



The Fate of Non-Muslims: Perspectives on Salvation Outside of Islam

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Abstract

What is the fate of non-Muslims after death? This essay lays out three different answers that Muslims have proposed regarding non-Muslims who have had the message of Islam reliably presented to them (since those who have not are not considered responsible) : 1) the view that Islam is the only true religion and those who reject it cannot attain salvation except if God wills it; 2) moral theism, which holds that salvation awaits all those who believe in God and do good deeds; and 3) Perennialism, the belief that all religions revealed by God are valid paths to truth and salvation. This essay presents the main evidence mustered by each approach as well as the principal criticisms leveled against each of them. It concludes by suggesting that anxiety over the fate of Muslims and non-Muslims after death is best assuaged by trusting in God's total justice and immense mercy.

Do All Good People Go to Heaven?

When my father died almost two years ago, my young son, who was then just barely old enough to have formed memories of 'Sidu Jonathan,' asked where he had gone. All I could think to say was that his grandfather had gone to *al-Akhira*, the Hereafter. What is *al-Akhira*? It's a wonderful place, I answered, in another world.

My father was Christian. He rarely talked about religion, but he went to church weekly. And he was a good man. What was my father's fate when his soul exited his body? The truth is I don't know. So why did I tell my son he had gone to Heaven? What else could I say?

The influential French sociologist Emile Durkheim (d. 1917) developed a theory that religion and society were effectively one and the same. Communal identity and group solidarity weren't just affected by religion or aspects of it, they were its very heart and purpose. Religions functioned to unite and bind together community, dividing 'us' and 'them' with the language of the sacred and profane,

heaven and hell. A century ago, a Czech ethnographer named Alois Musil (d. 1944) travelled around what is today northern Saudi Arabia, Iraq, and Syria, documenting the life and cultures of the Bedouins he encountered. He observed that the Rwala Bedouins believed that the Afterlife was divided into Paradise, which was a place “below ground” with plentiful rain, where all the Rwala went and dwelled prosperously; and Hell, which was, not coincidentally, a place above ground, scorched by the sun, where all the non-Rwala ended up. (FYI: The Rwala did not even identify with Islam, noted Musil. They dismissed it as a “weak” religion that could not alleviate the suffering of the settled townsfolk who followed it).¹

We might find the Rwala conviction laughable. After all, religions are about beliefs, faith, morals, etc. But even adherents of the world’s great faiths all too easily lapse into communitarianism à la Durkheim. In 2015 a hysterically funny Egyptian YouTube faux-talk show, ‘What’s Behind the Crutains (sic) (*Mā warā’ al-Kawālīs*),’ skewered such thinking in Egyptian society. After over a dozen young men died in a nightclub fire, the host of the show had a [mock interview](#) with the bar’s ‘owner.’ Describing the victims, the faux-owner rasped, “These youths were martyrs, who will enter Heaven.” Asked by the host how he’d concluded this, he replied, “Aren’t they Egyptians? When Egyptians die, don’t we call them martyrs? So why not these guys?!”

If Rwala beliefs seem laughable, this satire points out the kitschy nationalism behind the common claim that all those who die for the home/father/mother-land are martyrs. But many Americans are not far off. A 2005 survey of American teens found that, across faiths, young Americans tended to share a common understanding of religion. The authors dubbed it Moralistic Therapeutic Deism, and its main features are:

- A God exists who created the world and watches over human life

¹ Alois Musil, *The Manners and Customs of the Rwala Bedouins* (New York: American Geographical Society, 1928), 479, 674-75.

- God wants people to be good, kind, and fair to each other, as taught by most world religions
- The main goal of life is to be happy
- There is no need for God to be particularly involved in one's life, except when He is needed to resolve a problem
- Good people go to heaven when they die.²

Of course, we can easily substitute 'good people' with 'people we like' or 'people close to us'; in short, people in our community. Believing that only followers of one's own religion go to heaven, the authors noted, was suspect among American youth.³

Now, I do not share Durkheim's view, nor do I believe that Moralistic Therapeutic Deism is the best way to approach religion. Religion is not just about being a 'good person,' in large part because it's immensely difficult to know what that is supposed to mean—so difficult, in fact, that God has sent revelation to aid us in doing so. Nor is religion just about 'our group' being the good guys and going to heaven, while the bad guys go to hell. If by religion one means the belief that an eternal and all-powerful entity and order lies behind our created world, both beyond it and yet also closer to us than our jugular vein (Qur'an 50:16), allowing us to fulfill our purpose and find peace in recognizing and obeying it, then, no, religion is not just about society. Society is just an aspect of the created world and an element of human life. And if it seems hard to think of anything meaning more than community—or to strip it to its barest and most visceral—than the bond between parent and child, then that's just because the life of our world is but an alluring veil over this ultimate Reality, nothing more than "play, vanity, an ornament, boasting amongst yourselves and rivalry for gain in money and kin" (Qur'an 57:20).

² Christian Smith and Melinda Lundquist Denton, *Soul Searching: The Religious and Spiritual Lives of American Teenagers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 162-63; Rod Dreher, *The Benedict Option* (New York: Sentinel, 2017), 10.

³ Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, 170.

Moralistic Therapeutic Deism is, first and foremost, pragmatic. Religion is fine, the youth said, as long as it helps *you* and gives *you* meaning. Otherwise, who are we to judge?⁴ But this is not the position of the great world religions. They are not self-help programs. They are (or at least claim to be) the only correct windows on ultimate truth. As the great historian Marshall Hodgson wrote, they demand “exclusive historical commitment.”⁵ My loving someone or thinking they’re a good person is meaningless as regards their standing before God and their salvation. So the question is there, and the pain is real: my heart longs for those I love, those I know to be good, to be guaranteed supreme peace in eternity. But is that what my religion says will happen? How do we reconcile our feeling that it’s wrong for good people not to attain salvation after death simply because they follow the wrong religion with the claim of many religions that only their followers will attain salvation?

How should Muslims resolve this conundrum?

Those Ignorant of Islam

Before we can answer this, three important points need to be made. First, regardless of what it means for one’s fate in the Afterlife, the division of Muslim and non-Muslim has concrete meaning for the daily life of Muslims. Quite apart from one’s eternal fate, being a Muslim entails certain duties, relationships, rights, and obligations in *this* world. And, however merciful God might be, in this world we operate on people’s external professions of faith. For earthly purposes, in the Islamic tradition people who profess Islam are called Muslims, and those who do not profess Islam are called unbelievers (*kuffār*). This distinction has no *necessary* link to one’s actual faith or fate in the Afterlife. And disapproval of people’s outward professions of faith need not in any way condemn or even negatively color our interactions with them. As the Qur’an says, “God does not prohibit you from being good and dealing justly with those who have not fought you in your religion

⁴ Smith and Denton, *Soul Searching*, 163.

