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PRINCE ALWALEED BIN TALAL

CENTER FOR MUSLIM-CHRISTIAN UNDERSTANDING

GEORGETOWN UNIVERSITY

مركز الأمير الوليد بن طلال للتفاهم الإسلامي المسيحي

Pluralism in Muslim-Christian Relations

John L. Esposito

*Founding Director and University Professor
Prince Alwaleed Bin Talal Center for
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Prince Alwaleed Bin Talal
Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding
Georgetown University
Washington, DC 20057
202-687-8375

I believe the modern religious situation is one in which we can be open to all the great traditions ... without falling into eclecticism or relativism. The better we understand other traditions, the better we understand our own. The better we understand other traditions, the better we see that we are engaged in a common struggle to create a more human world.¹

Introduction

Muslim-Christian relations, yesterday and today, have too often been marked by mutual ignorance and conflict. Emphasis on the “other” as a threat and religious triumphalism have too often obscured recognition of shared beliefs, values and interests. While 9/11 and the threat of global terrorism as well as Muslim and Christian theologies of exclusivism and hate have reinforced stereotypes and fears, Christians and Muslims have theological and ethical resources for developing contemporary models of religious pluralism and tolerance grounded in mutual understanding and respect.

Muslim-Christian Dialogue Today: Setting the Stage

The impetus toward pluralism in the contemporary era has been fueled by a variety of factors. While past approaches of religious exclusivism have tended to highlight theological differences, advocates of dialogue have emphasized shared beliefs, commonly held values and concerns: the moral breakdown of societies as well as recognition that power and wealth, rather than religion, tend to guide both national and international affairs. The impact of globalization, the communications revolution, and immigration increasingly brought people of different faiths and cultures into daily contact.

In the latter half of the 20th century, international politics also encouraged dialogue as a matter of necessity. During the 1950s and 1960s, interfaith dialogue was promoted as a method for joining forces during the Cold War to fight Communism. During the late 1960s and 1970s, the emphasis shifted to social issues. During the 1980s and 1990s, human rights took center stage. Although many of the agendas have been defined and driven by Christians without always producing greater mutual understanding or knowledge, these examples of cooperation have nevertheless led to increasing recognition on both sides that positive, constructive methods of interfaith interaction are a global necessity today.²

The desire to build a new society and world order in which God's will is done and a more just society achieved through redressing poverty and injustice has made possible the building of bridges between religions as people of faith are enabled to work together to build the Reign of God in this world. Since the 1970s, many religious leaders globally have embraced the path of interreligious dialogue and cooperation to address ethical-moral issues. In 1970, the Federation of Asian Bishops pledged itself to "open, sincere and continuing dialogue with our brothers and sisters of other great religions of Asia, so that we may learn from one another how to enrich ourselves spiritually and how to work more effectively together on our common task of total human development."³ A 1999 statement by Indian bishops confirmed the central role of dialogue in the life of the Church, emphasizing the importance of the Church serving, rather than dominating or controlling, the Reign of God, much as Jesus served the poor.⁴ Most prominently, the World Parliament of Religions, convened in 1993 and 1999, sought to develop a global ethic to eliminate poverty and promote justice and environmental protection. Although some have expressed concern that the imposition of an ethical agenda may result in imperialism of some religions by others, the majority continue to be concerned by ethical issues with worldly relevance, rather than the questions of salvation and the Afterlife that dominated interreligious discussions

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Pluralism in Muslim-Christian Relations

and debates in the past.⁵ Thus, rather than “winning” by proving one group’s religion to be superior over the others, victory in this context is measured by how many people are helped, fed, educated, provided with healthcare, and assured safety and an end to war and violence, while saving and protecting the environment. This desired global outcome requires the help of everyone’s God or Savior.⁶

Today, many Muslims and Christians work together to address many common concerns, particularly the need to restore the ethical and moral codes provided by religion as the foundation for developing universal principles upon which to build a more just society. They condemn greed, economic injustice, materialism, excessive individualism, consumerism, sexual promiscuity, violence and selfish aggrandizement at the expense of the public good. Increasing numbers of believers have come to realize that religious pluralism provides the framework for a common bond and shared vision and can lead to greater appreciation of the faith of others and with it a modern notion of tolerance based not simply on coexistence but upon mutual understanding and respect.⁷

Scriptural Foundations of Pluralism in Islam and Christianity

Both Islam and Christianity have shared beliefs that provide a basis for mutual recognition and cooperation. Both recognize and worship God as Creator, sustainer and Judge, share a belief in common prophets and in divine revelation to humankind, believe in moral responsibility and accountability, the last judgment and eternal reward and punishment. The Quran proclaims, “We believe what has been sent down to us, and we believe what has been sent to you. Our God and your God is one, and to Him we submit,” (Q28:46) and “We have sent revelations to you as We sent revelations to Noah and the prophets who came after him; and We sent revelations to Abraham and Ishmael and Isaac and Jacob and their offspring, and to Jesus and Job...and to Moses God spoke directly” (Q4:163-164). Similarly, Peter, preaching in Jerusalem shortly after Jesus’ death, declared that, “The God of Abraham and of Isaac and of Jacob, the God of our fathers, glorified His servant Jesus, whom you delivered up and denied in the presence of Pilate” (Acts 3:13-14). As John Hick notes, all of these passages imply that the confirmation of prior revelations in present revelation means that all are worshipping the same God.⁸

Muslims and Christians also share a belief in ethical monotheism, in which God is understood to possess a moral nature that demands justice, righteous anger, and an absolute claim to worship combined with grace, love, mercy and forgiveness.⁹ Both proclaim the Golden Rule – “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you” (Luke 6:31) and “No man is a true believer unless he desires for his brother that which he desires for himself” (Hadith recorded in *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*

and the collections of Ibn Māja, al-Darīmī, and Ibn Ḥanbal). Both further assert that God has revealed Himself to humanity through His Word – the Bible for Christians and the Quran for Muslims.

The Quran states that God deliberately made humanity into different nations and tribes so that “you may know one another. The most honored among you in the eyes of God is the one who is the most righteous” (49:13). Muslim scholars like Fathi Osman have argued that diversity is a part of divine creation. Rather than abolishing diversity, he believes that this passage encourages people to learn to handle their differences intellectually, morally and behaviorally, both within a single community and between multiple communities.¹⁰ Osman also points to the Quranic title of “Children of Adam” (Q17:70) given to all people as God’s conferring honor and dignity on all of humanity. He believes that this honor and dignity must be assured through guarantees of freedom of faith, opinion and expression for all people.¹¹ Finally Q 30:22 and 49:13 recognize ethnic and racial pluralism, which Osman interprets as a call for cooperation between different races, ethnicities and social ranks.¹² Because “every human being has his or her spiritual compass and has been granted dignity by God” (Q7: 172-173), Osman contends that scripture supports the development of universal relations and global pluralism, including not only Jews and Christians, but also Hindus, Buddhists, Taoists, and other faiths.¹³

Interreligious Dialogue

The acknowledgment of religious pluralism forms the basis for interreligious dialogue. Effective dialogue is based upon a willingness to listen to the religious Other, openness to learning about the Other’s beliefs, acceptance of the religious “Other” as equal, and engagement in self-criticism, both of oneself and one’s own religions. Dialogue requires self-criticism, recognition that no one individual or religion possesses all of the answers, that no religion has been perfect throughout history, and that all religions have something to learn from other religions.¹⁴ Although missionary work is recognized as the right and responsibility of all religions, proselytizing is discouraged.¹⁵ Christian and Muslim scriptural foundations for interreligious dialogue include the Biblical proclamation of human unity and equality: “In Christ, there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.” (Galatians 3:28); and the Quran’s confirmation of the potential for faith and righteousness among all people of faith in 3:113-114: “For of the People of the Book, there are the upright who recite God’s revelations throughout the night, while prostrating themselves. They believe in God and the Last Day, bid the right and forbid the wrong and hasten to do good deeds. Those are among the righteous people. And whatever good they do, they will not be denied it.”

Pluralism in Roman Catholicism

Until modern times, Christians of many denominations, including Roman Catholics and Protestants, believed that they had an exclusive claim to the one and only truth, necessitating missionary work and instruction to others. Christian attitudes toward other religions were shaped by biblical passages asserting the unique salvific capacity of Jesus, like Acts 4:12 “There is no salvation through anyone else, nor is there any other name under heaven given to the human race by which we are to be saved”; and John 3:16-18 “For God so loved the world that He gave His only Son, so that everyone who believes in Him might not perish but might have eternal life. For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through Him. Whoever believes in Him will not be condemned, but whoever does not believe has already been condemned, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God.” For many Christians, these passages clearly indicated that Christianity was the one and only true religion that superseded and replaced other religions.¹⁶ The particularity and singularity of the community of Jesus Christ – the Church – took precedence over the universal love of God in matters of salvation, – a position that is maintained by most fundamentalist and evangelical Christian denominations today.

