the diversity of human communities, is divinely-willed, and not the result of some human contingency. Universal revelation and human diversity alike are expressions of divine wisdom. They are also signs intimating the infinitude of the divine nature itself as indicated in the verse quoted before: “*And among His signs is the creation of the heavens and the earth, and the differences of your languages and colours. Indeed, herein are signs for those who know.*” (30:22) Just as God is both absolutely one yet immeasurably infinite, so the human race is one in its essence, yet infinitely variegated in its forms. The *fitra*, or primordial nature, is the inalienable substance of each human being and this essence of human identity takes priority over all external forms of identity such as race and nation, culture or even religion.

*Truly We inspire you, as We inspired Noah, and the prophets after him, as We inspired Abraham and Ishmael and Isaac and Jacob and the tribes, and Jesus and Job and Jonah and Aaron and Solomon, and as We bestowed unto David the Psalms; and Messengers We have mentioned to you before, and Messengers We have not mentioned to you. (4:163-164)*

*We sent no Messenger before you but We inspired him [saying]: There is no God save Me, so worship Me. (21:25) Naught is said unto you [Muhammad] but what was said unto the Messengers before you. (41:43)*

This diversity of revelations and plurality of communities is intended to stimulate a healthy 'competition' or mutual enrichment in the domain of 'good works'.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup>. Given this clear expression of the universality of salvation, any lapse into the kind of religious chauvinism which feeds intolerance is impermissible. This is made clear in the following verses, which explicitly mention forms of religious exclusivism which the Muslims had encountered among the 'People of the Book': 'And they say: "None enters Paradise unless he be a Jew or a Christian". These are their vain desires. Say: "Bring your proof if you are truthful". Nay, but whosoever submits his purpose to God, and he is virtuous, his reward is with his Lord. No fear shall come upon them, neither shall they grieve (2:111-112). In other words, the Muslim is not allowed to play the game of religious polemics. Instead of responding in kind to any sort of chauvinistic claims or 'vain desires' aimed at monopolizing Paradise, the Muslim is instructed to raise the dialogue to a higher level and to call for reasoned debate. The Qur'anic position is to affirm the universal salvific criteria of piety, accessible to all human beings, whatever be their religious affiliation. This position is further affirmed in the following verses: "It will not be in accordance with your desires, nor with the desires of the People of the Book. He who does wrong will have its recompense . . . And whosoever performs 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 (4:123-124). The logic of these verses clearly indicates that one form of religious prejudice is not to be confronted with another form of the same error, but with an objective, unprejudiced recognition of the inexorable and universal law of divine justice, a law which excludes both religious nationalism and its natural concomitant, intolerance.

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

*And they say: ‘None enters Paradise unless he be a Jew or a Christian’. These are their vain desires. Say: ‘Bring your proof if you are truthful’. Nay, but whosoever submits his purpose to God, and he is virtuous, his reward is with his Lord. No fear shall come upon them, neither shall they grieve. (2:111-112)*

*It will not be in accordance with your desires, nor with the desires of the People of the Book. He who does wrong will have its recompense ... And whoso performs 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. (4:123-124)*

Differences of opinion are inevitable consequences of the very plurality of meanings embodied in diverse revelations. These differences are to be tolerated on the human plane and will be finally resolved in the hereafter.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup>. Given the fact that “*there is no compulsion in religion*” (2:256), it follows that differences of opinion must be tolerated and not suppressed. This theme is not unconnected with the principle of divine mercy: just as God’s mercy is described as “*encompassing all things*” (7:156), so divine guidance through revelation encompasses all human communities. The Prophet is described as a “*mercy to the whole of creation*” (21:107), and his character is described as merciful and kind in the Qur’ān (9:128). In the traditional sources, the word most often used to define the essence of his personality is *hilm*, which means forbearance compounded of wisdom and gentleness. The tolerance accorded to the Other by the Prophet is thus an expression not only of knowledge of the universality of revelation but also of the mercy, love and compassion from which this universal divine will to guide and save all peoples itself springs. To

*Say: O you who disbelieve, I worship not that which you worship, nor do you worship that which I worship. And I shall not worship that which you worship, nor will you worship that which I worship. For you your religion, for me, mine. (109:1-6)*

*If they submit, they are rightly guided, but if they turn away, you have no duty other than conveying the message. (3:20)*

*If they are averse, We have not sent you as a guardian over them: your duty is but to convey the message. (42:48)*

We will close this section with words from the Qur'ān, words which might be called the Islamic equivalent of the Christian Credo, a definite statement on the authority of the Word-made-Book, of the faith of the Prophet and of those who may be considered as the most spiritual of his Companions.