⁵ Marshall Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), 1:29.

or driven you from your homes” (Qur'an 60:8). Moreover, the Prophet ﷺ explained that one's neighbor has rights whether they are Muslim or not. He said:

*The rights of a neighbor are that, if he falls sick you visit him, if he dies you follow his funeral procession, if he asks you for a loan you lend to him, if he is in need you assist him, if good befalls him you congratulate him, if misfortune befalls him you console him, that you not build your house up above his, blocking out the breeze, and that you not afflict him with the aroma of your cooking pot without offering him some.*⁶

Here it is useful to recall the distinction that Muslim scholars have made between internal ‘Foundational Faith (*īmān fiṭrī*)’ and ‘Legal Faith (*īmān shar‘ī*).’⁷ The first is the true, actual nature of a person's faith, known to them and God alone. The second is their faith-as-community-identification. So a random Muslim (let's call him Ahmad al-Doe) is assumed to be Muslim for purposes of law: Ahmad al-Doe has the rights and responsibilities of a Muslim. Ahmad al-Doe will be buried in a Muslim graveyard, etc. Whether or not this legal status reflects Ahmad's true, internal faith is a separate matter that we cannot know. He might well be an atheist in reality. Muslims are instructed by the Prophet ﷺ to accept outward professions of faith and not to seek to plumb the inner recesses of others' hearts. When a man in Medina asked the Prophet's permission to kill some of the *Munafiqun*, those Hypocrites in Medina who professed Islam outwardly but whom the Qur'an exposed as deceitful unbelievers (Qur'an 4:60-63, 140-46), the Prophet ﷺ prohibited him. It was a person's external profession of faith and outward performance of the prayer, regardless of how insincere they might be, that qualified that person as a Muslim.⁸

⁶ This *hadith* is considered weak by many scholars, but Ibn Ḥajar al-‘Asqalānī states that it has a basis (*aṣl*) from the Prophet ﷺ. See Murtaḍā al-Zabīdī, *Iṭḥāf al-sāda al-muttaqīn bi-sharḥ Iḥyā' ‘ulūm al-dīn*, 10 vols. (Beirut: Mu'assasat al-Tārīkh al-‘Arabī, 1994), 6:308–309.

⁷ Ḥamd al-Khaṭṭābī, *Ma ‘ālim al-sunan* (Beirut: al-Maktaba al-‘Ilmiyya, 1981), 4:325.

⁸ *Muwaṭṭa'* of Mālik: *kitāb qaṣr al-ṣalāt fī al-safar, bāb jāmi' al-ṣalāt*.

Conversely, a person whose legal identity is Christian is classified as an unbeliever in Islamic law; they are not buried in a Muslim cemetery, etc. But they might be a true monotheist and moral exemplar who just never heard the message of Islam and someone who God will reward with a place in the Garden. This distinction between Internal Faith and Legal Faith arises in an interesting *fatwa* given by the great Tunisian scholar Muhammad Tahir Ibn ‘Ashur (d. 1973). Asked if a Muslim man can marry a Christian woman even if that woman is, in actuality, an atheist, Ibn ‘Ashur replied that as long as the woman doesn’t explicitly say she’s an atheist, she’s assumed to belong to the religious community she grew up in.⁹

A second important point is that Heaven (generally referred to as the Garden in the Qur’an) and Hell (generally referred to as the Fire) are not two simple categories, like First Class and economy. As the Qur’an alludes to in its reference to various levels of Heaven and Hell, punishment and reward differ according to a person’s faith and deeds. As the great scholar al-Ghazali (d. 1111) describes, “The levels of people vary in the degrees of pain and pleasure in innumerable ways.” There are, in effect, as many different levels of Heaven and Hell as there are people, since each person will be judged with absolute and exact justice.¹⁰

Finally, the third and perhaps most important point is a basic principle of Islamic theology: people are not accountable for things outside their control. In this case, what that means is that the question ‘Are religions other than Islam valid?’ simply doesn’t apply to people who never hear about Islam. One school of Islamic theology, the Maturidi school, holds that even if a person lived on a desert island with no access to any religious instruction they are still expected to arrive at a belief in the Creator by use of reason alone. But this person would not be faulted for not following *Islam* as we know it since they had never been informed of it. The other schools of theology in Islam go even further: God will [not punish people](#) for not believing in Him or for not following His chosen religion if they had no

⁹ Muḥammad Ṭāhir Ibn ‘Āshūr, *Fatāwā al-shaykh al-imām Muḥammad Ṭāhir Ibn ‘Āshūr*, ed. Muḥammad Ibrāhīm Bū Zughayba (Dubai: Markaz Jum‘at al-Mājid li’l-Thaqāfa wa’l-Turāth, 2004), 366.

¹⁰ Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī, *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*, trans. Michael Marmura (Provo: Brigham Young University Press, 1997), 212; idem, *Iḥyā’ ‘ulūm al-dīn*, ed. Muḥammad Wahbī Sulaymān and Usāma ‘Ammūra (Damascus: Dār al-Fikr, 2006), 4:2476-77.

reliable access to the revelation of a prophet. How exactly God would evaluate the fate of such people in the Afterlife is disagreed on, with some questionable *hadiths* describing how these people will be asked to vault over fires on the Day of Judgment, and other scholars simply saying that God will judge them in just and fair terms unknown to us.¹¹

People who've had no true access to God's religion are known as the *Ahl al-Fatra*, roughly translatable as 'People of Times of Weakened Prophecy.' They are those people who live in a time and place that the message of God's prophets has not *reliably*¹² reached. The notion of the *Ahl al-Fatra* is based on the wording of Qur'an 5:19 and the principle laid out in Qur'an 17:15, namely that, "No bearer of burdens will bear the burden of another, and We would not punish [a people] until We had sent a messenger." That those who died in a time of weakened prophecy will be judged independently on the Day of Judgment is also affirmed in a *hadith* referring to the *Ahl al-Fatra*, which is found in the *Sahih* of Ibn Hibban (d. 965)