In Roman Catholic doctrine, attention focused historically on the status of Jesus as the *logos spermatikos*, or seed-like word, and the Church.¹⁷ According to this understanding, God’s Word was scattered like seeds before the birth of Jesus. After the birth of Jesus, it was universally sown, making it available to all of humanity. Some Early Church Fathers believed that this universal presence of the seed-like word meant that God’s saving presence existed outside the boundaries of the Church. Justin Martyr taught that anyone who hears God’s call in this seed-like word and tries to follow it is already a Christian, even if the person has never heard of Jesus. Tertullian took the idea one step further by declaring all people, both men and women, “naturally Christian” because of the universality of God’s call and presence.¹⁸

However, this early recognition of the presence of the seed-like word in other religions and cultures was overridden and eclipsed in the fourth century when Christianity became the state religion under Holy Roman Emperors Constantine and Theodosius and emphasis shifted from the universality of God’s love to the importance and central role of the Church. Enemies of the state became enemies of the Church and vice versa. Consideration of all non-Catholics and non-Romans as enemies was reflected in new theological interpretations, such as the teaching of St. Augustine (d. 430) that salvation is made possible only by grace and that saving grace exists only within the Church. His position was elaborated more stridently by his student, Fulgentius of Ruspe (d. 533): “There is no doubt that not only all heathens, but also all Jews and all heretics and

schismatics who die outside the Church will go into that everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels.”¹⁹

Until the 16th century, the Roman Catholic Church maintained the official doctrine of *Extra ecclesiam nulla salus* (“Outside the Church, no salvation”). After the 5th century and particularly throughout the Middle Ages, this doctrine was directed especially toward Muslims and Jews, although it was also applied to certain Christian groups considered to be schismatic, such as Nestorians and Jacobites. In 1215, the Fourth Lateran Council amended official doctrine to state, “Outside the church, no salvation *at all*,” placing new emphasis on membership in the Roman Catholic Church. This was followed in 1302 by Pope Boniface VIII’s papal bull, *Unam Sanctam*, which clarified that membership in the One Church and acceptance of papal authority were required to achieve salvation. In 1442, the Council of Florence made a sweeping statement denying any possibility of achieving salvation outside of the Roman Catholic Church: “No persons, whatever almsgiving they have practiced, even if they have shed blood for Christ, can be saved, unless they have remained in the bosom and unity of the Catholic Church.”²⁰

The first recognition of the possibility of conscience and moral living existing outside of the Roman Catholic context emanated from the Council of Trent (1545-1563), which devised the theology of “baptism by desire.” It asserted that a person who followed his or her conscience and lived a moral life had, by action, demonstrated a willingness to listen to the voice of God and, therefore, an implicit desire to join the Church, and thereby attain salvation, despite not having been baptized or having formally joined the Church. This new theology of “baptism by desire” marked the Church’s first attempt to reconcile God’s universal love with the necessary role of the Church by expanding the pool of potentially saved candidates while maintaining a single-minded vision of world history and religion.²¹

This position was expanded in subsequent centuries as important questions about the legitimacy of divisions within Christianity were raised. However, it remained limited to the personal merit or mystical experience of the individual believer. It did not consider the possibility of alternative religious institutions providing salvation. For example, in 1863, Pope Pius IX stated in *Quanto conficiamur moerore* that it was possible for a non-Roman Catholic to be considered “in a state of grace” and on the path to salvation if the person displayed Christian faith in his/her desire and actions. Although this link to the Roman Catholic Church was unconscious and existed in a “way known only to God,” the Roman Catholic Church considered it necessary for salvation.²² The intent of this declaration was to include in salvation those who led godly lives but were not formally part of the Roman Catholic Church. However, the declaration met with criticism by those who objected to the apparently equal status being given to non-Roman Catholics in salvation and questions about the necessity of baptism and membership in the Roman Catholic Church if salvation was available without them.²³

Pluralism in Muslim-Christian Relations

In response, Pope Pius XII limited membership in the faith community to those who had not deliberately sought to be outside of it. *Mystici corporis* (1943) asserted the necessity of baptism and the profession of the “true faith” for salvation. This position was bolstered in 1949 with his *Letter of the Holy Office to Archbishop Cushing* (1949), in which the Pope rejected equal access to salvation in any religion as false doctrine. Asserting the necessity of faith in God and repentance for personal sin for salvation, no substitute for Roman Catholicism was recognized.²⁴

However, in the aftermath of World War II, many Christians were concerned by the use of Christianity to justify political and economic agendas that had little to do with faith or love. The discovery that Christianity had become imperialistic, non-spiritual, and was in moral decline was disturbing, particularly when compared to the moral and social vitality of other non-Christian religions throughout the world. Many Christians demanded a reconsideration of Christianity’s role in society and the world, leading to a shift in focus from the most important obligation of the Church being defense against heresy to the most important obligation being to love one’s neighbor. Supporters of this line of thinking argued that recognition that God’s love (*agape*) is available to all human beings and that human beings are justified by faith and righteous living meant recognizing those religions that emphasize divine love and the importance of putting faith and love into practice as falling under the umbrella of God’s mercy.²⁵

Initially, this approach was intended to resolve denominational differences within the Christian Church. However, it quickly shifted from an inward-looking to an outward-looking perspective, or a shift from inter-denominational to inter-faith interaction. Although the Roman Catholic Church had previously abstained from the ecumenical movement, clinging to its more exclusivist claim to possession of the one and only truth and, therefore, path to salvation, it too ultimately embraced inter-denominational and inter-faith dialogue in an effort to restore unity among humanity.²⁶

A pivotal player in this new perspective was German Jesuit Karl Rahner, author of the concept of “anonymous Christianity.” Reinterpreting 1 John 3:8 – “God is love” – as a declaration that God wants to reach out and embrace all people and beings, Rahner determined that God wants to save all people. Because the Bible teaches that what God wants, God wills, Rahner believed that God must have acted to make it possible for all people to be saved. In the past, the Church had taught that this possibility had been enacted and institutionalized through the Church alone. However, arguing that God’s love for every human being meant that God’s saving grace has to be available to every human being, Rahner called for greater attention to be given to grace than to sin, based on Romans 5:20 – “Where sin increased, grace abounded all the more.” Based on the belief that God’s grace and love are more powerful than sin and evil, Rahner taught that there had to be more people being saved than not. Logically, this suggested that God’s grace had to be available and active in other religions, albeit through Jesus Christ, even if not acknowledged, thus opening the door to “anonymous Christianity.”²⁷

Rahner believed that God's saving grace is given through God's Spirit, which enters, fills and enables human beings to "reach for more," even if the individual does not recognize Jesus.²⁸ Although the resulting acts of faith, charity, and "supernatural friendship with God" are done without knowledge of Christ, "Christ is the source of the grace they have received, their faith and love are objectively directed toward him also, even though they may never have the opportunity to arrive at explicit Christian faith or membership in the church."²⁹ Rahner posited that it must be within the providential plan of God for people to express their worship of God through whatever religion is available to them in cases where Christianity is not a viable option. "In other words, even though the non-Christian religions are objectively abrogated by the advent of Christianity, they continue to be legitimate religions for people who are inculpably ignorant of any obligation on their part to abandon the religion of their culture and to embrace Christianity."³⁰

Rahner therefore encouraged Christians to pursue relationships with these "anonymous Christians" both to work with them toward greater love and justice and to make them aware of their status as children of God. Pivotal to this interpretation was a shift from traditional Catholic doctrine asserting that grace is experienced only through the institution of the Church and its sacraments to the experience of grace through relationships with other people. The shift to the experience of God's universal grace through interpersonal relationships opened the door to recognizing the potential for other religions to serve as "ways of salvation" if they provided a means of gaining a right relationship with God by promoting right relationships with others. This possibility was not the equivalent of the Church's guarantee of salvation. Rather it acknowledged the potential for other religions to serve as a guide or preparation for Christianity.³¹

Building on Rahner's theological vision, the Roman Catholic Church initiated dialogue with Judaism in 1960. Then, more boldly, the Church adopted Rahner's attitude, although not his terminology of "anonymous Christians," toward other religions in the Second Vatican Council (1962-1964). Rather than asserting Christianity as the replacement for other religions, the Second Vatican Council called for a new approach to other religions, referred to as fulfillment, that taught the inherent value of other religions because God is found in them and commanded Christians to dialogue with them. The majority of mainstream Christians today follow this model, including Lutherans, Reformed, Methodists, Anglicans, Greek Orthodox, and Roman Catholics.³²

The Second Vatican Council produced a number of major documents detailing this new approach, including the 1965 Declaration on the Relationship of the Church to Non-Christian Religions (*Nostra Aetate*), which called on Christians to engage in interreligious dialogue and recognized the authenticity of Protestant Christianity for the first time. Recognizing and applauding the "profound religious sense" animating other religions (specifically, Islam, Hinduism

Pluralism in Muslim-Christian Relations

and Buddhism), *Nostra Aetate* affirmed the teachings and practices of these religions as potentially leading to salvation.

