

No Matter if Jesus, Buddha or Allah ...

Is Truth One or Many?



Overview

Several weeks ago, a short clip from a conversation between Muslim and Christian women went viral on social media. In it, you see one of the Muslim participants asking another: “Do you believe Christians will enter Paradise?” With full-blown confidence, she replies: “Yes, I do.” The sister who’s asked the question nods with interest, almost casually – as though this was an answer you would naturally expect.

Just as the Christian side is about to respond, a third sister steps in and elaborates: “That’s true – that’s exactly what we believe. Allah never addresses *the Muslims* in the Qur’an, but *the believers*. And that includes anyone who believes in the God of Abraham. The word *Muslim* doesn’t mean someone who prays and fasts. It means someone who submits to God. So anyone who submits to God is, in the truest sense of the word, a Muslim.”

The comment section blows up with thousands upon thousands of positive comments, saying: “That’s the true understanding of Islam if you were only to understand it with your heart!”

“Finally someone educated to convey the Qur’an’s message properly!”

“This shows the universal nature of Islam: a religion of mercy, sincerity, and connection to the Divine – not exclusion or superiority.”

But then, amidst all the praise and applause, a single comment pops up that almost goes unnoticed: “*Why should I even convert then?*”

Whether the author really meant to make a point here or not, this brief remark exposes the real problem – one that even the Christian women in the video seemed to recognize immediately: if anyone who “believes in God” already counts as a Muslim, then what purpose do revelation, prophethood, or even Islam itself serve?

While the sisters in the video at least refer to a shared Abrahamic origin of the religions (which, as we shall see, is not entirely unproblematic), their line of reasoning can be traced back to a very specific school of thought that goes even further. Their seemingly “inclusive” - even “enlightened” - understanding reflects an ideology known in modern religious philosophy as **Perennialism, Universalism** or **religious-soteriological Pluralism**¹, which is the belief that all religions ultimately worship the same God and merely represent different paths leading to the same destination.

Today, we come across the marks of this philosophy all over: in interfaith forums, peace prayers, universal prayer rooms, and similar initiatives that reduce religion to the lowest common denominator.² At first glance, it does sound very appealing. In a world shaped by conflict and division, it promises harmony and peace, together with the comforting idea that, ultimately, no one is really wrong and everyone will make it to Paradise eventually.

But aside from the many logical contradictions that come with equating all faiths, this belief comes at another cost: it causes the very question of truth itself to disappear – not just any truth, but Truth with a capital T. For if all paths are already considered to be true, there is no reason left to search for the one that is *actually* true. The desire for certainty fades into indifference, and where truth was once seriously debated, it is now met with little more than a shrug.

This raises an important question: who actually benefits from this? Is it perhaps a secular-liberal system that presents itself as morally “neutral” and “tolerant”, all too often in the name of “Human Rights,” while quietly establishing itself as the ultimate authority over all other competing worldviews? It is within this system that religions are reduced to nothing more than lifestyle choices – mere “flavors” within a dominant secular world order that claims to embrace them all, yet in doing so subjects them to its own standards while remaining itself unquestioned.

This white paper aims to critically examine the claim that all religions are equally true or valid, and show why this idea is problematic from both an Islamic as well as an intellectual standpoint. At the same time, it seeks to equip young Muslims with the confidence to understand, strengthen, and articulate the Islamic position clearly, without shame and without the need to demean others.

The Origins of Religious Pluralism and Its Different Forms

Consider the following thought experiment: A group of blind men encounters an elephant. One reaches for its leg and says, “It's a tree!” Another feels its trunk and says, “No, it's a snake!” A third touches its tusk and is convinced, “It's definitely a spear!” In the end, they start arguing with each another, even though it is one and the same creature that's in front of them.

So let's be honest – did you just find yourself agreeing in silence? Well, this parable does sound plausible. After all, it seems to offer a simple explanation as to why people misunderstand one another, while still suggesting that everyone is somewhat right. But perhaps that is precisely where the trap lies: in the persuasive simplicity of what is, in reality, a far more nuanced matter. It is therefore no surprise that this parable has become one of the most popular metaphors in modern religious discourse.³

It was first popularized by British philosopher of religion John Hick, a self-professed Catholic of the 20th century who taught at universities in England and the United States and who - largely because of his “elephant” analogy - is still regarded as one of the most influential voices of religious pluralism today. Through his close relationships with Muslims from the Indian subcontinent, he began questioning whether it could truly be just for morally upright and God-fearing people of other faiths to be excluded from salvation in the Hereafter simply because they did not accept Jesus as the Son of God. Out of this ethical dilemma, as he saw it, Hick developed his pluralistic theology: no single religion, he argued, possesses the full truth about God, but each reflects only one facet of the very same divine reality.