*They believe, all of them, in God and His Angels and His Books and His Messengers. And they say: We make no distinction between any of His Messengers. (2:285)*

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follow the Prophet means, among other things, to be gentle and lenient to all, in accordance with the *hilm* which defined his character: "It was a mercy from God that you are gently disposed to them; had you been fierce and hard-hearted, they would have fled from you" (3:159). In regard to the disbelievers, then, the Muslim is enjoined to let them go their way unmolested, to let them believe in their own religion: "Say: O you who disbelieve, I worship not that which you worship, nor do you worship that which I worship. And I shall not worship that which you worship, nor will you worship that which I worship. For you your religion, for me, mine." (109:1-6) Returning to the duty to deliver the message and no more, there are a number of verses to note; for example: "If they submit, they are rightly guided, but if they turn away, you have no duty other than conveying the message." (3:20) "If they are averse, We have not sent you as a guardian over them: your duty is but to convey the message." (42:48)

## THE QUR'ANIC PERSPECTIVE - ANTHROPOLOGICAL

Martin Lings has elucidated the issue with great perspicacity and insightfulness in his masterly study 'With All Thy Mind.'<sup>23</sup> I would also refer here to Arvind Sharma who has closely followed the four crucial principles mentioned above in his *Can Muslims Talk to Hindus?*<sup>24</sup> After taking his thesis through the enunciated categories, Sharma concluded with the following verse from the Qur'an:

*Oh mankind! Lo! We have created you male and female, and we have made you nations and tribes that ye may know one another. Lo! The noblest of you in the sight of God, is the best conduct Lo! God is All Knowing, All-Aware. (49:13)*<sup>25</sup>

This verse seems to offer the clearest mandate for Muslims to talk to Hindus. The verse is a Medina verse and is addressed specifically to humanity, not just to Muslims for the diversity of both peoples and of genders is affirmed. Note that no revelations have been sent in terms of the division of humanity by sex, but rather to the peoples. Not only is diversity of the peoples alluded to but there are no qualifications attached to it such as that they be Jews or Christians or Sabeans. Moreover, the purpose of diversity is to provide an occasion for people to know each other-

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<sup>23</sup> Martin Lings, "With all Thy Mind", in M. S. Umar (ed.), *The Religious Other-Towards a Muslim Theology of Other Religions in a Post-Prophetic Age*, Iqbal Academy Pakistan, Lahore, 2009, pp. 7-24; Also see Martin Lings, "Why 'With all Thy Mind'", Ch. III, *A Return to the Spirit*, Fons Vitae, 2005, p. 29.

<sup>24</sup> Arvind Sharma, 'Can Muslims Talk to Hindus?' in *Religions*, Doha International Centre for Interfaith Dialogue, 2009, p. 193.

<sup>25</sup> Sharma has used the translation of Mohammed Marmaduke Pickthall, *The Meaning of the Glorious Koran* (New York: The New American Library, 1972), p. 369.

or to put it in a modern idiom- to engage in dialogue so that it might bring out the best in them. Hence Muslims and Hindus can talk to each other not (only) because revelation is universal but because *diversity is universal* – a pervasive feature of the human condition. In other words, the diversity being celebrated here is ‘radical,’ in its etymological sense of pertaining to the roots of the human condition. I would therefore propose that it is possible for Muslims to talk to Hindus without this possibility having to be mediated through the category of *ahl al-kitāb*, which is to say that Muslims can talk directly to Hindus just because they constitute two different communities and that this difference is meant to enable them to come to know each other. The Qur’ān provides what we might call an anthropological basis as distinct from a revelatory basis for Muslims to talk to Hindus.<sup>26</sup>

#### QUR’ANIC PERSPECTIVE – HINDU SPECIFIC

Although Hindus and Hinduism are not directly mentioned in the Qur’ān by name, the *Purānas*, one of the most important sources of Hindu thought and practice, is mentioned in the Qur’ān (26.196).