Those who, without blame, do not know Christ or his church, but with a sincere heart seek God and His will, as it is known to them through the dictates of their conscience, and who, with the help of grace, try to fulfill God's will in their actions, can hope for eternal salvation.³³

Nostra Aetate also endorsed interfaith dialogue:

Other religions to be found everywhere strive variously to answer the restless searchings of the human heart by proposing 'ways' which consist of teachings, rules of life and sacred ceremonies. The Catholic Church rejects nothing which is true and holy in these religions. She looks with sincere respect upon those ways of conduct and life, those rules and teachings which, though differing in many particulars from what she holds and sets forth, nevertheless often reflect a ray of that Truth which enlightens all men... The Church therefore has this exhortation for her sons: prudently and lovingly, through dialogue and collaboration with the followers of other religions, and in witness of Christian faith and life, acknowledge, preserve, and promote the spiritual and moral goods found among these men, as well as the values in their society and culture.³⁴

Encouraging forgetting the "quarrels of the past" in favor of "mutual understanding for the benefit of all," *Nostra Aetate* promoted social justice, peace, liberty, and moral values.³⁵ The accompanying Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (*Lumen Gentium*) declared even atheists following their consciences as within the parameters of salvation because they had followed the voice of God, while the Decree on the Church's Missionary Activity (*Ad Gentes*) recognized "elements of truth and grace" and "seeds of the Word" in other religions.³⁶ Finally, the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (*Gaudium et Spes*) recognized "precious things, both religious and human" in other religions.³⁷ Muslims were explicitly recognized in *Lumen Gentium*:

But the plan of salvation also includes those who acknowledge the Creator. In the first place among these there are the Moslems, who, professing to hold the faith of Abraham, along with us adore the one and merciful God, who on the last day will judge mankind.³⁸

In all of these documents, the Second Vatican Council recognized the existence of revelation in other religions toward the goal of fostering dialogue, mutual understanding, respect and cooperation. Nevertheless, these other religions remained considered "preparation for the Gospel," rather than alternative or additional paths to salvation. "It is through Christ's Catholic Church alone, which is the all-embracing means of salvation, that the fullness of the means of salvation can be found."³⁹

The greater openness to dialogue established by the Second Vatican Council was concretized and made more substantial by Pope Paul VI's 1964 establishment of the Vatican Secretariat for Non-Christian Religions (renamed and reorganized as the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue in 1989) to build dialogue with Muslims, Hindus and Buddhists. The Church proclaimed its support for bringing the "religious life of every nation to its full development," noting that "mission should not aim at the destruction of other religions but at their continued existence so that all religions could stimulate each other in the unity of the most complete truth."⁴⁰ In his first encyclical of the same year, Pope Paul VI expressed esteem and respect for the spiritual values to be found in non-Christian religions, although he reiterated Vatican II's position on other religions serving to prepare non-Christians for the Gospel.

The outcome of *Nostra Aetate* included the creation of space and official support for interfaith dialogue, as well as the establishment of formal relations between the Vatican and 17 Muslim majority countries, including Algeria, Egypt, Indonesia, Iran, Kuwait, Pakistan, Sudan, Syria, and Turkey. Since the 1970s, there have been yearly meetings between Muslims and Christians geared toward increasing dialogue and mutual understanding. Many of the ongoing dialogues have promoted discussion of common points of faith, including co-sponsored colloquia on Religious Education in Modern Society (1989), Rights and Education of Children (1990), Women in Society (1992), and Religion and Nationalism (1994). Other conferences, such as Journées d'Arras, Journées Romaines, Journées Proche-Orientales, Journées Maghrebines, and Asian Journey, are organized by regional concerns. Both faiths have also focused on the preservation of the family as a sacred institution and the only legitimate means for the continuation of the human race, highlighting the responsibility of parents for raising their children and of children to respect their parents.⁴¹

Pope John Paul II played a particularly important role in expanding Vatican dialogue with other faiths and recognizing their virtue, spirituality and prayer by introducing a new focus on the Holy Spirit in his ministry of dialogue, understanding and experience. His 1986 encyclical letter on the Holy Spirit, *Dominum et Vivificantem*, proclaimed the universal action of the Holy Spirit: "For, since Christ died for all, and since the ultimate vocation of man is in fact one, and divine, we ought to believe that the Holy Spirit in a manner known only to God offers to every man the possibility of being associated with this paschal mystery." Similarly, his initiation of the interreligious Day of Prayer for Peace in Assisi in 1986 acknowledged the vital role of the Holy Spirit in prayer: "Every prayer is prompted by the Holy Spirit, who is mysteriously present in every human spirit."⁴²

John Paul II's emphasis on the Holy Spirit was based on his conviction that the Spirit is the unity that underlies the differences in the world's religions. Although there are many religions, there is only one Spirit dwelling not only in

Pluralism in Muslim-Christian Relations

the hearts of individuals, but also in “society and history, peoples, cultures and religions.”⁴³ *Dialogue and Proclamation* – issued jointly by the Commission on Interreligious Dialogue and the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples in 1991 – explicitly recognized “the active presence of God through His Word” and “the universal presence of the Spirit” in both people and religions outside of the Church, asserting that it is “in the sincere practice of what is good in their own religious traditions... that the members of other religions correspond positively to God’s invitation and receive salvation.”⁴⁴ It also concluded that the religions of the world play “a providential role in the divine economy of salvation,” suggesting that people can truly find and connect with God, and thus with salvation, in and through other religions.⁴⁵ In 1996, the Vatican International Theological Commission affirmed the “saving function” of other religions, referring to them as “a means which helps for the salvation of their adherents.”⁴⁶ Rather than simply proclaiming the Gospel, the Church has shifted to a call for joint proclamation and dialogue as “component elements and authentic forms” of the mission of the Church, “intimately related, but not interchangeable,” so that “there can be no question of choosing one and ignoring and rejecting the other.”⁴⁷

This call to dialogue differs from religious dialogues of the past in which the purpose of dialogue was to convince the other side of the truth of one’s own message without listening to what the other had to say. Although dialogue was to “remain oriented toward proclamation” and was to be “conducted and implemented with the conviction that the Church is the ordinary means of salvation and that she alone possesses the fullness of the means of salvation,”⁴⁹ both *Redemptoris Missio* and *Dialogue and Proclamation* assert “mutual knowledge and enrichment” as the goal of true dialogue.⁴⁹ Both sides must be prepared to be “questioned,” “purified,” “challenged,” and “transformed” toward a “deeper conversion of all toward God,” even if that means leaving one faith for another.⁵⁰

Although Jesus is still recognized as the only Savior of all of humanity,⁵¹ this new theological approach emphasizes the Reign of God, rather than membership in the Church, as the primary end of Christianity. “The Church is not an end unto herself, since she is ordered toward the kingdom of God of which she is seed, sign, and instrument.”⁵² Jesus retains special status as the one mediator between God and humanity, from whom other mediations and vehicles of God’s love and grace may “acquire meaning and value” but who cannot themselves be “understood as parallel or complementary to him.”⁵³ Although other religious traditions can add to the richness of Christianity, Christ remains “the fulfillment of the yearning of all the world’s religions and, as such, he is their sole and definitive completion.”⁵⁴ Thus, John Paul II maintained in *Redemptoris Missio* that, while salvation is offered to all, it is available only through Christ. Recognizing that some people do not have an opportunity to know the Gospel or enter the church due to social and cultural circumstances, he considered that they might nevertheless access salvation through grace and be “enlightened” in a way accommodated to their spiritual and

material situation. However, it remained Christ-based: “This grace comes from Christ; it is the result of His Sacrifice and is communicated by the Holy Spirit. It enables each person to attain salvation through his or her free cooperation.”⁵⁵

Within this construct, John Paul II asserted that the purpose of interreligious dialogue was to enable the Church to uncover the “seeds of the Word” in both individuals and the religious traditions of humanity. Such dialogue had to be based on hope and love and was expected to “bear fruit in the Spirit.”⁵⁶ His emphasis on interreligious dialogue was solidified in his charge to the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue to carry out serious study of other religions and to encourage Roman Catholic communities throughout the world to engage in and recognize the importance of dialogue.

John Paul II’s support for interfaith dialogue was further reflected in his consistent references to *Nostra Aetate*, his 1995 Encyclical Letter *Ut Unum Sint* (That All May Be One), and his 2000 Declaration “*Dominus Iesus*” (On The Unicity and Salvific Universality of Jesus Christ and the Church). He repeatedly affirmed the Church’s duty to encourage unity and charity between both individuals and nations on the basis of commonalities shared by all people. Reaffirming the belief in Jesus as the “saving event for all humanity,” *Dominus Iesus* affirmed *Nostra Aetate*’s “high regard for the manner of life and conduct, the precepts and teachings” of other religions as often reflecting “a ray of that truth which enlightens all men”⁵⁷ and called for continued engagement in interreligious dialogue because “the salvific action of Jesus Christ, with and through his Spirit, extends beyond the visible boundaries of the Church to all humanity.”⁵⁸ Rejecting relativism, subjectivism, and eclecticism, *Dominus Iesus* called for a reaffirmation of the substance of each faith in its interpretation, particularly the Church’s firm belief in “the mystery of Jesus Christ, the Incarnate Son of God” as “the full revelation of divine truth.”⁵⁹ Of the scriptures of other faiths, it recognizes that “there are some elements in these texts which may be de facto instruments by which countless people through the centuries have been and still are able today to nourish and maintain their life-relationship with God”⁶⁰ and that they “in actual fact direct and nourish the existence of their followers” and “receive from the mystery of Christ the elements of goodness and grace which they contain.”⁶¹ Thus, although maintaining the unique salvific role of Jesus, *Dominus Iesus* nevertheless suggested the possibility of “participated mediation,” in which “theology today, in its reflection on the existence of other religious experiences and on their meaning in God’s salvific plan, is invited to explore if and in what way the historical figures and positive elements of these religions may fall within the divine plan of salvation.”⁶²