However, Hick was by no means the first to take up the idea of religious diversity. Even in ancient Rome, different deities could be worshipped side by side without contradicting, let alone trying to convert one another. With the advent of Christianity, this changed drastically. For the first time in history, a religion combined an exclusive claim to truth with a universal mission, insisting that its

message applied to all humanity. Its core message was clear: salvation is only to be achieved through Jesus Christ. This claim stood in sharp contrast to the Roman model of religious coexistence and ultimately led to the persecution of early Christians, though less because of intellectual disagreement and more because Roman rulers viewed Christianity as a potential threat to public order at the time.

Many centuries later, during the age of exploration, this concept of exclusivity began to be questioned on rational grounds. European Christians encountered peoples who had never heard of Jesus, yet appeared morally upright and spiritually fulfilled within their own religious traditions. The idea that all these individuals would be lost simply because of their ignorance seemed unacceptable to many. At the same time, other developments reinforced this shift. Religion was increasingly used by church and state to secure power, while new scientific discoveries brought it into conflict with established religious doctrines. Gradually, this changed how religion itself was understood: it came to be seen less as clear revelation and guidance from God, and more as a cultural expression of a universal human longing for “the Divine”.

During the Enlightenment period of the 18th century, this approach to religion gained even more momentum. Philosophers and rationalists openly mocked the Church’s exclusive claim to Truth: Were millions of people in China or India really to be doomed for all eternity simply because they had never known Jesus? Faith increasingly became subject to human reason and logic. The search for a standard that transcended all human faiths eventually led to the idea that all religions stem from a single Divine source and differ only in symbols, forms, and languages (which is, of course, in sharp contrast to atheistic positions that reject religion altogether).

With this, the intellectual groundwork for modern religious pluralism had been laid. In the 1930s - shortly after the abolition of the Ottoman Caliphate - such ideas also began to find resonance in Muslim circles. In fact, to this day, some people will point to Sufi thinkers such as Ibn ‘Arabi or Rumi in order to justify such views. In reality, however, this is not part of a historical Islamic tradition, but a distinctly modern movement. Among its most influential proponents were French metaphysician and esoteric thinker René Guénon as well as his student Frithjof

Schuon. Both later embraced Islam and became known as 'Abd al-Wahid Yahya and 'Isa Nur ad-Din Ahmad, respectively. By blending elements of Islamic mysticism with Hindu metaphysics, they effectively disguised perennialist ideas in Islamic language.

In the second half of the twentieth century, similar ideas were further developed by figures such as Martin Lings, Gai Eaton, and Seyyed Hossein Nasr. As the editor of *The Study Quran*, Nasr in particular has contributed to the continued influence of this perspective within Western Islamic discourse.

What all these approaches have in common is the belief that the obvious differences between religions are ultimately secondary – they are but different languages referring to one and the same God. As a result, the criterion shifts: it is no longer *what* you believe that counts, but merely **that** you believe (overall).

Today, religious pluralism usually takes one of two forms. **Reductive pluralism** emphasizes common ground, arguing that all religions share a core principle - such as love, devotion, or morality - that makes them equally valid paths to salvation. **Non-reductive pluralism**, by contrast, accepts the differences between religions but still insists that all of them are equally true and intended by God.

Ultimately, both versions boil down to the same underlying assumption: that truth itself is relative. If all paths are considered equally valid, however, the very concept of truth becomes meaningless and sacred scriptures are reduced to nothing more than different narratives about the Divine. This clearly can be seen in the rise of “New Age” spirituality and the rapidly growing number of the so-called “Non-Affiliates” – people who believe in “something higher” but do not (or choose not to) associate with any specific religion. Although various factors are at play here, religious pluralism is, without a doubt, one of the primary driving forces behind this development, and no longer remains limited to personal spirituality or academic debate, but increasingly extends into world politics.

“Abraham Accords”: Abrahamism as a Political Vision

Before outlining the Islamic position on the claim to Truth in the next section, we at One Ummah Forum consider it important to draw attention to current developments on the global stage in which the idea of religious pluralism has already begun to take shape politically.

In the context of the so-called “Abraham Accords,” there is growing emphasis on a common “Abrahamic identity” shared by Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. This rhetoric seeks to reduce the aforementioned religions to a supposedly common religious core, giving the impression that they essentially represent equivalent paths to God, whose differences are primarily historical or cultural in nature. Religious diversity is thus not merely tolerated, but actively reinterpreted theologically and at the same time politically instrumentalized.

This development becomes especially evident against the backdrop of the ongoing genocide in Palestine. As several Muslim-majority states move toward normalizing political relations with Israel, appeals to a shared “Abrahamic” foundation are increasingly used as a moral and religious justification. Key differences in belief are deliberately ignored in order to make political rapprochement - and in particular, normalization with Israel - appear religiously unproblematic or even desirable. The involvement of Muslim countries makes this development all the more alarming. In this context, Abrahamism appears less as a project of genuine religious understanding and more as an ideological tool that subordinates religious meaning to political and strategic interests.