¹¹ Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī, *al-Hāwī li'l-fatāwī*, 2 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Kitāb al-ʿArabī, n.d.), 2:404; Muḥammad Nāṣir al-Dīn al-Albānī, *Silsilat al-aḥādīth al-ṣaḥīḥa*, #1434, #2468. One narration reads 'arba 'a yawm al-qiyāma yudlaww bi-ḥujja rajul aṣamm lā yasma 'u wa rajul aḥmaq wa rajul harim wa man māta fī al-fatra... and that even if they entered the Fire it would be cool and tranquil for them. This is found in the *Ṣaḥīḥ* of Ibn Ḥibbān, the *Musnad* of Aḥmad Ibn Ḥanbal (Maymaniyya printing), 4:24 and other collections. A second version explains that their fate will depend on whether God had ordained salvation (*sa'āda*) or perdition (*shaqāwa*) for them. Another version, found in the *Musnad* of Abū Ya' lā al-Mawṣilī (*yu'tā bi-arba 'a yawm al-qiyāma...*; or *arba 'a yaḥtajjūn yawm al-qiyāma...*) is cited as proof for the existence of the *Ahl al-Fatra* category by Abū al-Ḥasan al-Ash'arī; al-Ash'arī, *al-Ibāna 'an uṣūl al-diyāna*, ed. Fawqīyya Ḥusayn Maḥmūd (Cairo: Dār al-Anṣār, 1977), 33. This latter version of the *hadith* contains a section describing how the *Ahl al-Fatra* will be judged by God by being asked to jump through a fire. This element caused some controversy and disagreement. The famous Andalusian judge and *hadith* scholar Ibn 'Abd al-Barr (d. 1070) rejected this version completely. He argues that, though this narration has sound (*ṣaḥīḥ*) *isnāds*, it is not widely transmitted enough or free enough of flaws in transmission (*'ilal*) to establish the "major principle" it claims. And it is contradicted by other principles that are too well known. First of all, the Afterlife is not "a site for acts/deeds, it is a site of reward/punishment. So how could God order a person who never heard a messenger to do an act to prove belief?" For Ibn 'Abd al-Barr, how the *Ahl al-Fatra* are dealt with is a matter of God's divine decree and power (*qadar*) that we should not get into; Ibn 'Abd al-Barr, *al-Istidhḳār*, ed. 'Abd al-Mu'ī Amīn Qal'ajī (Beirut: Dār Qutayba, 1993), 8:404; idem, *al-Tamhīd li-mā fī al-Muwaṭṭa' min al-ma'ānī wa'l-asānīd*, ed. Muṣṭafā Aḥmad al-'Alawī and Muḥammad 'Abd al-Kabīr al-Bakrī, 2nd ed., 26 vols. (Rabat: Wizārat 'Umūm al-Awqāf wa'l-Shu'ūn al-Islāmiyya, 1982-), 18:130.

¹² Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī, *On the Boundaries of Theological Tolerance in Islam: Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī's Fayṣal al-Tafrīqa*, trans. Sherman A. Jackson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 126. One of the requirements for a person to be held accountable (*mukallaḥ*) before God for the sacred law and the message of prophets is that the message have reached them (*bulūgh al-da'wā*). According to the contemporary Ash'arī theologian Sa'īd Fūda, this requires massive parallel transmission (*tawātur*) or something similar to it. See Sa'īd Fūda, "Sharḥ Jawharat al-Tawhīd, part 5," available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JiYmS_egwkE.

and other less rigorous collections (al-Suyuti considered its various narrations to be *hasan* and al-Albani ranked it as *sahih*).¹³

There are several questions around the issue of the *Ahl al-Fatra*. If people have had no exposure to a revealed message at all, then clearly they can't be held accountable for not heeding it. But what about people who hear about a prophet's message but don't have reliable information about it or only come across misrepresentations? This is highly pertinent when we think about the *Ahl al-Fatra* since the time of the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ. Some Native Americans in the first decades of US history might have heard British colonists talking about some foreign religion called Islam, but what they heard was probably not very accurate or positive. Would this count as them having heard the message of Islam to the extent that God would hold them accountable for not heeding it? Al-Ghazali and other Muslim scholars stated that, in order to be held accountable, one has to hear about Islam by reliable means and in a reasonably accurate way.¹⁴

So what about some American living in rural Nebraska who only hears the word Islam mentioned in the context of terrorism, the oppression of women, and images of graphic violence? Can we really say that this person should be expected to seek out more reliable information on Islam, let alone embrace the religion? The famous Salafī scholar of Yemen, Muqbil al-Wadī'i (d. 2001), concluded that the answer was no, and that the people of the US and Europe were a modern *Ahl al-Fatra*.¹⁵ A more dramatic position was taken by the influential early twentieth-century scholar Rashid Rida (d. 1935). He argued that people cannot be considered to have heard the message of Islam unless they heard it in an attractive and compelling way, an idea seconded more recently by Yusuf al-Qaradawi. Such people will be judged by God based on the standards of what they knew to be true and good.¹⁶

¹³ Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī, *al-Hāwī li'l-fatāwā*, 2 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Kitāb al-ʿArabī, n.d.), 2:404; al-Albānī, *Silsilat al-aḥādīth al-ṣaḥīḥa*, #1434, #2468.

¹⁴ Al-Ghazālī, *On the Boundaries of Theological Tolerance in Islam*, 126.

¹⁵ Muqbil bin Hādī al-Wādī'ī, *Majmūʿ fatāwā al-Wādī'ī*, ed. Ṣādiq Muḥammad al-Bayḍānī ([No place, no publisher], 2005), 414.

¹⁶ Mohammad Hassan Khalil, *Islam and the Fate of Others* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 132.

Three Approaches

So now we've dealt with those who either never hear about Islam or know of it only as a religion of terror and violence. **But what about non-Muslims who are informed reliably and accurately about Islam's teachings and yet do not convert? What is their fate in the Afterlife?**

As far as I understand, three answers have been offered in the Islamic tradition. I describe them here, along with their main scriptural support and the questions they raise. Please note: at this point I'm not advocating any one of them. I am merely presenting them and trying to lay out arguments for and against them. Attention: to anyone accusing me of advocating one of these positions, read the previous two sentences.

In the section that follows two issues will reappear. First, what is the status of someone who rejects Islam even after learning accurately about its message? If that person follows another religion, can it be considered a valid path to salvation? Second, even if other paths are not 'true' religions in comparison to Islam, would their followers still have any chance of eventually achieving salvation (perhaps after some period of punishment)?