*And (the same message) is found in the Scriptures of the Ancients (Zubur al-Awwalīn).*

This is an exact, word to word rendering of the Sanskrit word *Purāna* (old, ancient) into Arabic. Muslim scholarship has identified it as an elliptical reference to the *Purānas*. Interestingly,

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<sup>26</sup>. ‘That ethnical and cultural diversity are part of God’s plan, as the Qur’an confirms (49:13) was a fact accepted even [*sic*] by Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328).’ Tamara Sonn, *A Brief History of Islam*, Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2004, p. 127. The verse however is cited here in the context of internal diversity within Islam.



one of these, the *Bhawishiya Purāna* (The Ancient Scripture of the Future),<sup>27</sup> mentions Kālki, the tenth and the last Avatar of Vishnu and the description, which generated a lot of debate and provided considerable fuel to many missionary agendas, carries a striking correspondence to Prophet Muhammad.<sup>28</sup>

There is a category of the 'Religious Other' counted among the 'saved' communities in the Qur'ān called the *Sabians* (*al-Ṣābi'īn*):

*Verily the Faithful<sup>29</sup> and the Jews and the Sabians and the Christians, whosoever believeth in God and the Last Day and doeth deeds of piety-no fear shall come upon them neither shall they grieve.*"<sup>30</sup>

The precise meaning of the reference to the *Sabians* has long perplexed the Qur'ān commentators, jurists and other religious scholars. There is no consensus of opinion as to which religious group is referred to by this word and certain Muslim rulers in India and elsewhere have taken this verse as a basis for tolerance towards their non-Muslim, non-Christian and non-Jewish subjects. The majority of scholars have become inclined to the view that the word *Sabians* is a cumulative title or reference for the other two families of world religions i.e. the Aryan

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<sup>27</sup>. Enlisted by Al-Birūnī though he frankly tells us that he has read only a few of these 18 *Purānas*. See *Al-Beruni's India*, E. C. Sachau (trans.), Delhi, rep. 1964, p. 130.

<sup>28</sup>. Pundit Vaid Parkash is a Brahman Hindu and a well-known Sanskrit research scholar who concluded that the guide and prophet called 'Kalki Autar' refers to Muhammad (*pbuh*). As an argument to prove the authenticity of his research, Pundit Vaid Parkash says that the Veda, another sacred book among Hindus, mentions that 'Kalki Autar' will be the last Messenger or Prophet of Bhagawan to guide the whole world.

<sup>29</sup>. Muslims.

<sup>30</sup>. Qur'ān (2:62); repeated almost *verbatim* at (5:69).

mythologies and Shamanistic religions. In this view, the verse could be including Hinduism and other religious traditions along with Abrahamic Monotheisms.<sup>31</sup>

## LEGAL PERSPECTIVE

Since it would be instructive to glance at the roots of the Muslim appraisal of the religio-juridical status of Hinduism and Buddhism, let us take a look at the Indian subcontinent where Islam met the Hindu and Buddhist wisdom traditions – the oldest among the revealed religions according to our understanding – for the first time and where the legal perspective was initially formulated. One of the earliest and most decisive encounters between Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism on the Indian soil took place during the short but successful campaign of the young Umayyad general, Muḥammad b. Qāsim in Sind in 711 AD. During the conquest of this predominantly Buddhist province, he received petitions from the indigenous Buddhists and Hindus in the important city of Brahmanabad regarding the restoration of their temples and the upholding of their religious rights generally. He consulted his superior, the governor of Kufa, Hajjāj b. Yūsuf, who in turn consulted his religious scholars. The result of these deliberations was the formulation of an official position, which was to set a decisive precedent of religious tolerance for the ensuing centuries of Muslim rule in India. Hajjāj wrote a letter to Muhammad b. Qāsim, This letter became known as the

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<sup>31</sup>. Also see Manāzīr Aḥsan Gilānī, 'The Sabeans', *Al-Ma'ārif*, Ali Garh, 1934; M. Ikram Chaghata'ī, *Ifādāt-i-Manāzīr Aḥsan Gilānī*, Lahore, 2017; Also see Rene Guenon, 'On the Exact Meaning of the Word Hindu', *Introduction to the Study of Hindu Doctrines*, Luzac, London, 1945. New edition, Sophia Perennis, San Rafael, CA, 2013.

'Brahmanabad settlement.'<sup>32</sup> Part of the letter includes the following:

The request of the chiefs of Brahmanabad about the building of *Budd* and other temples, and toleration in religious matters, is just and reasonable. I do not see what further rights we can have over them beyond the usual tax. They have paid homage to us and have undertaken to pay the fixed tribute [*jizya*] to the Caliph. Because they have become *dhimmīs* we have no right whatsoever to interfere in their lives and property. Do permit them to follow their own religion. No one should prevent them.