Islam and the Claim to Truth

Having examined where the idea of religious pluralism originates, why it resonates strongly in the modern world, and how it is increasingly instrumentalized for political reasons, we now want to take a look at the Islamic perspective. First things first: Islam does tolerate religious pluralism in a social and legal sense – the history of its Golden Age clearly demonstrates this. In places like al-Andalus and under Ottoman rule, different religious communities did not just coexist, but the “People of the Book” were even granted the right to judge according to their own laws and scriptures and administer their own institutions accordingly. In many ways, this form of coexistence was far more liberal than what modern liberalism claims to be today.

In the following section, we will show how Islam distinguishes between truth and falsehood, guidance and misguidance, and why this distinction is fundamentally irreconcilable with the idea of equally valid religions promoted by religious pluralism.

The Qur'an on Islam's Claim to Truth

The Islamic position on religious pluralism is abundantly clear in the Qur'an. Allah keeps emphasizing in various passages that no religion is accepted by Him other than Islam. One well-known example in this regard can be found in Surah al-'Imran:

Certainly, Allah's only Way is Islam.⁴

The Qur'an does not use the term *Islam* here in the merely linguistic sense of general “submission,” but as the name of a specifically revealed religion. This becomes especially clear in verses 157 and 158 of Surah al-A'raf, which precisely describe the relationship between previous revelations and the mission of Muhammed ﷺ:

*They are the ones who follow the Messenger, the unlettered Prophet, whose description they find in their Torah and the Gospel. [...] Only those who believe in him, honour and support him, and follow the light sent down to him will be successful. * Say, O Prophet, “O humanity! I am Allah’s Messenger to you all. [...] So believe in Allah and His Messenger, the unlettered Prophet, who believes in Allah and His revelations. And follow him, so you may be rightly guided.⁵*

These verses clearly rule out any symbolic or generalized interpretation of the term *Islam*. Allah explicitly mentions the Torah and the Gospel as the sacred scriptures of other religions and, in turn, contrasts them with the final revelation. Whoever follows the “Light” sent down to the Prophet - that is, the Qur'an, and thus Islam - is described to be among the successful ones. At the same time, it becomes clear that Muhammed ﷺ was sent as a messenger to all of humanity; through him, Allah definitively established the religion He requires of humankind. Earlier revelations remain part of the same overarching truth, but their validity comes to an end with the sending of the final Prophet – especially given the Islamic understanding that earlier scriptures were altered over time.

Anyone who still doubts that *Islam* refers to a specific and distinct religion should reflect on the following words of Allah:

Whoever seeks a way other than Islam, it will never be accepted from them, and in the Hereafter they will be among the losers.⁶

To some, this verse may be a hard pill to swallow, but it captures the logical consequence of a divine concept of truth: the truth of a religion is not measured by personal sincerity or moral effort, but by objective standards – its coherence, its evidence, and whether it truly contains what it claims to be: revelation from God. A person may have the best intentions in the world or be sincerely committed to being a “good person” within his or her own religious tradition – if a religion does not even claim to be revealed from God or cannot plausibly justify such a claim, it already falls short in terms of truth. The Qur'an therefore draws a clear distinction between Islam and all other belief systems and establishes its own standards of truth and morality.

Let us quote one final verse that makes this universal claim unmistakably clear:

He is the One Who has sent His Messenger with true guidance and the religion of truth, making it prevail over all others, even to the dismay of the polytheists.⁷

Here, Islam is not described as one alternative amongst many, but as the one religion that surpasses all others.

There are many other verses that emphasize Islam's claim to Truth and run like a thread through the Qur'an, such as 2:120, 2:135-137, 3:31, and 4:150-151. Likewise, 5:72-73 and 9:31 which condemn belief in Jesus as God or in religious authorities as forms of shirk, as does 16:36, in which Allah declares that He sent messengers to every community calling them to worship Him alone. Together, all of these passages show that the call to *tawhid* – the very core and defining feature of the Islamic faith – has remained the same throughout all ages, and that even the slightest deviation from it is never regarded as equally valid.

Statements by the Prophet ﷺ on Islam's Claim to Truth

In addition to the numerous verses in the Qur'an that reject religious pluralism and clearly affirm Islam's claim to Truth, there are also several narrations by the Prophet ﷺ that reinforce this line of argument. Particularly revealing in this regard is the well-known hadith about the *fitrah* – the natural disposition of human beings:

*Every child is born upon the *fitrah*, and then his parents make him either a Jew, a Christian, or a Magian.⁸*

This statement by the Prophet ﷺ does not mean that every human being is born a Muslim in the religious-technical sense. Rather, it illustrates that human beings are created with an inner inclination toward truth and toward the recognition and worship of Allah alone. Islam understands itself as the revelation that affirms this

original disposition, clarifies it, and gives it concrete form in the form of divine guidance and revelation.