1. Islam is the Only Path

This school of thought is exclusive. It holds that only by embracing the message of the Qur'an and the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ, only by adopting the religion we know of as Islam, can one attain salvation in the Hereafter. One must fulfill the three parts of faith (*īmān*): affirmation in one's heart, bearing testimony with one's tongue (or, if unable, with a gesture), and undertaking actions to realize one's declaration. Otherwise, one is condemned. We see evidence for this in Qur'anic verses like:

- “Whoever seeks other than Islam as a religion, it will not be accepted from him, and he shall be in the Hereafter among the lost.” (3:85)
- “Truly religion in the sight of God is Islam.” (3:19)
- “But whoever opposes the Messenger, after guidance has been made clear to him, and follows a way other than that of the believers, We shall leave him on [the path] he has taken, and We shall cause him to burn in Hell—what an evil journey’s end! (4:115, see also 48:13).

This has been the position of almost all Muslim scholars across the board for fourteen hundred years, and it is the position of all traditional schools of Islamic theology without exception.¹⁷ Embracing Islam is the only path to salvation and the only attainment of truth.

2. Belief in God and Doing Good Deeds

One might call this the moral theism school of thought. It holds that anyone who believes in God and does good deeds can attain salvation. Its main evidence in the Qur’an are the verses:

- “Indeed, those who believe, and the Jews, and the Christians, and the Sabians, those who believe in God and the Last Day and work righteousness, they shall have their reward with their Lord; no fear need they have, neither shall they grieve.” (2:62)
- Coming in between verses criticizing Christians and Jews for making claims of salvific exclusivity, God declares, “Nay, but whoever submits (*aslama*) themselves totally to God and does good, they will have their reward with their Lord, no fear need they have and neither shall they grieve.” (2:112)

There are also *hadiths*, such as:

¹⁷ See, for example, Muḥyī al-Dīn al-Nawawī, *Sharḥ Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, 15 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Qalam, 1987), 2:59.

- “Whoever says ‘There is no god but God’ enters the Garden.”¹⁸

This is not a position easily located in the pre-modern Islamic tradition. Explicit advocates of this school of thought seem to have emerged only in the twentieth century, especially amongst Islamic Modernists. It has been tenuously (almost certainly incorrectly) attributed to Rashid Rida (d. 1935).¹⁹ The influential Pakistani modernist scholar Fazlur Rahman (d. 1988) clearly advanced this position. He argued that verses like Qur'an 2:62 are obvious expressions of the Qur'an's anti-exclusionary ethos and concluded that the verses' meaning was obvious: “that those—from any section of humankind—who believe in God and the Last Day and do good deeds are saved.” This was, for Rahman, an inevitable result of God's boundless mercy.²⁰ The most articulate defense of the moral theism position comes from the South African liberation theologian Farid Esack, who builds on Rahman's argument and offers responses to its critics.²¹

Beyond the Qur'anic verses cited above, the Islamic argument for the moral theism school would go like this: God states in the Qur'an that every community has been sent a messenger (some 124,00 in all, according to a *hadith* in the *Musnad* of Ibn Hanbal).²² The core of God's message is always the same, though the details might differ (“And we did not send any messenger before you except that We reveal to him ‘There is no deity other than God, so worship him (you plural),’” Qur'an 21:25). So an advocate of this school might argue that the world prior to the coming of Muhammad ﷺ was replete with people sincerely following the inherited teachings of those prophets, regardless of how badly those teachings might have been corrupted (such as the Christian belief that Jesus was God incarnate on earth). Followers who inherited those teachings could and did nonetheless excel in piety and devotion to God, as the Qur'an describes:

¹⁸ *Jāmi' al-Tirmidhī: kitāb al-īmān, bāb mā jā'a fī-man yamūtu wa huwa yashhadu an lā ilāh illā Allāh..* The more complete version of this *hadith* is, “Whoever has testified that there is no god but God and that Muhammad is the messenger of God, God has made the Fire prohibited for him”; *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim: kitāb al-īmān, bāb man laqiya Allāh bi'l-īmān wa huwa ghayr shākk fīhi dakhala al-janna wa ḥaruma 'alayhi al-nār*. Al-Albānī considers this narration to be *ḥasan*; al-Albānī, *Ṣaḥīḥ Sunan al-Tirmidhī*, revised ed. (Riyadh: Maktabat al-Ma'ārif, 2000), 3:51-52.

¹⁹ Khalil, *Islam and the Fate of Others*, 112-123.

²⁰ Fazlur Rahman, *The Major Themes of the Qur'an*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis: Bibliotheca Islamica, 1994), 166.

²¹ Farid Esack, *Qur'an, Liberation and Pluralism* (Oxford: Oneworld, 1997), 160-5.

²² *Musnad* of Aḥmad Ibn Ḥanbal (Maymaniyya printing), 5:265-66.

And among the People of the Book is an upright community who recite God's signs in the watches of the night while they prostrate. They believe in God and the Last Day, enjoin right and forbid wrong, and hasten unto good deeds. And they are among the righteous. Whatsoever good they do, they will not be denied it. (Qur'an 3:113-115)

This would seem to be a strong endorsement of the legitimacy of the religions of the People of the Book at least as they were practiced by some of their better adherents.

This approach to moral theism has sometimes been termed covenant pluralism, which argues that the numerous covenants that God made with earlier communities through prophets like Moses and Jesus retain some degree of salvific validity even after the revelation of the Qur'an (we'll discuss problems with this below).

Another version of the moral theism argument generalizes 'Islam' itself. Its proponents argue that the above Qur'anic verses stressing that only 'Islam' will be accepted as a valid religion must be read in English not as Islam with a capital *I*, meaning the formal religious tradition, but rather as the Arabic *islam*, with a lower-case *i*, or the generic act of submission to God (Arabic does not have the capital/lower case distinction). By this reading, being a *muslim* and following *islam* is open to anyone who obeys God and seeks to be righteous. So any of those who believe in God and submit to His worship and do good deeds will attain salvation at some point.