Moreover, the Arab historian, Al-Balādhurī, quotes Muhammad bin Qāsim's famous statement made at Alor,<sup>33</sup> a city besieged for a week and then taken without force according to the following strict terms: there was to be no bloodshed, and the local faith would not be opposed. Indeed, Muhammad bin Qāsim was reported to have said:<sup>34</sup>

The temples [lit. *al-Budd*, but referring to the temples of the Buddhists and the Hindus, as well as the Jains] shall be treated by us as if they were the churches of the Christians, the synagogues of the Jews, and the fire temples of the Magians.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>32</sup>. *Chachnamah Retold—An Account of the Arab Conquest of Sindh*, Gobind Khushalani, New Delhi: Promilla, 2006, p. 156.

<sup>33</sup>. Arabised as 'al-Rūr'.

<sup>34</sup>. Abū al-Hasan al-Balādhurī, *Futūh al-Buldān*, Beirut: Maktaba al-Hilāl, 1988, p. 422 - 423.

<sup>35</sup>. *ibid.*, p. 424. See for further discussion, *History of Muslim Civilization in India and Pakistan*, S. M. Ikram, Lahore: Institute of Islamic Culture, 1989. It is thus not surprising to read, in the same historian's work, that when Muhammad bin

Although subsequent Muslim rulers varied in their degree of fidelity to this precedent establishing the principle of religious tolerance in India,<sup>36</sup> the point being made here is more theological than political. What is to be stressed is that Hindus and Buddhists were, in principle, to be granted the same religious and legal recognition as fellow monotheists, the Jews and the Christians or the 'People of the Book'. The implication of this act of recognition is clear: the religion these Hindus and Buddhists followed was not analogous to the pagan idolatrous religions, whose adherents were not granted such privileges. Rather, as a community akin to the 'People of the Book', they were regarded, implicitly if not explicitly, as recipients of an authentic divine revelation.

It may be argued, however, that granting Hindus and Buddhists legal recognition was in fact more political than theological; that the instinctive response of Hajjāj and his general stemmed more

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Qāsim died, 'The people of India wept at the death of Muhammad bin Qasim and made an image of him at Kiraj'.

<sup>36</sup>. One cannot overlook such acts as the destruction of the monastery at Valabhi by the Abbasid army in 782. But, to quote the Buddhist scholar, Dr Alexander Berzin, 'The destruction at Valabhi . . . was an exception to the general religious trends and official policies of the early Abbasid period. There are two plausible explanations for it. It was either the work of a militant fanatic general acting on his own, or a mistaken operation ordered because of the Arabs' confusing the local 'white-clad' Jains with supporters of Abu Muslim and then not differentiating the Buddhists from the Jains. It was not part of a *jihad* specifically against Buddhism.' See his 'The Historical Interaction between the Buddhist and Islamic Cultures before the Mongol Empire' in his 'The Berzin Archives—the Buddhist Archives of Dr Alexander Berzin' ([http://www.berzinarchives.com/web/en/archives/ebooks/unpublished\\_manuscripts/historical\\_interaction/pt2/history\\_cultures\\_10.html](http://www.berzinarchives.com/web/en/archives/ebooks/unpublished_manuscripts/historical_interaction/pt2/history_cultures_10.html)). The other acts of unprincipled violence by rogue Muslim generals, such as the destruction of the temple of Nalanda by Bakhtiyar Khalji in 1193, are to be seen, likewise, as contrary to the general religious trends and official policies of Muslim states acting in accordance with Islamic precepts. Such acts are thus to be seen as military-political exceptions which prove the religious rule: the religious rights of Hindus and Buddhists, as *dhimmi*s, were sacrosanct.

from hard-headed pragmatism than subtle theological reflection. While such pragmatism no doubt played a role in this historic decision, the point to be made is this: the scholars of Islam did not (and still do not) regard this 'pragmatic' policy as violating or compromising any fundamental theological principle of Islam. Pragmatism and principle went hand in hand. The implication of granting Hindus and Buddhists legal recognition, political protection and religious tolerance is that the spiritual path and moral code of the Hindu and Buddhist faith derive from an authentic revelation of God. If this principle was disputed by Muslims, the historical practice of granting Hindus and Buddhists *dhimmi* status would be seen as nothing more than 'Realpolitik' at best or a betrayal of certain theological principles at worst. Indeed, one would be guilty of according religious legitimacy to a false religion.

We would argue, on the contrary, that the Hindus and Buddhists were recognized - in an existential, intuitive and largely unarticulated manner by Muslims as followers of an authentic faith even if this faith appeared to contradict Islam in certain major respects. In fact, in their encounters with Hinduism and Buddhism, Muslims noticed sufficient 'family resemblances' between Hinduism and Buddhism and the 'People of the Book' for them to feel justified in extending to Hindus and Buddhists the same legal and religious rights granted to the 'People of the Book.' We would argue, furthermore, that the 'pragmatic' decision of the politicians and generals was actually in harmony with the Islamic revelation, despite certain reservations, refutations or denunciations stemming from popular Muslim

prejudice and despite the paucity of scholarly works<sup>37</sup> by Muslims making doctrinally explicit what was implied in the granting of *dhimmī* status to Hindus and Buddhists.