However, while the hadith confirms Islam's monotheism on one hand, it also implies a clear distinction by listing other faiths. The latter are not presented as equal alternatives to Islam, but rather as later deviations from the original *fitrah*, which is shaped by socialization and environment.

Another hadith further clarifies that good deeds alone are insufficient for salvation if they aren't rooted in faith in Allah. The Prophet ﷺ once spoke of a man from the pre-Islamic period who upheld family ties and fed the poor. When one of the companions asked whether these virtues would benefit him in the Hereafter, the Prophet ﷺ replied:

*It will be of no use to him, for he never said, 'O my Lord, forgive my sins on the Day of Resurrection.'*⁹

The story of the Jewish boy who served the Prophet ﷺ is also very telling. When the boy fell seriously ill, the Prophet visited him, sat at his bedside and said, "Embrace Islam." The boy looked to his father for guidance, and when the father told him to obey the Prophet, the boy declared the testimony of faith. Thereupon, the Prophet ﷺ said:

*All praise is due to Allah, Who saved him from Hellfire.*¹⁰

This incident shows once again that salvation is achieved neither through ancestry nor through good deeds, but solely through faith in the Messenger of Allah ﷺ and accepting his message.

Beyond these three examples, there are plenty of other narrations that attest to the exclusivity of Islam. For instance, the Prophet ﷺ stated that even earlier messengers such as Musa (as) would be obliged to follow him were they alive today, since his message confirms, corrects, and ultimately completes previous revelations.¹¹ In another narration, he warned that anyone who hears of his message and then rejects it cannot hope for salvation, be it Jew or Christian.¹² Together, both statements highlight the theological finality of earlier religions: with

the coming of the Prophet Muhammed ﷺ, the truth to which all people, regardless of their background, are bound was finally and universally defined.

Scholarly Consensus

In addition to the evidences from the Qur'an and Sunnah, there has been a clear and longstanding consensus (*ijmā'*) among Islamic scholars since the death of the Prophet ﷺ that Islam, after its revelation, is the only path accepted by Allah. This consensus encompasses classical Sunni schools of thought and has remained uncontested for centuries.

More recent pluralistic interpretations that claim salvation is possible regardless of embracing Islam therefore stand not only in clear contradiction to the explicit textual sources, but also in opposition to this established *ijmā'*, which itself has evidential value in Islam. The Prophet ﷺ said in this regard:

*Allah will not gather my ummah upon misguidance.*¹³

Misunderstandings and Objections to the Islamic Claim to Truth

Now that the Islamic position on religious pluralism has been made clear, a pressing question remains: how is it that some thinkers today still arrive at the opposite conclusion – despite the explicit evidence found in the Qur'an and Sunnah? In fact (and somewhat ironically), proponents of religious pluralism rely both on certain passages in the Qur'an, which - how could it be otherwise - are taken out of context and reinterpreted, as well as on supposedly “logical” or “ethical” arguments that seek to question or even ridicule Islam's exclusive claim to Truth.

This section therefore examines two types of objections:

- 1) **Qur'anic misinterpretations**, which attempt to blur or dilute the clear Islamic stance on religious pluralism; and

- 2) **Pseudo-rational arguments**, grounded in moral or logical claims that appear persuasive at first glance, but collapse upon closer scrutiny.

This is by no means an exhaustive list, but it addresses the most common and influential arguments circulating in contemporary pluralist discourse. Taken together, both lines of reasoning ultimately reveal that the pluralist reading is incompatible not only with revelation, but also common sense.

1) Misinterpretations from the Qur'an and Sunnah

The Supposed Equal Status of All Faith Communities

Indeed, the believers, Jews, Christians, and Sabians—whoever truly believes in Allah and the Last Day and does good will have their reward with their Lord. And there will be no fear for them, nor will they grieve.¹⁴

In pluralist interpretations, this verse is often cited as the primary proof that salvation in the Hereafter is possible even without belief in the Prophet Muhammed ﷺ and his message. This reading, however, is a modern one and stands in clear contradiction to numerous other verses, as we've already seen (most notably 3:85).

The phrase “whoever believes in Allah” is never vague in the Qur'an, but presupposes a correct understanding of God – namely, the absolute rejection of associating partners with Allah, such as the doctrine of the Trinity. Likewise, “righteous deeds” are not defined subjectively or arbitrarily, but they are bound to the moral and legal standards revealed by God Himself. For this reason, classical (not modern!) Qur'anic exegetes understood the verse as referring to earlier religious communities in their own time, i. e. those who truly followed their original, uncorrupted revelations before the coming of Muhammed ﷺ. However, once he was sent, those communities were likewise called and obligated to accept Islam.