There are two serious flaws in the moral theism argument. First, some of the verses providing key proof for the exclusivist school seem to be statements made specifically to condemn Christians and Jews for refusing to embrace Muhammad ﷺ's message. Verses like "Truly religion in the sight of God is Islam," are immediately followed by criticisms of the People of the Book, upbraiding them for not heeding God's final revelation (3:20-22). One could argue that these criticisms are only directed at certain deviant People of the Book (*farīq minhum*, mentioned

in the next verse 3:23); i.e., the bad ones. But, as we'll see below, the verses praising those pious folk among the People of the Book are conditioned on them then accepting the guidance God has sent with Muhammad ﷺ. It's therefore hard then to read 'islam' in those verses as generic submission to God instead of a proper noun for a specific religion distinct from Christianity and Judaism.

Second, ecumenical expressions in the Qur'an face the obstacle of the book's revelation over the twenty-two years of the Prophet ﷺ's career. Many verses referring to the People of the Book might well be overtures to Arabian Christians and Jews who were being presented with Muhammad ﷺ's message for the first time. The Qur'an thus would offer confirmation of the revealed truth lying at the core of their religions, and even praising the pious and goodly among them, while also calling them to heed the Messenger whose revelation replaced theirs. If those Christians and Jews chose to ignore Muhammad ﷺ's call to follow God's final revelation, then they would be guilty of denying the truth regardless of how valid their belief and practice was prior to that. Muslim scholars over the centuries have understood verses such as 'no fear need they have and neither shall they grieve' either as referring only to those People of the Book who had also affirmed belief in Muhammad ﷺ's message, or as being abrogated (*mansūkh*) by verses revealed later that stress Islam's exclusive claim to truth and salvation.²³

If they are abrogated, then verses such as "among the People of the Book is an upright community...They believe in God and the Last Day, they enjoin right and forbid wrong and hasten to goodly deeds...Whatsoever good they do, they will not be denied it" (3:113-115) should not be read as endorsements of prior religions or affirmations of their validity in the eyes of God even after the revelation of Muhammad ﷺ. Rather, they should be read as overtures to the People of the Book, but overtures that ceased to be valid for those Jews, Christians, etc. who learned about the Prophet's message but chose to reject it.

²³ See al-Qurṭubī, *al-Jāmi' li-aḥkām al-Qur'ān*, ed. Muḥammad Ibrāhīm al-Ḥifnāwī and Maḥmūd Ḥamid 'Uthmān, 20 vols in 10. (Cairo: Dār al-Ḥadīth, 1994), 1:394 (on Qur'an 2:62).

Farid Esack offers a response to this criticism, arguing that classical Muslim scholars suffered from a closed-mindedness regarding the Qur'an's powerful ethos of religious recognition and proposing that the people that the Qur'an refers to as 'those who believe' are believers in all times and places regardless if they have heard of Islam or not.²⁴ For this response to be valid, we would have to assume that this powerful ethos of religious recognition outweighed the severity of the People of the Book in question denying Muhammad ﷺ's prophetic claims—denials made to the Prophet's face.

Other evidence against the moral theism school are numerous *hadiths* specifically describing how non-Muslim communities like Jews and Christians will be denied entrance into Heaven on the Day of Judgment. The most reliable *hadiths* (in the *Sahihayn*) describe a process by which those who worshipped false deities are condemned to Hellfire, with only those "who worship God, whether righteous or iniquitous" remaining to be judged. This group includes the Muslims and the People of the Book.²⁵ The Christians and Jews will then be asked about their beliefs. They will be condemned for their false ones, such as the belief that Jesus is the son of God. The Muslims will follow the Prophet ﷺ across a great Bridge leading to the Gardens of Paradise, and he will also use his right of intercession (*shafā'a*) to rescue sinners from among his community from punishment. As the Muslims cross the Bridge, some will pass safely, some will suffer torment on the Bridge because of their sins, and some will fall into Hellfire.

An advocate of the moral theism school could respond that it is clearly established in the Sunna that even many sinful Muslims will suffer punishment in the Afterlife before earning their admission into some level of the Garden. A *hadith* in the *Sahihayn* states that God will order "'Whoever had a mustard seed's weight of faith in his heart, remove him [from the Fire], and they will be removed, having

²⁴ Esack, *Qur'an, Liberation and Pluralism*, 160-165.

²⁵ *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī: kitāb al-riqāq, bāb al-ṣirāt jīsr Jahannam; Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim: kitāb al-īmān, bāb ma 'rifat ṭarīq al-ru'ya.*

been burned and returning like coals. Then they will be thrown into the River of Life, and they will grow like a seed grows in the soil carried (*ḥamīl*) by floods.”²⁶

So being destined for punishment in Hellfire is not necessarily an *eternal* sentence. The great scholar Ibn Hajar (d. 1449) described how a report in *Sahih al-Bukhari* about the Prophet ﷺ's unbelieving uncle Abu Talib shows that even an unbeliever (*kāfir*) can have their punishment in the Hereafter reduced thanks to good deeds they had performed in life.²⁷

Another argument that could be invoked by the moral theism school of thought is that the punishment in Hellfire is not eternal for anyone, and that Hellfire will eventually be extinguished and those suffering in it freed. This is due to the fact that, according to a sound *hadith*, God decreed before the creation of the universe that “My mercy overwhelms my anger.”²⁸ This point was advanced by the famous scholars Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328) and his student Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya (d. 1351) (who may have been more agnostic on the point), and they used as their main evidence opinions to that fact from the Companions Umar and Ibn Mas‘ud (ra). God’s mercy, they proposed, was simply too overwhelming for any human to assert with confidence that He would damn people to eternal suffering.²⁹

Later Sunni scholars were highly skeptical that Hellfire itself would one day be extinguished, responding that Companions like Umar had not meant that all those punished in Hellfire would be released but only those who upheld monotheism

²⁶ *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī: kitāb al-riqāq, bāb ṣifāt al-janna wa’l-nār; Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim: kitāb al-īmān, bāb ithbāt al-shifā’a wa ikhrāj al-muwahhidīn min al-nār.*

²⁷ Ibn Hajar, *Fath al-Bārī sharḥ Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, ed. ‘Abd al-‘Azīz Bin Bāz and Muḥammad Fu’ād ‘Abd al-Bāqī, 16 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyya, 1997), 11:525-7. In the *hadith*, the Prophet ﷺ says, regarding his uncle Abū Ṭālib, who died refusing to accept Islam despite knowing its teachings intimately, “Perhaps my intercession will benefit him on the Day of Resurrection,” and that he would receive a lighter punishment; *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī: kitāb al-riqāq, bāb ṣifāt al-janna wa’l-nār; Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim: kitāb al-īmān, bāb shifā’at al-nabī (s) li-Abī Ṭālib....*

²⁸ *rahmatī taghlibu ghaḍabī; Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī: kitāb al-tawhīd, bāb qawlihi ta’ālā wa yuḥadhdhirukum Allāhu nafsahu.*

²⁹ Jon Hoover, “Islamic Universalism: Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya’s Salafī Deliberation on the Duration of Hell-Fire,” *Muslim World* 99 (2009): 180-201.