Among the Catholic theologians who have embraced this vision of interreligious dialogue with the goal of understanding the presence and role of God in other religions is Raimon Panikar, a major theologian for decades in interreligious dialogue. Panikar has called for awareness of God, rather than doctrine, as the “fundamental religious fact” common to all religions. However, rather than calling

Pluralism in Muslim-Christian Relations

for unification of all religions on this basis, he asserts the need for diversity and pluralism so that both religions and the earth might be cared for.⁶³ Because there is no ultimate religion, no religious system can claim superiority over another. Pannikar believes that pluralism is “a revelation of the nature of reality.”⁶⁴ Thus, rather than replacement or conversion, he believes that the appropriate relationship between religions should be one of “mutual fecundation” in which each is enriched and grows through its discovery and experience of others.⁶⁵ Such a “Christophany” allows the light of Christ to shine forth from all religions without any claiming privilege or superiority over others.⁶⁶ Jesus remains Christ, but Christ is not reduced to the person of Jesus, thus opening the door to recognizing other names, such as the Hindu Rama or Krishna, within the term Christ.⁶⁷

This comparative theological approach makes dialogue the foundation for a theology of religions in which each religion defines itself but must also explore the teachings, beliefs, and traditions of at least one other religion both to understand that other religion on its own terms and to gain a deeper understanding of one’s own religion. Based on verses like “Do not judge so that you may not be judged yourself,” (Matthew 7:1), comparative theology rejects judgment of other cultures or religions as usurping God’s prerogative⁶⁸ and seeks rather to better understand the meaning of Christianity.⁶⁹ This approach requires not only making oneself vulnerable to the transformative power of the other religion while remaining loyal to one’s own, but also getting to know both the other religious texts and the members of the other faith. This will facilitate not just toleration, but acceptance and living with others, even in the face of disagreement.⁷⁰ As Paul Knitter notes, the Golden Rule of loving one’s neighbor as oneself is the most basic requirement of both dialogue and Christianity:

Love requires not just that we do ‘good’ to others but that we respect them, affirm them, listen to them, and be ready to learn from them. To truly love others, we have to stand ready to receive from them, at least as much as we hope to give to them. If ‘doing good’ is not accompanied by respect and mutuality, then love becomes patronizing kindness. Which means it is no longer love. Love calls for relationships of mutuality in which there is reciprocal giving and taking, teaching and learning, speaking and listening. And that’s what dialogue is all about. ‘Love thy neighbor’ means ‘Dialogue with thy neighbor.’⁷¹

Although some fear that these pluralistic approaches may lead to a homogenization of the world’s religions,⁷² others believe that pluralism and public recognition of religion can serve to preserve democracy, freedom, and justice because of pluralism’s potential for reconciling diversity.⁷³ Examples of leaders who have applied principles taught by other religions within their own societies, even though they themselves were not members of those faith communities, include Hindu leader Mahatma Gandhi, who learned non-violence in part from the Christian Gospels, and the

Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., who later incorporated Gandhi's development of the political dimension of non-violence back into his own Christian struggle. Such examples encourage pluralism as a positive development through their practical demonstration of how the process of encountering the religious "Other" can lead to gradual understanding and appropriation of what is best from other faiths. Although that encounter can present a challenge, it also allows the Church to hold on to the heart of Christian revelation in a dynamic way that leads to unity.⁷⁴

Pluralism in Protestantism

Historically, Protestantism shared the Roman Catholic belief that there could be no salvation outside of the church and that there was no value in other religions because they were either lacking or aberrant. Belief in the uniqueness and superiority of Christianity required a vision of the ultimate conversion of the entire world to Christianity, an approach referred to as "total replacement" theology. Certain Protestant groups, such as Fundamentalists, some Evangelicals, and Pentecostal/Charismatics, maintain this belief in the superiority of Christianity.

"Total replacement" theology is based on the belief that the Bible contains no errors and must be studied and interpreted in a self-contained manner. It rejects modern approaches to religion, such as the historical-critical and form-critical methodologies that substitute human science and social scientific interpretation of the Bible for biblical inerrancy. "Total replacement" Protestants believe that Christianity is superior to other religions and that all people will need to convert to Christianity in order to achieve salvation because they believe that salvation is dependent upon belief in the Bible and what the Church preaches. Theologians for these groups posit that there is one single, clear and certain path for all of humanity to follow. God's single truth, as recorded in the Bible, shows the linear historical progression of all of humanity toward a common goal, purpose and salvation. Thus, the necessary relationship between religions must be one of holy competition, with the expectation that Christianity will win because it alone possesses the single and final truth. For these Christians, there is no need to look outside of their clear and logical theology, as supported by strong proof texts, for answers or truth.⁷⁵

The most prominent Protestant "total replacement" theologian was Karl Barth (1886-1968). For Barth, the evil and slaughter of World War I made it clear that human beings need God's help and grace. He therefore taught that Christians must step back, trust in God's grace, and "Let God be God" through Jesus Christ – that salvation comes by grace alone, by faith alone, by Christ alone, by Scripture alone. There is no other path. According to this vision, the privileged place of Christianity is due to Jesus Christ. Because only Christians recognize that

Pluralism in Muslim-Christian Relations

the good works that come out of dedication to religion are due to the presence of God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit in their lives, Christians have nothing to gain from interreligious dialogue because other religions have no Jesus. Rather than dialogue, this theological understanding calls for monologue – Christians are to lovingly and respectfully announce the Gospel and let the light of Christ shine without there being a mutual exchange of ideas.⁷⁶

Barth's theology was based on Biblical passages such as Acts 4:12 "There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved"; 1 Corinthians 3:11 "For no one can lay any foundation other than the one that has been laid; that foundation is Jesus Christ"; 1 Timothy 2:5 "There is one mediator between God and humankind: Christ Jesus"; John 14:6 "I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life. No one comes to the Father except through Me"; 1 John 5:1 "Whoever has the Son has life; whoever does not have the Son of God does not have life"; Romans 1:21, 3:9 "They are without excuse, for though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God... All, both Jews and Greeks, are under the power of sin"; John 3:36 "Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life; whoever disobeys the Son will not see life, but must endure the wrath of God"; and Romans 10:14, 17 "But how are they to believe in one of whom they have never heard?... So faith comes from what is heard." Barth believed that these passages made it clear that God saves in Jesus alone, precluding the need to look anywhere else. He also charged that any Christian theology seeking to weaken or deny the impact of these apparently clear statements was contrary to Christianity itself.⁷⁷

Several Protestant responses to the question of the potential salvation of non-Christians resulted. Some, particularly Evangelicals, follow the teachings of Thomas Aquinas in suggesting that a conversion in an interval between life and death will be possible for those who have never had a practical opportunity to know Christ. Others suggest that God will determine the person's fate based on God's knowledge of whether that person might have converted if circumstances had been different. Still others assert that the holy, sincere people of other religions may be saved due to God's favor for them, as supported by the Biblical examples of Enoch, Job, Melchizedek, and Jethro. Finally, a minority propose a universalist solution in which all people will be given the opportunity to convert at the resurrection on the Last Day. All of these responses are tied together by the belief that God's justice and mercy cannot be compromised. Evangelicals like Clark Pinnock and John Sanders claim that God's mercy demands that God be capable of saving non-Christians, thus opening the door to recognizing the Holy Spirit's presence and activity in other religions, although this necessarily occurs through the saving presence of Jesus.⁷⁸

Concerned that this vision of a single revealed truth applicable to all people has the potential to lead to exclusivism, polemics and anti-intellectualism, as well as by its failure to engage social issues or acknowledge the moral, ethical,

and charitable worldviews of other religions, some Protestants posited a “partial replacement” theology. Not only did this approach limit biblical infallibility to issues of faith and practice while acknowledging the potential for errors in historical and scientific data, but it also recognized elements of truth in other religions. “Partial replacement” theology reflects the experiences of many Christians of multiculturalism and religious diversity in their schools, neighborhoods and workplaces. Although they still believe that Christianity is the only true religion and that all people should convert to Christianity, they recognize the reality of godliness and righteousness in people of other religions.