“If Allah had willed, there would be only one religion”

*To each of you We have ordained a code of law and a way of life.
If Allah had willed, He would have made you one community¹⁵*

Had your Lord so willed O Prophet, all people on earth would have certainly believed, every single one of them! Would you then force people to become believers?¹⁶

Had your Lord so willed, He would have certainly made humanity one single community of believers, but they will always choose to differ¹⁷

O humanity! Indeed, We created you from a male and a female, and made you into peoples and tribes so that you may get to know one another.¹⁸

These verses are often cited as evidence that God *intends* religious diversity and therefore accepts all belief systems equally. The Qur'an, however, makes a clear distinction between what Allah *allows* to exist (His cosmic or creational will) and what He **loves, commands, and approves** of (His legislative will). In other words, the mere fact that Allah permits or "tolerates" the existence of multiple religions does not mean that He endorses or validates them all.

For instance, the third verse listed above merely talks about humanity's ethnic and social diversity, not about the equal truth of different belief systems. Moreover, the first verse in the list explicitly states the purpose behind these differences – if it only would be read to the end:

We have revealed to you O Prophet this Book with the truth, as a confirmation of previous Scriptures and a supreme authority on them. So judge between them by what Allah has revealed, and do not follow their desires over the truth that has come to you. To each of you We have ordained a code of law and a way of life. If Allah had willed, He would have made you one community, but His Will is to test you with what He has given each of you. So compete with one another in doing

good. To Allah you will all return, then He will inform you of the truth regarding your differences.

Here, Allah makes clear that He tests people as to who follows His revelation and guidance best. This very notion of a test already rules out the idea that all paths are equally valid because any meaningful test necessarily presupposes the existence of right and wrong.

“Christians are closest to the believers”

You will surely find the most bitter towards the believers to be the Jews and polytheists and the most gracious to be those who call themselves Christian. That is because there are priests and monks among them and because they are not arrogant.¹⁹

This verse is sometimes understood as an endorsement of Christian belief. However, the very next verse (5:83) immediately qualifies whom this praise actually applies to:

When they listen to what has been revealed to the Messenger, you see their eyes overflowing with tears for recognizing the truth. They say, “Our Lord! We believe, so count us among the witnesses.

The passage therefore does not affirm Trinitarian doctrine or Christian theology as such. Rather, it praises a specific group of Christians which are those who, upon hearing the Qur'anic revelation, recognize it as the Truth and respond to it with submission. In other words, the verse commends Christians who follow the Truth sincerely when it becomes clear to them, i. e. those who accept the message of Islam once they encounter it.

Hadiths Commonly Misunderstood

In addition to verses from the Qur'an, there are also several narrations by the Prophet ﷺ that are frequently cited and misinterpreted by proponents of religious pluralism in order to support the idea that all religions are equally valid. A closer look, however, shows that these narrations convey the exact opposite.

1. The Prophet ﷺ Standing for a Jewish Funeral Procession. In one occasion, it is reported by Jabir ibn 'Abdillah that a funeral procession once passed by the Prophet ﷺ, upon which he stood up. When the Companions remarked that it was the body of a Jew, the Prophet ﷺ replied: "Was he not a human being?"²⁰ While this incident is sometimes presented as evidence for theological equivalence between religions, in reality it expresses nothing but respect for human dignity and for the gravity of death. The Prophet ﷺ intended to affirm the sanctity of human life, not to endorse the entire religion of Judaism.

2. The Well-Known Hadith: "The difference of opinion among my Ummah is a mercy." This narration is often quoted to justify religious diversity as such. But first of all, the majority of hadith scholars consider the narration to be unauthentic, and secondly, even if one were to accept its meaning, it refers exclusively to limited differences of opinion within Islamic law and theology. The "mercy" here lies in the flexibility of Islamic jurisprudence in secondary matters – not in the coexistence of contradictory religions.

3. The Hadith Qudsi: "My Mercy Prevailed Over My Wrath."²¹ Some interpret this narration as evidence for universal salvation, regardless of faith. Yet this understanding contradicts the broader context of revelation. Divine mercy manifests in two distinct forms: **a) general mercy in this world**, which encompasses all of creation, believers and unbelievers alike; and **b) a specific, eschatological mercy in the Hereafter**, which is reserved for those who believe in Allah and His Messenger. This hadith simply affirms that God's specific mercy ultimately prevails over His punishment and does not imply unconditional salvation for everyone.

2) Rational Objections

Shaped by the modern secular-liberal climate, many proponents of religious pluralism - including a considerable number of atheists and agnostics - appeal primarily to rational and moral objections. Yet, even these fail to hold up when examined more closely.

“Exclusivism is arrogant.”