(*muwaḥḥidūn*).³⁰ Some modern Muslim scholars, however, have revived the notion of ‘the extinction of the Fire,’ including the influential Rashid Rida.³¹

At any rate, the moral theism school would not apply to religions that do not call for the worship of the one God or to avowed atheists (though some, going back to seventeenth-century English Deists, have argued that humans are incapable of not believing in God; claiming to be an atheist really only means a rejection of one’s surrounding religious tradition).³²

3. All True Paths Lead to the One

An even broader approach to the questions of salvation and truth is sometimes known as the Perennialist school (so named because it holds that all celestial religions, those originally based on revelation from God, share a certain transcendental unity and truth even if their followers have corrupted them over time). It argues that, since God is the only and manifest Truth and Reality, and since all of His creation reflects His majesty and ultimately His unity, then, as the Qur’an states, “Unto Him belongs sovereignty over the heavens and the earth, and unto God are all matters returned” (57:5). This position emphasizes that the Qur’an refutes the claims of Jews and Christians that they alone are the beloved of God, asserting instead that “unto God is the journey’s end” (5:18).

This approach acknowledges that the Qur’an and Sunna offer unmistakable criticisms of earlier religious communities and how they had perverted God’s true message. But some Perennialists would argue that these criticisms were directed only at the mainstreams of Christianity or Judaism, not at those Christians or Jews who continued to follow the original, celestially pure forms of those traditions. But so manifest is God’s total truth and reality that, like the sun, even what has been

³⁰ Ibn al-Amīr al-Ṣan‘ānī, *Raf‘ al-astār li-ibtāl adillat al-qā’ilīn bi-fanā’ al-nār*, ed. Muḥammad Nāṣir al-Dīn al-Albānī (Beirut: al-Maktab al-Islāmī, 1984), 65, 75.

³¹ Khalil, *Islam and the Fate of Others*, 126-30.

³² Peter Gay, ed., *Deism: An Anthology* (Princeton: D. van Nostrand Co., 1968), 35.

shrouded in shadow still catches some of its light. Although no pre-modern Muslim scholar that I know of seems to have explicitly taken this Perennialist position, advocates of Perennialism in the last century have argued that it is embedded in the complex writings of Ibn Arabi (d. 1240).³³

The chief Qur'anic evidence for this school of thought are many of the same verses invoked by moral theism, and the main criticisms it faces are the same as well. First, the Qur'an seems to state clearly that the only religion acceptable to God is Islam, and this is the context in which this 'Islam' is contrasted with the religions of the People of the Book. Second, the remaining truth and salvific potential found in religions inherited from earlier prophets all cease to be valid if the followers of those faiths, having learned of the revelation of Muhammad ﷺ, choose to reject it. Ibn Arabi himself explains that these earlier prophets, had they lived during the time of Muhammad ﷺ, would have followed him, just as their laws and rituals would have followed those of Islam.³⁴

There is a possible response to all this. Here I want to be clear that I am offering my own *hypothetical* speculation on this—I am not directly quoting any adherents in particular of the Perennialist school. The response is that the Qur'anic verses stressing the salvific exclusivity of Islam as well as any *hadiths* seconding them are all addressed to the masses. The verses asserting God's total, all-encompassing and permeating Reality, as well as the verses explaining how those who 'believe in God and do good deeds' will be rewarded for their faith, are aspects of a higher truth comprehensible only to a spiritual and philosophical elite. If this were the case, it would be similar to Ibn Sina's (d. 1037) argument that the Qur'an's many references to bodily resurrection and the carnal pleasures of the Afterlife are only figurative images intended to attract the masses towards God's message. In truth, Ibn Sina argued, the Afterlife was an abode of spiritual resurrection and punishment/reward.

³³ One can find a good expression of this ethos in Chapter 2 of Reza Shah-Kazemi's *The Other in the Light of the One: The Universality of the Qur'ān and Interfaith Dialogue* (Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 2006).

³⁴ Khalil, *Islam and the Fate of Others*, 58.

The main criticism—and it is a big criticism—of this potential explanation would be the same one directed at Ibn Sina by al-Ghazali, Ibn Taymiyya, and many others: it would mean that God was, in effect, lying in His revelation (or, to be more charitable, God was concealing the true breadth and depth of the Truth and all its aspects). It would mean that Qur’anic verses and reliable *hadiths* stressing Islam’s salvific exclusivity were just not true. It would also raise the question of how, if God was lying at points in His revelation, we would know whether or not we should believe other parts. Presuming we were this intended elite audience, what basis would we have for taking some parts at face value and others as fodder for the masses? How would we have realized that God had coded His revelations so that some evident meanings were actually false and the true meaning of others was clear only to us elect? We could only have known this via some access to ultimate truth outside of the revealed scriptures, in which case the real source of truth in our world would not be revealed scripture at all; it would be whatever instruction or wisdom that elect had received that enabled them to decode the true meaning of God’s revealed books. Would this truth have been known through reason alone (philosophy), or through direct experience with God (mysticism)?

This notion of a perennial truth underlying all of God’s revelations throughout history, resident in the minds of philosophers and mystics wherever they might be and whatever the external features of their faith traditions, has been attractive to some in the Islamic and Western traditions. It imbues the ‘Illuminationist’ school of Sufis such as al-Suhrawardi (d. 1191) and of Western thinkers like Pico della Mirandola (d. 1494).

If we adopted the ‘all paths lead to God’ worldview, it could lead in one of two directions. The first would be to conclude that, while all paths lead to God, some paths are shorter and more direct than others. Moreover, if one blended this approach with covenant pluralism, then only by following one of the established routes to ultimate divine truth could one efficiently reach it. One could not just be a ‘spiritual’ person; one would have to follow devoutly one of the revealed religions. The problem with this direction is that its validity cannot be proven by reference to the scriptural evidence of a religious tradition, since those scriptures (mostly)

require adherence to the religion they preach in order to attain salvation, Hodgson's "exclusive historical commitment."³⁵ This direction is certainly not provable using only the evidence provided in the Qur'an, since the Qur'an's clear statements against it can only be disarmed if they are decoded by our spiritual elite. But it's the validity of this spiritual elite and their claim to that status that we're trying to prove!