“Partial replacement” theologians believe that God can, in fact, be found in other revelations and faith communities because God speaks through both the power of nature and human consciousness. In support, they point to Biblical passages such as Romans 1:20, 2:15 “Ever since the creation of the world God’s eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things God has made... What the law requires is written on their [Gentiles’] hearts, to which their own conscience also bears witness”; Acts 14:16 “In past generations, God allowed all the nations to follow their own ways; yet God has not left you without a witness in doing good – giving you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, and filling you with food and your hearts with joy”; Acts 17:27 “God is not far from each one of us. For in God we live and move and have our being”; and John 1:1-14, which states that the Word was there from the beginning and that it gave life and light to the world – for all people. These theologians also recall that the early Church Fathers recognized God’s ability and desire to speak to all of humanity, not just to Christians. Protestant reformers Martin Luther and John Calvin agreed that a “sense of God” is instilled into human nature.⁷⁹

Contemporary Protestant theologians who have embraced the assertion that God’s voice can be heard within all people include Paul Althaus, Paul Tillich, and Wolfgang Pannenberg. Althaus has taught that people hear the Divine in the “Something More” that calls to their hearts when they fall in love and commit to remain with that person in difficult times, when they care for the poor, or when they continue to hope that good is stronger than evil, even when the evidence indicates otherwise.⁸⁰ Tillich asserts that God’s presence is felt when people find themselves “grasped by an Ultimate Concern” and experience the sense, feeling or knowledge of being accepted, no matter who or what they are. He teaches that people need to “just accept Acceptance” and place themselves in God’s hands.⁸¹ Pannenberg believes that history demonstrates that God has spoken and continues to speak to humanity. God’s voice is heard when human beings ask questions and search for answers, sensing that history is always moving forward, but recognizing that no one knows exactly what the final outcome of history will be or when it will end. The diversity of history reflects religious diversity and the appearance of Divine Mystery in many forms and places. Because God has spoken multiple

Pluralism in Muslim-Christian Relations

times in history in order to make people aware of God's existence, some consideration must be given to what God has said in other religions, particularly insofar as they address the need for human and world redemption.⁸²

According to these theologians, the fact that religions other than Christianity are concerned about the human condition proves that the existence of other religions is God's will. Not only do they represent God, but they also constitute the tools by which God will carry out God's plan for humanity. Nevertheless, salvation remains the unique gift offered by Christianity. In other words, while revelation is possible in other religions, salvation cannot be achieved through revelation alone. As taught clearly in the New Testament, they maintain, only Jesus Christ can bring about salvation. People cannot save themselves. Thus all people desiring salvation must become Christians. Such conversions are made possible through the proclamation of the Gospel, which announces Jesus.⁸³

Recognizing members of other faiths as children of God, these theologians believe that the purpose of interreligious dialogue is to express respect and love, exchange information, correct false impressions, and dissolve prejudice, mistrust and conflict with the expectation that Jesus will ultimately provide the answers other religions seek. Because dialogue is to be engaged with dignity, intelligence and religious freedom, proselytizing is not permitted. It is hoped that common social, economic, environmental or political concerns may be identified as areas for cooperation.⁸⁴ At the same time, there remains the major theological question of how to maintain belief in the universality of God's love and mercy while proclaiming the particularity of Jesus. This struggle raises the further question of whether God can ever be fully known by a single religious tradition or whether God is so multi-faceted and multi-dimensional that all religions offer unique insights without ever entirely explaining God.

One response to this struggle has been the adoption of inclusivist doctrine asserting that everyone can be saved, no matter what their religion, but that it is actually Christ who does the saving. Theologians like John B. Cobb, Jr., and Anglican Bishop and prominent scholar of Islam, Kenneth Cragg, proclaim the need to be open to the truth contained in other religions without trading in one's own absolute conviction of the importance of Christ to one's own personal faith. Cobb encourages mutual transformation through learning from each other, while cautioning against the temptation to lack conviction.⁸⁵ Cragg seeks commonality between Christians and Muslims based upon a shared understanding of the divine, where Luther's plea to "Let God be God" and Islam's concept of *tawḥīd* (unity) are both recognized. While acknowledging that there are some theological issues that cannot be resolved, he encourages both communities to live with that reality without allowing it to stand in the way of mutual recognition and cooperation.⁸⁶

Another response calls for the refocusing and reaffirmation of the distinctive identity of Christianity while clarifying and valuing the distinctiveness

of other religions. Lutheran theologian George Lindbeck has been a pioneer of this response, which focuses on the worldviews provided by each religion through its specific language, experience and cultural-linguistic context, all of which have an impact on how the Spirit touches and communicates with the individual believer.⁸⁷ Within this framework, dialogue serves to enable the believer to be a good neighbor without encroaching on another's religious territory or expecting any religion to lose its distinctiveness. Each religion is free either to gain or to add insights to other religions without detracting from them. Furthermore, salvation remains the domain of God, rather than the prerogative of the hidden Christ proposed by the "anonymous Christians" model.⁸⁸

A third response is the assertion of belief in monotheism as the basis for salvation in which the single Divine Reality may bear different names and even characteristics in different contexts. Two pioneers of this approach are John Hick and Wilfred Cantwell Smith. Hick considers Christians, Muslims, Jews, Hindus and Buddhists all to be monotheists, even though all have different ways of expressing the experience of the Divine Reality. Because he believes that all of these religions provide contexts for salvation, he has called for a paradigm shift from a Christianity- or Jesus-centered universe to a God-centered universe in which each religion contains a part of truth, but none contains full and complete access to truth, thus precluding any rivalry between religions.⁸⁹ Hick believes that the terms by which people refer to the Divine are best understood as symbols of their experiences of the Divine Reality (language of the heart, or love language), rather than terms that literally describe the Divine (language of the head). Acknowledging the symbols as such allows for movement around doctrinal differences because it decreases their importance. Rather than theological unity, Hick has focused on the common roots and ethics of different religions while allowing each religion to make its own distinctive contribution to the proclamation and knowledge of truth.⁹⁰ At the same time, he rejects relativism, noting that not all religious paths necessarily lead to the same place. He uses the religion's promotion of self-sacrificing concern for others, improvement in the quality of human life, and attention to self-losing in the Real that generates love, compassion, and acceptance for all of humanity and all life as the determining factors of a religion's legitimacy because these fruits reflect the human response to the Divine Spirit.

Wilfred Cantwell Smith, committed to the unity of knowledge and humanity and the development of a universal religion, judged the Christian presumption of the uniqueness of the Christian message and the claim to exclusive truth to be "nothing more than an arrogance which goes against the teachings of Christ about humility."⁹¹ Also moving away from a Christ-centered Christianity, Smith called for a broader analysis of God's activities in a variety of contexts throughout history.

Islam and Pluralism

Historically, many Muslims, like Christians before them, expressed concerns that pluralism was another form of imperialism designed to create discord within the Arab world and to rob Islam of its unity and power. Some saw the Christian origins of interfaith dialogue as evidence of its political, economic and colonial overtones, while others questioned how honest such dialogue could be if the Western world remained largely ignorant of Islamic beliefs and practices.⁹² During the 1960s and 1970s, many Islamists, who advocated the reassertion of Islam as the dominant faith and ideology and offered an alternative ideology to prevailing forms of Arab nationalism, socialism and Marxism, opposed pluralism. Interpreting Quranic passages like – “Muslims are the best of all people” (Q 3:110) – as evidence of Islam’s “superiority” to other religions, many were intolerant or leery of any “compromise” with non-Muslims.⁹³ This situation has changed considerably.

The political realities of the 1980s led to greater calls for government accountability, political participation and human rights, setting in motion a growing discussion and debate among Muslims of all orientations regarding democratization, pluralism, civil society, rule of law and human rights. Mainstream Islamists became prominent leaders in social and political reform, emphasizing civil society and the opening up of the one-party and authoritarian political systems in the Muslim world. Theory and practice, theology and electoral politics in the Arab and Muslim world reflected the debates over democratization and pluralism, both religious and political. By 1990, the term “pluralism” (*ta’addudiyah*) had become common to explore conflict and differences in Muslim society as well as the legitimacy of a multiparty system in an Islamic state. Although exclusivist revolutionary Islamist movements continued to refuse compromise and peaceful coexistence, a new Islamic methodology of dialogue and conflict resolution was introduced by moderate Islamists in a literature that emphasized differences of opinions (*adab al-ikhtilāf*) in Islam. Major discussions and debates focused on the possibility of normal relations between Islamic and non-Islamic states, the toleration of political and religious differences within an Islamic state, the creation of opportunities for religious minorities and public roles for women within an Islamic state.⁹⁴

Both moderate Islamists and Muslim scholars of diverse orientations have advocated a pluralism that affirms principles of freedom, difference and coexistence, based on interpretations of Quranic teachings regarding the equality of all humanity. Thus, for example, many argue that the Quran (Q 30:22 and Q 48:13) teaches that God deliberately created humanity to consist of different nations, ethnicities, tribes and languages. This interpretation is bolstered by Q 2:251 which states that God deliberately created difference in order to foster competition between nations and to guarantee progress. Quranic passages regarding the plurality of civilizations, systems and laws (Q 5:48 and 5:69) are interpreted as encouraging people to understand one another better and co-exist rather than

engage in conflict. Moderate Islamists also assert that God created the Muslim community as a “middle community” (*ummataṅ wasaṅ*) as a reflection of His favor for moderation and desire to avoid extremes, so that seeking the negation or eradication of the religious Other is not permitted.⁹⁵ These interpretations or reinterpretations provide the foundations that support the belief that pluralism is the essence of Islam as revealed in the Quran and practiced by the Prophet Muhammad and the early caliphs.