The idea that Islam’s claim to Truth is an expression of arrogance misses a basic point: religions are followed because their adherents are (at best) convinced that they are true in the first place. After all, why would anyone commit to something they do not believe to be true? A truth claim, then, is not a sign of arrogance but a basic and logical requirement of being religious at all. Moreover, arrogance is a matter of character, not truth. There are humble exclusivists and arrogant pluralists, and ironically, declaring all exclusivists “wrong” is itself an exclusivist truth claim – one that undermines the very claim that all religions are equally valid.

“Being a good person is enough.”

Influenced by humanist thought and modern human rights, many argue that good manners and empathy are more important than any specific beliefs or dogmas. But morality without a divine standard, as this whitepaper has emphasized in several places, inevitably becomes relative: what is considered a virtue within one worldview may appear as a vice in another. Islam doesn’t deny the value of good behavior, but holds that it is truly salvific only when carried out with awareness of the Creator and in accordance with His revelation. To uphold the rights of creation while neglecting the rights of the Creator is to miss the very purpose for which human beings were created.

“You’re only Muslim because you were raised as one.”

This argument is a classic example of a genetic fallacy: it attacks the origin of a belief rather than its substance. The fact that someone adopts a worldview due to their parents or upbringing says absolutely nothing about whether that worldview is true or false. People embrace - or leave - religions through conscious, deliberate decisions. And anyone who claims that faith is merely a product of social conditioning would have to admit that their own pluralism or any other ideology is likewise nothing more than a product of its time (at least if they were truly consistent).

“Exclusivism is intolerant.”

Tolerance only makes sense where disagreement exists in the first place. If all religions agreed with one another, there would be no need to speak of tolerance at all. As already noted, Islamic history clearly shows that exclusivist belief and social tolerance are not mutually exclusive. Under Muslim rule, Jews and Christians were able to practice their religions freely - even institutionally - without interference. This stands in stark contrast to many modern secular-liberal systems, which permit religion only on the condition that it conforms to a state-defined set of values (or “raison d'état”), often intervening far more deeply than historical Muslim governments ever did. Intolerance, then, does not lie in holding a truth claim, but in denying others respect or the right to hold and practice their own convictions.

“It’s offensive to tell others that they’re wrong.”

Disagreeing with someone is by no means an insult. What matters is *how* one disagrees, not the mere fact **that** disagreement exists. Otherwise, meaningful dialogue would be impossible altogether. The Qur'an itself instructs Muslims to invite to the path of God {{with wisdom and kind advice}}²². Moreover, in many other social contexts, disagreement is not only accepted but expected, most notably in political debates, where opposing positions are openly articulated and criticized without being perceived as offensive. How, then, could people ever

coexist if disagreement itself were considered an insult? Quite apart from that, why should anyone feel offended by a religion's judgment concerning salvation if they do not even believe that religion to be true in the first place? From the perspective of other traditions, Muslims are likewise considered doomed in the Hereafter, yet this hardly troubles us, precisely because we are convinced that we follow the Truth. And finally, if someone genuinely believes that a particular religion leads to salvation, then remaining silent about it would indeed be negligent, selfish, and irresponsible – ironically, the very accusations often directed at exclusivists. The one who remains silent keeps what they believe to be truth and salvation to themselves, whereas the one who speaks about truth with kindness and goodwill is, in fact, showing care and respect for others.

“Many people have never received the message of Islam – how could God punish them?”

Islam draws a clear distinction between excusable and inexcusable ignorance. In other words, not everyone who has not embraced Islam is treated alike. A person who never received the complete and uncorrupted message of Islam is not judged in the same way as someone who received the message, understood it, and willingly rejected it. There are also those who sincerely seek the truth but encounter only distorted or misleading portrayals of Islam, and therefore never come into contact with its message in an authentic form. Others, however, may have had access to reliable sources, yet remained indifferent in their search for truth or simply followed the customs of their surroundings without ever seriously engaging with life's fundamental questions. This, too, carries responsibility. Moreover, Islamic theology also recognizes the concept that individuals who had no genuine opportunity to recognize the truth in this world may be subjected to a specific test – even if that may be in the Hereafter. In all cases, the final judgment as to who belongs to which category rests with Allah alone. In this life, Muslims judge only by what is outwardly apparent; the Hereafter, however, belongs entirely to Allah's perfect and final justice: {{And your Lord will never wrong anyone.}}²³

“Islam must adapt to our day and age.”

This claim is only valid insofar as it concerns changeable social norms, not divine constants. But even the former are not treated arbitrarily in Islam but are governed by the science of fiqh, which carefully distinguishes between what is culturally contingent and what isn't. Religious teachings about God, revelation, morality, or salvation cannot be subject to the same fluctuations as fashion trends or political ideologies. A truth that changes with every era would not be Truth at all, but merely the spirit of the age. In fact, the very demand that religion must constantly adapt is self-contradictory. If truth were truly relative, then today's pluralism could just as easily be dismissed as “outdated” or “false” tomorrow – thereby undermining its own premise.