The second direction would be to conclude that, since 'all paths lead to God,' we can do whatever we want and believe whatever we want, since all truth is one and God is the final destination (though a scholar like Ibn Arabi would still insist that those who truly denied God would remain veiled from Him to a certain extent). On this premise, we could either embrace some sort of cosmic-hippydom, much skewered in Hollywood depictions of shallow yogis, soaking up and regurgitating whatever spiritual pabulum we wanted. Or we could assume a state of elite salon transcendence, paying public lip service to the ritual and dogmatic commitments of whatever religion we claimed to follow while maintaining a private realization that these were mere superficialities, like Cicero (d. 43 BCE) or Edward Gibbon (d. 1794).³⁶

The problem with the cosmic-hippydom course of action is that it would publicly undermine our initial premise: that God had revealed books like the Qur'an for the masses. Our cosmic hippydom would undermine the discipline that a scripture like the Qur'an instills in the masses with its declarations that only by following Islam's system of belief and worship could one attain salvation. The problem with the elite salon transcendence course of action is that, like the first direction above, it assumes a source of truth and evidence for that truth outside of scripture.

How I Deal with this Question

³⁵ Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam*, 1:29.

³⁶ Cicero, *De Natura Deorum*, 1:60–62, 71–73; Edward Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, 3 vols. (New York: Modern Library, n.d.), 1:27.

The question of whether or not there lies salvation outside of Islam—or of any exclusive religion—is too daunting for any particular conclusions to be drawn (at least by me). We can discuss this issue in the abstract, but when it comes to specific individuals the tradition of Muslim scholars has been to withhold judgment. As one scholarly saying goes:

*No, do not rule that anyone will go to the Garden,
Nor to the Fire, if you seek [to follow] the Sunna.*³⁷

We can pass judgment on the correctness or falsity of religions, but we do not know the fate of the individual people who follow those religions. This principle can be found early on in Islamic history in a statement by the Companion Ibn Abbas (ra): “It is not fitting for anyone to pass judgment on [how] God [rules] on His creation, nor to assign them to the Garden or the Fire (*lā yanbaghī li-aḥad an yaḥkuma ‘alā Allāh fī khalqihī wa lā yunazzilāhum jannatan wa lā nāran*).”³⁸

This withholding judgment is called for by God’s immense mercy and compassion for His creation, something affirmed at the beginning of every chapter (but one) of the Qur’an. The Prophet ﷺ can only put forth parables to communicate the vastness of this mercy and compassion. In one *ḥadīth*, the Prophet ﷺ speaks of a woman who had lost her child and was going around holding and breastfeeding any child she could. He asked his followers, “Do you think that this woman could throw her child into the Fire?” Of course not, they replied. The Prophet ﷺ responded, “God is more compassionate towards His slaves than she is to her child.”³⁹

Because of the enormity of God’s mercy, and because the scope of His cosmic justice so far exceeds our ken, the result is that we cannot know who will enter Heaven and who will not. Muhammad ﷺ once told a parable of two Jews in ancient times, one of whom was pious and admirable and the other of whom was

³⁷ *Wa lā taḥkumanna ‘alā aḥadin bi’l-janna, wa lā bi’l-nār idhā aradta al-sunna.*

³⁸ Ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, *Tafsīr* (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, 1985), 8:34 (on Qur’an 6:129).

³⁹ *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī: kitāb al-adab, bāb raḥmat al-walad wa taqbīluhu wa mu’ānaqatuhu; Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim: kitāb al-tawba, bāb fī si’at raḥmat Allāh ta’ālā wa annahā sabaqat ghaḍabahu.*

an open sinner. The righteous man would tell his friend to amend his ways, to which the sinful man would reply, “Leave me be, me and my Lord.” Finally, the pious man told his friend, “God will never forgive you or allow you to enter the Garden of Heaven.” When both their souls were taken upon death God said to the pious man, “Did you know Me or control My power?” God bestowed His ultimate clemency and Paradise upon the iniquitous man and condemned the otherwise pious man to Hell for the sin of arrogance.⁴⁰ The moral of this parable is clear: we cannot know how God will judge any mortal, and it is sheer hubris to delimit His mercy.

If one follows the scholarly tradition of Islam, transmitted and elaborated from the time of the Prophet ﷺ until today, then it is clear which of the above three positions is correct: Islam is the only valid religion in the eyes of God. Of course, those vast swaths of humanity who preceded the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ in human history will be judged according to the extent to which their faith and conduct met the standards set by the prophets and messengers sent to them. And, of course, those people who lived in times or places which revelation did not reliably reach, or those who have lived after the time of Muhammad ﷺ but who have not received a reliable and accurate understanding of Islam will not be held accountable for not embracing that religion. They will be judged justly on the Day of Judgment by God on terms fair and known to Him.

This leaves the question of how we should understand the fate of people who have insisted on retaining their religious beliefs and practices despite their having understood fully the true teachings of Islam. Here one massive question looms: does one believe that accepting the specific religious message of Muhammad ﷺ, as it has been preserved and transmitted down to our times, is so important that rejecting it means suffering eternally in Hellfire, whether that punishment is physical or a spiritual alienation from God? Put more simply, is believing in Islam so important that you’re willing to declare that non-Muslims have no hope for peace in the Afterlife? For those who live in majority-Muslim societies, this

⁴⁰ *Sunan* of Abū Dāwūd: *kitāb al-ādāb, bāb al-nahy ‘an al-baghy*; Muḥyī al-Sunna al-Ḥusayn al-Baghawī, *Sharḥ al-sunna*, ed. Shu‘ayb al-Arnā’ūṭ (Damascus: al-Maktab al-Islāmī, 1983), 14:385.

question does not present itself daily except to those who choose to ponder it. But it is a regular one to Muslims living as minorities in non-Muslim societies, where loved ones and friends know about their religion but choose not to embrace it.