Many Muslim pluralists point to Q 2:256, “There is no compulsion in religion”, as a challenge and contradiction to religious worldviews that divide the world into two absolute spheres of Islam and either war or unbelief. Focusing on freedom of religion permits not only greater levels of peace and tolerance, but also opens the door to protecting the rights of religious minorities and approaching missions from the perspective of partnership, rather than of competition.⁹⁶ For example, Tunisian scholar and leader of the Renaissance Party Rashid al-Ghannoushi believes that the Quranic principle that there is no compulsion in religion should serve as the basis for religious, cultural, political, and ideological pluralism in Muslim society.⁹⁷ As evidence of pluralism forming part of Islam’s heritage, he looks to the Middle Ages when Jews lived peacefully in Muslim countries and were free to choose their work on the basis of skill, rather than religious affiliation. For al-Ghannoushi, the purpose of Islam is to be a “comprehensive revolution on evil and oppression and an urgent mission towards equality and freedom on all levels.”⁹⁸ There is no space for compulsion in religious matters in his worldview.

Similarly, Mahmoud Ayoub of Temple University in Philadelphia has worked to discredit visions of religious exclusivism in Islam. Citing Q 5:48 – “To everyone we have appointed a way and a course to follow” – and Q 2:148 – “For each there is a direction toward which he turns; vie therefore with one another in the performance of good works. Wherever you may be, God shall bring you all together [on the day of judgment]. Surely God has power over all things” – Ayoub argues that God deliberately created pluralism. He notes that there are two different levels of Islamic identity in the Quran – one based on membership in the institutionalized religion and legal system and the other based on individual faith.⁹⁹ Because the truth or falsity of a person’s faith is known only by God, Ayoub believes that fighting people on the basis of their faith is not permissible in Islam. He has specifically challenged literal and militant interpretations of Q 9:29 – “Fight those among the People of the Book who do not have faith in God and the Last Day, and do not prohibit what God and His Messenger had prohibited, and do not abide by the true faith, until they give the *jizyah* with their own hand, humbled” – by noting that two of the three conditions laid out for fighting – not having faith in God and the Last Day and not abiding by the true faith – cannot be verified by human beings.¹⁰⁰

Protected People of the Book – Dhimmi Revisited

The Quran teaches that the “People of the Book” are to enjoy a special relationship with Muslims because they share a common tie to both monotheism and divine revelation that is believed to come from the same “Mother Book” in Heaven. Because Islam requires submission to the will of God, rather than conversion, as the criterion for faith, Jews and Christians are particularly recognized as “People of the Book” because they share belief in God’s revealed will through prophets common to all three faiths, including Abraham, Moses and Jesus. The Quran recognizes the potential for salvation for People of the Book in Q 2:62, which states, “Those who believe – the Jews, the Christians, and the Sabaeans – whosoever believe in God and the Last Day and do good works, they shall have their reward from their Lord and shall have nothing to fear, nor shall they come to grief.” Other religious groups – Magi, Samaritans, and Zoroastrians – also came to be regarded as protected religious minorities (*dhimmis*) because they believed in one God, although they did not accept Muhammad’s prophethood. However advanced compared to Christianity this early Muslim teaching was, by modern standards it amounts to second class citizenship and a limited form of pluralism and tolerance.

A cross section of diverse Muslim voices and Islamic scholars from North Africa to Southeast Asia, Europe to America, Sunni and Shii, traditionalist, Islamist and liberal reformist, have championed new understandings and interpretations (*ijtihad*) of pluralism and tolerance. A starting point for many contemporary Muslim thinkers has been the reinterpretation of the “protected” status, *dhimmi*, of non-Muslims. Among the earliest and most prominent reformers, Mahmoud Ayoub has reinterpreted the term *dhimmah*, noting that the term, which is found only in the *hadith*, refers to those who are entitled to a protective relationship with Muslims in exchange for payment of the *jizyah* (poll tax). He does not believe that the term was intended to imply second-class status. Rather, it referred to a relationship.¹⁰¹ Similarly, he believes that the Arabic phrase *ahl al-kitab*, normally translated into English as “People of the Book,” ought to be translated as “Family of the Book,” because *ahl* always signifies a family relationship. Because the Quran enjoins Muslims and all people of faith to love and be kind to their families, he believes that the injunction to love and be kind ought to carry over to the Jewish and Christian communities as well, a practice that encourages pluralism.¹⁰²

Indonesian scholar Nurcholish Madjid has been a major Southeast Asian voice for religious pluralism. Writing in the context of the ethnically and religiously pluralistic societies of Indonesia and Southeast Asia, Madjid has identified the peaceful coexistence of Christians, Muslims, Hindus and Buddhists in Indonesia as contemporary evidence of Islam’s historical practice of religious pluralism. He calls for a reexamination of the Quranic order of the plurality of

human communities, in which God prescribes a Law and an Open Way to each people.¹⁰³ For Madjid the Quranic concept of the unity of God (*tawhīd*) is evidence that universal Truth is naturally one, although physical manifestations of that Truth may vary. Because God requires exclusive submission (*islām*), rather than Islam, the specific faith path, from humanity, Madjid believes that *islām* encompasses the common principles of all Messengers and Prophets. Thus, all followers of those Messengers and Prophets constitute a single community. Recognition of this understanding of *islām* as the key to genuine and legitimate religion makes religious pluralism a Quranic obligation. However, pluralism does not affirm the truth of all religions in their actual practice, but requires that all religions be free to be practiced. Individuals are then responsible for finding truth and a meeting point with other people of faith based only on submission to God.¹⁰⁴

Because Islam recognizes that true faith can exist in forms other than Islam, Madjid believes that the critical issue of faith is whether a person is sincere in his/her faith and engages in righteous conduct, not whether s/he believes in the prophecy of Muhammad. He cites Q 2:62 in support, noting that salvation depends on “faithfulness to God and the Day of Judgment and the carrying out of good deeds,” not on “factors of descent.”¹⁰⁵ He includes in his definition of People of the Book anyone who follows “teachers of moral law,” including Jews, Christians, Sabians, Zoroastrians, Hindus, and Buddhists, because the Quran states that God has sent a Messenger to every community. Some of these Messengers are described while others are not, yet all had the same duty – teaching monotheism.¹⁰⁶

Based upon both religious teachings and examples from Islamic history, Madjid maintains that Muslims have a particularly important role to play in pluralism. He cites as primary examples the Constitution of Medina during the Prophet Muhammad’s lifetime, which was the first known political document asserting religious freedom, the historical track record of fairness and justice that occurred under Muslim rule, including the Jewish Golden Age, and second Caliph Umar ibn al-Khattab’s guarantee of Christian personal and property rights and safety for the inhabitants of Jerusalem.¹⁰⁷ Madjid argues that these examples serve as a divine command to accept the natural plurality of human society, – a command that needs to be heeded more than ever at a time when the tolerance and pluralism of classical Islam appear to be disappearing in the course of globalization.¹⁰⁸

Pluralism and Social Justice

Islam emphasizes both the faith and deeds of the individual and the community. Muslims are expected to be just, honest, and charitable and to fight oppression of the poor and powerless. The Quran and the Prophet Muhammad regarded soci-

Pluralism in Muslim-Christian Relations

eties that failed to exhibit these characteristics, that is societies that exploited the poor, orphans, and women or were corrupt and oppressive, as sinful disobedience to God. Because God's kingdom was to be based upon unity, equality, justice, and peace, Muhammad taught that anyone who worked toward the establishment of a just society was considered to be in submission to God's will.¹⁰⁹ Some Muslim advocates of interfaith dialogue and interreligious pluralism regard this tradition as providing the blueprint for interreligious dialogue, one that focuses on cooperation based on social ethics and social justice, rather than on differences in beliefs.

One of the more prolific and outspoken advocates of pluralism and social justice is South African scholar Farid Esack, a prominent Muslim intellectual-activist in the struggle to end apartheid now teaching in America. Esack has defined religious pluralism as the creation of an environment in which everyone is safe and free to be human and to serve God. Arguing against a vision of pluralism that creates a value-free post-modernity, Esack calls instead for a more consistent application of morality that asserts the right of every human being to experience justice and be free from oppression, tyranny and conflict. He does not unequivocally call for peace, defined as the lack of conflict, because of his experience in South Africa where the ruling government used peace to preserve a social order that was inherently unjust and oppressive.¹¹⁰

Esack believes that the Muslim experience in South Africa is particularly relevant to debates about pluralism because of the practical experience South African Muslims gained in uniting both religious and ethnic groups on the basis of their common experiences of poverty, marginalization, and lack of power under apartheid. All had grown up and worked with each other throughout their lives as the result of circumstance. The challenge in the post-apartheid era was to take this experience and channel it into a deliberate openness in working together as people who represented not only different religions, genders and races, but also different sexual orientations.¹¹¹

Critical to this joint venture was a redefinition or broadening of the concept of morality as commonly understood. Although many Muslims assert that morality is tied to legal and sexual matters, Esack maintains that being a moral person means fighting hunger, poverty and injustice. Rather than reducing religion to a finite series of punishments, he embraces a vision of religion that addresses the underlying social inequalities that lead to crime. He does not believe in punishing theft with amputation in a society overwhelmed by poverty. Instead, he calls for an interpretation of Islamic law that engages in independent reasoning (*ijtihad*) to assure that the commitment to justice remains paramount.¹¹²