“There is no objective truth, everything is subjective.”

This claim is self-contradictory. Anyone who says that everything is subjective is making a universal truth claim of their own. If the statement is meant objectively, it refutes itself. If it is meant subjectively, then it is binding on no one else and therefore meaningless. Relativism, then, cannot stand on logical grounds: it insists that no religion may claim absolute truth all the while making an absolute claim about the nature of truth.

“Exclusivism leads to violence.”

In fact, history shows the opposite. Billions of exclusivists live peacefully alongside each other while violence most often arises from political, economic, or ethnic conflicts. A firm belief in Divine Truth can, in fact, encourage ethical conduct, as it instills a sense of accountability and reverence before God. The doctrine of exclusive truth in any religion does not oblige one to hatred and division, but rather to dignity, discipline, and justice in dealing with fellow human beings.

“Pre-modern scholars barely knew other religions.”

This claim is historically untenable. Numerous classical scholars, from Ibn Hazm to al-Ghazali and Ibn Taymiyyah, thoroughly dealt with the teachings of Christianity and Judaism, as well as other philosophies and movements. More importantly, however, the argument misses the point: the Islamic doctrine of truth and falsehood does not depend on the level of knowledge of individual scholars, but on the authority of divine revelation itself. Even if some scholars had been less familiar with other traditions, the normative standard would remain unchanged because it is grounded in revelation, not in “human comparative analysis.”

Conclusion: Unity Through Truth

Modern religious pluralism seeks to establish peace by relativizing truth claims. In this respect, it resembles a desperate parent trying to end a quarrel by telling all children at once that they are right – not because it’s true, but because it brings the conflict to a quick halt. Islam, by contrast, offers **peace through truth**. It acknowledges the diversity of peoples and cultures, yet traces them back to a single origin: the same Creator, the same *fitrah*, and the same prophetic tradition that has called humanity to the One God from its very beginning. Unity in Islam does not arise from erasing differences, but from orienting and aligning those differences toward the same divine message, which reached its completion with the sending of the Prophet Muhammed ﷺ.

It is precisely here that the uniqueness of Islam becomes evident. It unites people from vastly different cultures, languages, and lived realities solely on the basis of belief in the One God – something neither nationalism, nor ethnic identity, nor modern ideologies such as humanism or secularism have ever been able to achieve. While Christianity, too, has brought people together across cultures and nations, this unity does not rest upon a unified understanding of God in the way it does in Islam.

Yet even Christians acknowledge that differing conceptions of God and truth - even when they exist within the same religion, as in the case of Trinitarians and

Unitarians - are not mere side issues, but carry real consequences for the Hereafter. Religious pluralism, by contrast, seeks to neutralize precisely these differences by declaring them ultimately insignificant. Ironically, it is in doing so that pluralism often drives a wedge between people who tend to handle their religious disagreements with far greater composure and maturity.

In this sense, it is reminiscent of a well-known story about two brothers who each converted to different religions. Both were fully aware that they did not share the other's religious convictions and therefore chose not to take part in one another's religious festivities. For them, this posed no problem at all. The only person who took issue with it was their father, who interpreted this as an act of intolerance – precisely because he believed that religious differences should not matter (some readers may resonate when thinking of scenarios at school or work with regard to the annual Christmas celebration.)

In fact, it is often precisely these seemingly “objective” or “impartial” outsiders – frequently atheists, agnostics, or, as mentioned earlier, so-called “non-affiliates” – who resort to vague slogans such as “It doesn’t matter which religion you follow, as long as you’re a good person,” and in doing so actually generate tension rather than resolve it. As the example of the two brothers illustrates, it is often the adherents of different religions themselves who harbor no ill will toward one another, even while assuming that the other is on the wrong path. On the contrary, they take these differences seriously without dramatizing them, and ultimately wish one another well.²⁴

That such differences do not inevitably lead to hostility is also evident in the fact that religious traditions have long employed clear conceptual distinctions without reacting with outrage. Islam, for example, distinguishes between believers and *kuffār*,²⁵ while Jehovah’s Witnesses differentiate between “Witnesses” and so-called “worldly people.”²⁶

Muslims therefore really have no reason to feel ashamed of their own religion’s truth claim, for in the end every person follows some conviction precisely because they believe it to be true – including those who present themselves as “neutral” or “unbiased.” Islam does not even claim a “monopoly” on truth; rather, it simply

reminds us that Truth can only be one, just as there is only One Creator. While traces of this truth may be found across many traditions, Islam maintains that its correctness and completeness have been preserved only within its own revelation.