It is the tremendous injustice that may well loom in this claim that so troubled Lord Cherbury (d. 1648) in his influential deist treatise *De Veritate* (1624). He wrote, about condemning non-Christians to perdition, that truth must be more expansive than what the Church claimed for those who followed Christ alone. If one could not earn God's grace from worship and penitence in whatever guise or specific religious garb it might appear, "then God had created and condemned certain men, in fact the larger part of the human race, not only without their desire but without their knowledge."⁴¹ Similarly, in his essay on the Prophet ﷺ as a 'great man' in human history, the Scottish philosopher Thomas Carlyle (d. 1881) insisted that his audience take the Qur'an and Muhammad's claim to prophecy seriously, saying that it was simply inappropriate to dismiss, "this which so many creatures of the Almighty have lived by and died by..."⁴²

The most compelling argument for a more expansive salvific vision in Islam hinges on the Self-proclaimed nature of God Himself. Not only does the Prophet ﷺ report that God's mercy supersedes His anger, but God also instructs the Prophet to tell his followers that, "Your Lord has prescribed mercy upon Himself."⁴³ God declared in the Qur'an, "My punishment, I strike with it those whom I wish. And my mercy encompasses all things."⁴⁴ The Qur'an instructs the Prophet ﷺ to, 'Say: O my servants who have trespassed against themselves, do not despair of the mercy of God, for indeed God forgives all sins, indeed He is most forgiving and merciful.'⁴⁵ Thus God can forgive even the worst of sinners. "O child of Adam," the Prophet ﷺ reports from God in another *hadith* in the *Sunan* of al-Tirmidhi, "even if your sins reached as high as the ladders of the sky, and then you asked My

⁴¹ Gay, *Deism*, 37-38.

⁴² Thomas Carlyle, "Hero as Prophet: Mahomet: Islam," in *Carlyle's Lectures on Heroes* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1920), 40.

⁴³ *kataba rabbukum 'alā nafsīhi al-raḥma*; Qur'an 6:54.

⁴⁴ *'adhābī uṣību bihi man ashā'u wa raḥmatī wasī 'at kulla shay'in*; Qur'an 7:156.

⁴⁵ *qul yā 'ibādī alladhīna asrafū 'alā anfusihim lā taqnaṭū min raḥmat Allāh, inna Allāh yaghfiru al-dhunūb jamī'an innahu huwa al-ghafūr al-raḥīm*; Qur'an 39:53.

forgiveness, I would forgive you.”⁴⁶ Certainly, the Qur'an warns that God does not forgive the sin of *shirk* (4:48). But as Ibn Taymiyya and others have pointed out, this statement must be qualified to a certain extent because God also gives the good tidings, “Do not despair of the mercy of God, for indeed God forgives *all* sins, indeed He is most forgiving and merciful” (emphasis mine, Qur'an 39:53). This must at the very least mean that God forgives those who commit *shirk* but then repent.⁴⁷

The British Muslim scholar T. J. Winter has suggested another brilliant approach. Reconciling the scriptural evidence for Islam's salvific exclusivity with the compelling need to believe that God's mercy will bring peace to righteous non-Muslims should not be done by trying to wiggle out of that scriptural evidence. The answer lies in embracing it fully. Winter points out that the key may lie in the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ's promised intercession on the Day of Judgment, intercession that Winter argues may well be effectively inexhaustible and available to all mankind. As the Prophet ﷺ says in a *hadith* in *Sahih al-Bukhari*, “I was given intercession. And [while] a prophet [before] was sent specifically to his own people, I have been sent to the people overall.”⁴⁸ In another *hadith* he states, “Indeed I hope to intercede on the Day of Resurrection like the number of trees and clay.”⁴⁹ Finally, the Prophet ﷺ states that, “My intercession is for those who testify that there is no god but God, sincerely, their heart true to their tongue and their tongue true to their heart.”⁵⁰ Winter also cites the famous Indian-Yemeni scholar al-Zabidi (d. 1791) that “it is possible” that some of the Prophet ﷺ's intercession will be for all religious communities.⁵¹

⁴⁶ *Jāmi' al-Tirmidhī: kitāb al-da'awāt, ḥadīth.*

⁴⁷ Ibn Taymiyya, *Majmū'at al-fatāwā*, ed. Sayyid Ḥusayn al-ʿAffānī and Khayrī Saʿīd, 35 vols. (Cairo: al-Maktaba al-Tawfīqiyya, n.d.), 11:104; al-Albānī, *Fatāwā al-Shaykh al-Albānī*, ed. ʿUkāsha ʿAbd al-Mannān al-Ṭayyibī (Cairo: Maktabat al-Turāth al-Islāmī, 1994), 350.

⁴⁸ *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī: kitāb al-tayammum, bāb 2.*

⁴⁹ *Musnad* of Aḥmad Ibn Ḥanbal, 5:347.

⁵⁰ *Musnad* of Aḥmad Ibn Ḥanbal, 2:518.

⁵¹ Tim Winter, “Realism and the Real: Islamic Theology and the Problem of Alternative Expressions of God,” in *Between Heaven and Hell: Islam, Salvation and the Fate of Others*, ed. Mohammad Hassan Khalil (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 136-8; al-Zabīdī, *Ithāf al-sāda al-muttaqīn*, 10:494-5.

But how do we reconcile the tremendous emphasis on God's mercy with the evidence that the Qur'an and Sunna provide for salvation coming through Islam alone? How do we reconcile, on one hand, the repeated declaration that it is only belief in the one God and doing good deeds that can secure someone peace in the eternity after death, with, on the other hand, how clearly we see the moral virtue and excellence in many non-Muslims we interact with every day? In my opinion, one can only reconcile this through a complete trust in God's justice. As the Qur'an says on three occasions, "God does not wrong any of the slaves (i.e., human beings)" (3:182, 8:51, 22:10). The Prophet ﷺ explains that, when fates are apportioned in the Afterlife, "God does not wrong anyone of His creation."⁵² Commenting on this *hadith*, al-Nawawi (d. 1277) adds, "Injustice is impossible for God's truth."⁵³ With this firmly in mind, we can say with confidence and inner ease that, while we do not know the fate awaiting any one person after death, no one will be wronged before the "Best of judges" (95:8).

⁵² *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim: kitāb al-janna wa ṣifāt na ṭmihā wa ahlihā, bāb al-nār yadkhuluhā al-jabbārūn....*

⁵³ Al-Nawawī, *Sharḥ Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, 17/18:191. Ibn 'Abd al-Barr writes, "But the one who names Himself the Forgiving, the most Merciful, the Benevolent, the Wise (*al-ghafūr al-rahīm al-ra'ūf al-ḥakīm*) is too great for His attributes to be anything but truth – there is no god but He, He is not asked what He does, rather they are asked."; Ibn 'Abd al-Barr, *al-Istidhkār*, 8:402-3.