Let us also note that there is in the juristic tradition a lively debate about whether those communities to whom the *dhimmī* status was granted should also be regarded as *Ahl al-Kitāb* in the full sense. The great jurist, al-Shāfi'ī, founder of one of the four schools of law in Sunni Islam, asserted that the Qur'ānic references to the scriptures of Abraham and Moses (*suḥuf-i Ibrāhīm wa Mūsā*; 87:19) and the scriptures of the ancients (*zabur al-awwalīn*; 26:196) can be used as the basis for arguing that God revealed scriptures other than those specifically mentioned in the Qur'ān. He concludes that Zoroastrians, for example, can also be included in the category of *Ahl al-Kitāb* and need not be treated only as a 'protected community,' *Ahl al-dhimma*.<sup>38</sup>

## THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

It would be useful to explore further the implications of this early Muslim response to Hinduism and Buddhism and to provide a more explicit theological or spiritual justification for this response, which has formed the basis of the official policy of tolerance of Hinduism and Buddhism by Muslims world-wide. But that would be the subject of a separate study, which we cannot undertake here. The conclusion is, however, self-evident.

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<sup>37</sup>. The paucity of scholarly works in question was soon to be amply compensated for by Islamic scholarship after the establishment of Muslim Rule in the north of India with the arrival of Al- Bīrūnī, a process that has continued well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>38</sup>. Al-Shāfi'ī, *Kitāb al-Umm*, 4/245 *et passim*. Also see, Yohanan Friedmann, *Tolerance and Coercion in Islam – Interfaith Relations in the Muslim Tradition* Cambridge: CUP, 2003, p. 81.

If Hindus and Buddhists are recognized as akin to the 'People of the Book', then they are implicitly to be included in the spectrum of 'saved' communities, as expressed in one of the most universal verses of the Qur'ān quoted earlier:

*Truly those who believe and those who are Jews, and the Christians and the Sabians- whoever believes in God and the Last Day and performs virtuous acts- for such, their reward is with their Lord, no fear or suffering will befall them. (2:62)*

One has to make explicit that which in large part has hitherto remained implicit: if Hindus, like Jews, Christians and *Sabians*, are to be treated as 'People of the Book' and thus placed within the sphere of those believers mentioned in this verse, it should be possible for Muslims to recognize Hindu doctrines as expressing 'belief in God and the Last Day', and to recognize the acts prescribed by Hindus as 'virtuous acts'.

Indeed, in light of the verses cited above, it should be possible to demonstrate that the essence of the Hindu message is at one with the immutable and unique message of all the Messengers:

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

This verse confirms the uniqueness of the message: "*Nothing is said unto you [Muhammad] but what was said unto the Messengers before you.*" (41:43) If it cannot be shown that the essence of the Hindu message is at one with that of the message of the Qur'ān, it might be possible at least to demonstrate that it is 'like' it: "*And if they believe in the like of that which ye believe, then are they rightly guided.*" (2:137) If even this cannot be done, then one is deprived

of much of the religio-legal ground or the spiritual logic of the conventional Muslim practice of granting *dhimmi* status to Hindus. For this status must imply that, unlike man-made paganism, the religion practiced by them is – or at least was<sup>39</sup> – an authentic one, revealed by God.

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<sup>39</sup>. This reservation is important, for the overwhelming majority of Muslim scholars accept that the 'People of the Book' are undoubtedly recipients of an authentic revelation which inaugurates their respective traditions but that they have not been faithful to that revelation, whether through deliberate distortion of their scriptures (*tahrif*) or through a degeneration which is the effect of the passage of time. The Hindu Scriptures refer to the inevitability of such a degeneration in numerous prophecies, which gave rise to further prophecies in the course of time. Even Buddha himself referred to the inevitability of such a degeneration in numerous sayings, which gave rise to five centuries of development after his passing away. According to Edward Conze, 'Prophecies dating from the beginning of the Christian era have given 2,500 years as the duration of the teaching of the Buddha Śakyamuni.' E. Conze, *Buddhism – A Short History*, Oxford: Oneworld, 2000, p. 141. What matters in an exploration of common ground is the concordance on the level of principles, the extent to which these principles are practiced is a different question altogether.