Esack's vision of religious and social pluralism embraces all marginalized groups. More than a matter of tolerating or co-existing with the Other, this vision calls for valuing and being enriched by the Other without establishing boundaries, whether legal or ritual. The goal is to free people from injustice and servitude to other human beings so that they are free to worship God. Esack assigns a special

role to Muslim intellectuals in this struggle, encouraging them to set aside arguments about how to sight the moon or slaughter a cow correctly in favor of working on “important” issues, like fighting tribalism and racism within the Muslim community. This vision of pluralism is more than functional or utilitarian; it embraces the theological legitimacy of other faiths based on the Quranic proclamation of the single brotherhood of all people.¹¹³

For Esack, interfaith coexistence and cooperation are based on four Quranic verses (23:52, 5:5, 5:47, and 22:40) which recognize the People of the Book as part of the Muslim community (*ummah*) because they were recipients of divine revelation. Esack notes that, in practice, this union into a single community was lived under the Constitution of Medina. Because Q 5:5 declares the food and marriage of the People of the Book lawful for Muslims, he believes that this intimate individual relationship of marriage can and should be expanded to a vision for broader social co-existence. Q 5:47 upholds the norms and regulations of Jews and Christians in religious law. Again, Esack observes that this verse was fulfilled by Muhammad when he settled disputes between different religious groups according to their own religious laws. He bolsters this interpretation with Q 5:42-3, which describes the Divine vision of interfaith interaction along these lines. Finally, Q 22:40 asserts the sanctity of the religious life of the People of the Book and authorizes armed struggle to protect that sanctity, including specifically for churches, synagogues and mosques. Esack believes that this is not simply a cultural expression of protecting places of worship, but recognition that God is worshipped and served in each of them (Q 4:113). Based on this Quranic evidence, Esack asserts that the spirituality and claim to salvation of the religious Other must be accepted.¹¹⁴

Shii cleric Ayatollah Muhammad Husayn Fadlallah has been a prominent, and controversial, voice on issues of political and social justice, calling for greater attention to the “human question” of the imbalance of power between the strong and weak, rich and poor, north and south. Based in Lebanon, but with a broad following in many other parts of the world, Fadlallah was widely regarded as the de facto spiritual advisor of Hizballah in the late twentieth century. Although Hizballah was an organization and militia closely associated with Iran, anti-Americanism, violence and terrorism, Fadlallah emphasized the ideological and cultural confrontation of ideas and values – issues of political, cultural, and economic imperialism. He maintained that his purpose was to unite Christians and Muslims in the struggle against injustice and defending the weak. Believing that Muslims and Christians must work together to teach morality in a unified framework that leads to the broad proclamation of justice, freedom, and equality for all people, Fadlallah opposes any system that promotes injustice, servitude or arrogance.¹¹⁵

Theologically, Fadlallah has acknowledged the need for intellectual honesty in addressing the negative references in the Quran to People of the Book

Pluralism in Muslim-Christian Relations

and Christians. He believes that Christians must be open to discussing an Islamic state and that both Christians and Muslims must look seriously at concerns Christians typically have about such a state, in particular their status as *dhimmī* which Christians fear means second-class citizenship for non-Muslims and paying a poll tax (*jizyah*). Rather than contributing to an environment of fear or accusations, Fadlallah prescribes researching and studying the sacred texts of Islam and Christianity, recognizing that missionary work is a critical element to both faiths, and discussing the Islamic movement so that Christians can learn to perceive it as something other than an absolute danger.¹¹⁶

Fadlallah's vision of interfaith dialogue has two major aspects: theological and practical. Theological dialogue would be based on understanding faith as both an intellectual movement and a matter of personal conviction, while practical dialogue would address concerns like the status of Christians within an Islamic state in which only Muslims could hold office. Fadlallah's vision of the Islamic state eschews interreligious conflict or competition. Maintaining that Lebanon's "problem" is that the wealthy rule over the poor and thus threaten the interests of Muslims and Christians alike, Fadlallah maintains that the Islamic state would be the servant of humanity by providing free and direct elections capable of breaking the power of the wealthy over the poor.¹¹⁷

Although Fadlallah claims that he seeks to create an atmosphere in which dialogue can take place and people can feel free to reveal what they truly think, it is nevertheless clear that he expects freedom of thought to lead to recognition of Islam as the solution to all of humanity's problems. Consequently, his purpose in encouraging interfaith dialogue is not necessarily the pursuit or legitimation of pluralism, but the creation of solidarity against the West.¹¹⁸

However different, India's Asghar Ali Engineer shares with Esack and Fadlallah the belief that God's original vision of pluralism for humanity has been corrupted over time by theologians who have sought to promote and legitimate the domination and exploitation of the powerless. Observing the critical importance of the Quran's teachings on justice and sympathy for the oppressed, Engineer has called for less emphasis on theology, popular religious practices, customs and traditions, all the products of human interpretation, and greater attention to divine revelation itself, the Quran.¹¹⁹

Engineer's vision or theology of pluralism is rooted in the Quranic and Prophetic values of justice (*adl*), human dignity (*karāmah*), compassion (*raḥmah*), and permission to religious Others, such as Jews and Christians, to practice their religion freely. Because the Quran obligates Muslims to respect all prophets and include all persons respecting those prophets within the faith community, Engineer believes that pluralism is a Quranic obligation.¹²⁰

Engineer notes that pluralism has always existed in some form historically within any given faith tradition as there are always differences of opinion about how scripture should be interpreted and what the purpose of revelation is. These

divisions can either remain interpretational or result in physical divisions of worship spaces. Because these divisions are inherently based on power struggles or other political or material causes, as in the Crusades and Jewish opposition to Islam during the lifetime of Muhammad, rather than religious teachings, Engineer believes that these divisions need not create absolute divisions within or between faith groups. Instead, he calls for acknowledging the reality of these divisions while at the same time recognizing that all faith groups worship the same God. Because “the Quran does not teach disrespect to any other religion,” Engineer denounces accusations of unbelief by one faith group against another and legalistic interpretations of religion that focus on condemnation and difference, rather than shared values and beliefs. He points to the Sufis (mystics) as the most helpful in establishing pluralism in practice because of their doctrine of “total peace” (*subl-l-kul - Ar*). Within the multireligious Indian context, Sufi doctrines have helped to maintain interreligious peace, promote interfaith dialogue, and create religious synthesis, rather than religious confrontation.

Because competition between religions can and has led to religious conflict, Engineer calls upon religious leaders to focus on seeking God, rather than power. In an age in which many experience a lack of direction and meaning in life, he believes that religion can play a critical role in providing a sense of identity, belonging and rootedness. However, he limits this role to the spiritual and moral spheres. He encourages all religious communities to work together to achieve a just and equitable society that guarantees fair treatment for all religions and requires all religious people to live in peace with each other. Engineer concludes that, “[t]hose who are committed to [the] true spirit of religion should cultivate tolerance and respect for different religions and see to it that religious differences are solved through dialogue rather than through confrontation.”¹²¹ Pluralism is necessary for the creation of this reality because only pluralism asserts the equal validity of all religions.¹²²

Iranian-American scholar Seyyed Hossein Nasr believes that theology contains the seeds of both the conflict and harmony between Islam and Christianity. Historically, theology has created difficulties because of the challenge of recognizing the Other’s message as authentic and valid. Christians who believe that there is no salvation outside of Christ and the Church have been unable to accept the Quran as the Divine Word and Muhammad as a prophet. Muslims have been unable to accept the Christian doctrine of the Trinity, which they believe violates God’s unity (*tawḥīd*), and the Quranic teaching that Christians have misinterpreted Christ’s message, altering the text of the New Testament. In practice, this has left Christians in the intractable position of condemning all Muslims to Hell because they do not believe in Christ, despite recognition that there are pious and righteous Muslims who do not seem to belong there. Similarly, Muslims have limited the rights of Jews and Christians to living as People of the Book whose lives, property and religion are protected without

Pluralism in Muslim-Christian Relations

being included as members of the Muslim community (*ummah*). Given these theological conundrums, formal attempts to reach theological agreement between Muslims and Christians have failed, despite the best intentions of those engaged.¹²³

Similar to Engineer's emphasis on revelation over theology, Nasr calls for resolving theological differences by focusing on the esoteric dimension of faith – spirituality – rather than the exoteric dimension – dogma. For example, by interpreting the Quranic protection of the People of the Book as a demonstration of God's justice and mercy, Nasr moves beyond literal interpretations of the status of Jews and Christians in Muslim societies to focus on the agency of God, rather than of human beings, in matters of salvation. He denies the right of any Muslim to consider the People of the Book to be “unbelievers” or to condemn them to Hell.¹²⁴

In response to those Muslims and Christians who see or emphasize theological challenges or differences, Nasr asserts that Jesus and Muhammad are examples of “divine possibilities that had to be realized” in order to lead to “two different perspectives on the relation between spiritual and temporal authority.”¹²⁵ Thus, whether one is looking at the example of the spiritual, otherworldly Jesus or the human community leader Muhammad who did not separate religion from politics, each represents a divine intervention leading toward the end of history. Neither can be considered exclusively “right” or “wrong” because this would limit God's capacity for agency.¹²⁶

Nasr supports interfaith dialogue as a method of assuring respect between religions. He is careful to assert that this respect is intended to lead to recognition of the sacredness and protection of the sacred space of the religious Other without requiring uniformity of belief. Within this construct, Christian churches and land remain open to all because this is consistent with Christian teachings, while Muslims retain the right to limit access to their sacred spaces, particularly Mecca and Medina, because this is consistent with the teachings of the Quran. In other words, freedom of worship is not to be confused with freedom of access.¹²⁷ Similarly, Nasr calls for respecting the right of both Islam and Christianity to engage in global missionary activities, but insists that such activities be done in an intellectually honest manner that does not seek to destroy any other faith or to use centers for education or medical services as opportunities for conversion, as occurred during the colonial past. Ultimately, he believes that serious and honest interfaith dialogue will lead to the assertion of the universality of the Truth in which each revelation of the Truth will be accepted as “a unique revelation to be deeply respected as being the result of God's Will and reflecting some aspects of His Wisdom.”¹²⁸

One of the most prolific and insightful proponents of pluralism is Abdulaziz Sachedina of the University of Virginia. Sachedina emphasizes the centrality of the Quran and of *ijtihad*. Although he considers the *hadith* to be important in determining the historical and cultural context of the Quranic reve-

lation, Sachedina does not believe that the timeless and universal message of the Quran can or should be bound by that context.¹²⁹ His vision of pluralism is rooted exclusively in the Quran because of its unique authority among Muslims, because its spiritual space is shared by other monotheistic traditions, and because it recognizes the salvific value of other religions.¹³⁰ In support, he cites the Quran's discussion of "The Book," emphasizing the unity of the Message while acknowledging the plurality of the prophets.

Sachedina believes that the essential message of the Quran is the unity of humanity as evidenced by the common origins and right to God's mercy and forgiveness for all human beings. Q 2:213 states that humanity is a single community which God has the power to unite, making religious pluralism a necessary corollary to the diversity that characterizes human existence on earth. Thus, he concludes, although differences between religious traditions and the specifics of worship exist, greater attention should be given to the common human experiences of God, including judgment on Judgment Day, the requirement to be moral citizens, and the need to acknowledge God as the Creator of all of humanity.¹³¹

This attention could serve as a positive source of harmony, peace and cooperation, particularly at a time when people increasingly come into contact with diversity due to the twin forces of globalization and the communications revolution. Rather than continuing the past pattern of religious conflict due to competing exclusive claims to salvation, Sachedina has called for religious inclusivity that recognizes both multiple and unique truths.¹³² This vision of pluralism permits each religion to maintain its specificity and differences from other religions in matters of belief and practice while recognizing the oneness of humanity and the need to work toward better understanding between faiths. In other words, while human beings are free to have their own internal convictions, this should lead to coexistence and negotiation of spiritual space, rather than conflict.¹³³

Sachedina's definition of religious pluralism requires recognition of the religious Other as a spiritual equal entitled to salvation within the Other's own belief system. He does not allow for the supersession of one religion by another or the inferiority or superiority of one religion over another as this would be incompatible with God's justice.¹³⁴ "God's justice does not allow favoring one group while ill-treating another. All peoples who believe in a prophet and in the revelation particular to them 'their wages await them with their Lord, and no fear shall there be on them, neither shall they sorrow.' (Q 2:62)."¹³⁵ Thus, the potential for salvation through other revelations, including the Torah and Gospels, is recognized¹³⁶ and the rationalization of aggression against and exploitation of religious Others due to the supposed "flaws" of their religion is denied.¹³⁷

The desired outcome of religious pluralism, according to Sachedina's construct, is the creation of an ethical public order that requires human beings to live and work together for justice and peace for the entire world. Broad human acceptance of this order would be possible because every person possesses *fitrah*, or a pri-

Pluralism in Muslim-Christian Relations

mordial nature that allows each person to deal with others in fairness and equity. Sachedina believes that this moral ability should lead to the development of a global ethic of pluralism that embraces understanding and active engagement with the religious Other.¹³⁸

Although Muslims have traditionally identified such an ethical system or just public order with the creation of an Islamic state in which Islamic law is the law of the land, Sachedina argues that this can be the case only if Shariah, as divinely revealed law, takes precedence over jurisprudence (*fiqh*), which is human interpretation of that law. Identifying the critical characteristic of Shariah as justice, he argues that the purpose of Shariah is to maintain well-being at both the individual and social levels. Within this vision, religious pluralism becomes a necessary matter of public policy for Muslim governments in order to protect the “divinely ordained right of each and every person to determine his/her spiritual destiny without coercion.”¹³⁹ Sachedina believes that this could be done most effectively by freeing the Quranic text from its contextual trappings in order to uncover its universal message.¹⁴⁰

As with many other contemporary Muslim proponents of pluralism, Sachedina’s vision of pluralism extends beyond religion into politics. He believes that religious pluralism is the first step in demonstrating that people of diverse backgrounds can learn to work together on the basis of shared values. These individual-level relations must then be translated into community and ultimately national-level interactions. For Sachedina, acceptance of the religious Other in fellowship with the Divine must lead to cooperation in politics that encourages minorities to flourish in their way of life.¹⁴¹

Conclusion: Muslim-Christian Relations in a Post-9/11 World

Given the progress in Muslim-Christian dialogue and increasing openness toward religious pluralism evidenced since the late 20th century, the 21st century should have been characterized by interreligious tolerance, hope and peaceful coexistence. However, the tragic events of 9/11 have threatened to derail this progress by resurrecting past constructions of competition and conflict of a centuries old and inevitable conflict between Islam and Christianity. Osama Bin Laden’s declarations of unending global jihad against “Christian Crusaders” and Zionists and other militant exclusivist theologies emanating from some religious leaders and madrasahs in Saudi Arabia, Pakistan and Indonesia represent the worst of Islamic extremism. Christian ultra-conservative denunciations of Islam as a violent and militant religion and the Prophet Muhammad as corrupt and demonic by prominent militant Zionist voices of the Christian Right (as distinct from the mainstream Christian Right), such as Pat Robertson, Jerry Falwell, Franklin

Graham, Ron Parsley and John Hagee serve only to promote bigotry, inaccurate information, and intolerance.¹⁴² They feed and foster a time of rising distrust and paranoia in Muslim-Christian relations, particularly in America where Muslim charity assets are frozen, mosques are kept under surveillance, visiting Arabs and Muslims are required to register and are frequently singled out and detained, and Arab and Muslim civil liberties are often restricted or compromised. The result is a climate in which many Muslims in the United States and Europe feel vulnerable and Islamophobia and hate crimes have become a serious threat. Rising Muslim anger and resentment internationally against the West, both the United States and Europe, plays into the hands of those who, like Bin Laden, seek to exploit Muslim frustration and turn it into political activism and radicalism at the expense of pluralism, tolerance and peace.

In today's world of globalization where the lines between East and West, between "us" and "them," and between Christian and Muslim are too often a source of conflict, warfare and terrorism, the need to engage in dialogue – with other religions, cultures, and peoples – is even more urgent than ever before for peaceful coexistence. Both Christianity and Islam have the resources to support interreligious dialogue and notions of pluralism and tolerance that respond to the realities of the 21st century. A vanguard of religious thinkers and leaders writing in the last half of the 20th century have laid the foundation for dialogue and coexistence, rooted in a reading and a reinterpretation of their scriptures, doctrines and histories. Their diverse voices and calls for mutual understanding and respect, for religious pluralism and tolerance, can enable these Children of Abraham to contribute to the creation of a more human world.

Endnotes

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- ²⁵ Langdon Gilkey: "Plurality and Its Theological Implications," in *The Myth of Christian Uniqueness: Toward a Pluralistic Theology of Religions*, eds. John Hick and Paul F. Knitter. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1987, 38-40.
- ²⁶ Swidler, 332.
- ²⁷ Karl Rahner: *Foundations of Christian Faith*. New York: Crossroad, 1978, 178-203, and 318.
- ²⁸ Karl Rahner: "Christianity and the Non-Christian Religions," in *Theological Investigations*. Baltimore: Helicon Press, 1966, 5:115-134.
- ²⁹ Sullivan, 171-172.
- ³⁰ Sullivan, 172.
- ³¹ Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith*, 178-203, and 318. Not all Catholics accepted the concept of "anonymous Christians." Theologian Hans Küng rejected this construct because it made everyone a Christian, including those who had willfully and voluntarily rejected this title, including Muslims. It also failed to recognize the validity of other religions on their own terms. See Sullivan, 181.
- ³² Knitter, 63.
- ³³ *Nostra Aetate*, 2.
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- ³⁵ *Ibid.*, 3.
- ³⁶ *Ad Gentes*, 11 and 15.
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- ³⁸ *Lumen Gentium*, Recognizing the spiritual bonds, 16.
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- ⁵³ *Ibid.*, 5.

Pluralism in Muslim-Christian Relations

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- ⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 5.
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- ⁶⁸ Knitter, 177.
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- ⁷⁰ Knitter, 223 and 229.
- ⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 102.
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- ¹⁰⁸ Madjid, "In Search of Islamic Roots," 103.
- ¹⁰⁹ Sonn, 446.
- ¹¹⁰ Farid Esack: "Religio-Cultural Diversity – For What and With Whom?: Muslim Reflections from a Post-Apartheid South Africa in the throes of Globalisation," 1-2.
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- ¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 11.
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ACMCU

Prince Alwaleed Bin Talal

Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding

Georgetown University

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