The reason why many people today react defensively to questions of truth has less to do with religion itself than with its historical abuse. Yet the response to this abuse - claiming that all religions are equally true - does not solve the problem, but it renders truth meaningless as emphasized multiple times now. The mere existence of many different religions says nothing about their correctness, just as in a court case not all suspects can be guilty at the same time. The atheist denies the existence of a perpetrator altogether; the pluralist declares everyone guilty. Both ultimately avoid the real task: sincerely getting down to the nitty-gritty to the bottom of Truth.

This very demand - to getting to the bottom of truth - lies at the heart of Islam. It does not merely claim truth; it explicitly calls for it to be examined. The Qur'an does not demand blind faith, but repeatedly challenges its readers: "Produce a book like it," "Produce a chapter like it," "Reflect, compare, examine." Islam is not a circular claim to truth, but an invitation to sincere investigation.

This insistence on verification also helps explain why religious pluralism was long underestimated. What for years appeared to be just another harmless, internally inconsistent idea has proven to be highly adaptable and easily instrumentalized – precisely because it relativizes truth and thereby renders it insignificant. The example of Abrahamism clearly demonstrates the political consequences this may have. For Muslims, this means remaining vigilant and becoming ever more firmly grounded in their own religion, for that which relativizes truth today can be politically abused tomorrow.

Sources

1. Zawadi, B. (2023). *Deconstructing Religious Pluralism* (three-part lecture series). YouTube.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T7HoJKg0KRM> ; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VPiSPqxPFJs> ;
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NQWbSmdGHqw> .

Footnotes

1. Although the three terms are closely related, they are not fully interchangeable.
While **perennialism** assumes the existence of a timeless, metaphysical “primordial truth” underlying all religions, which is expressed in different religious symbols and traditions (without necessarily being bound to a specific revelation or concept of God), **universalism** understands religions as different expressions of a common divine truth. From this assumption, universalism additionally derives the moral equivalence of religions and their ability to lead people to God, each in its own, unique way. Finally, **religious-soteriological pluralism** (from the Greek *sōtēria* = “salvation,” “redemption”) refers to the concrete theological idea that all religions equally lead to salvation in the hereafter.
For the sake of clarity and simplicity, this whitepaper uses the term **religious pluralism** as an umbrella concept. This should not be confused with the mere social coexistence of different religions, which is a form of pluralism that Islam, as will be shown later, has no problem with.
2. A well-known example of this is the so-called “Garden Mosque” in the Schwetzingen Palace Garden in Germany. It was built in the late eighteenth century by Nicolas de Pigage in the style of a mosque, yet was never intended to function as one. Rather, it formed part of the Enlightenment-inspired overall concept of the garden and was meant to symbolically represent religious diversity. Notably, the building was deliberately designed in such a way that it cannot be fully grasped from one single viewpoint: depending on where you stand, only a partial view of the structure is visible so that the “full picture” is meant to emerge only through your own movement and contemplation. The inscriptions on and within the building reinforce this impression as well. While they do draw on religious quotes, they are intentionally kept general, overlap with multiple traditions, or appear more as timeless wisdom than as *one* clear, exclusive revelation. Religious truth is thus not presented as something clearly defined or unambiguous, but as dependent on perspective – and is thereby consciously relativized, very much in the spirit of the Enlightenment.
3. A similar analogy, which may be familiar to some, portrays God as a tree, with the various religions represented as its branches.
4. Surah al-‘Imran (3), Vers 19.
5. Surah al-A’raf (7), Verse 157-158.
6. Surah al-‘Imran (3), Vers 85.
7. Surah at-Tauba (9), Vers 33.
8. Buchari 1385.
9. Sahih Muslim 214.
10. Sahih Buchari 1356.
11. Musnad Ahmad 15156.
12. Sahih Muslim 153.
13. Al-Tirmidhi 2167.
14. Surah al-Baqarah (2), Vers 62.
15. Surah al-Maida (5), Vers 48.
16. Surah Yunus (10), Vers 99.
17. Surah Hud (11), 118.
18. Surah al-Hujurat (49), Vers 13.

19. Surah al-Maida (5), Vers 82.
20. Sahih Buchari 1312, Sahih Muslim 961.
21. Riyad as-Salihin 419.
22. Surah an-Nahl (16), Vers 125.
23. Surah al-Kahf (18), Vers 49.
24. As Muslims, we approach this matter with optimism and do not go about our daily lives burdened by the notion that every non-Muslim friend, colleague, or neighbor is inevitably destined for Hell (especially given the fact that we do not even have certainty about our own ending, i. e., whether we will ultimately die upon Islam – may Allah keep us steadfast!). Islam distinguishes between general theological statements about religions or life paths and judgments about specific individuals, whose inner states and final fate are known to Allah alone. Only where revelation itself issues an explicit judgment about a particular person – such as in the case of Abu Lahab – may such certainty be adopted. In this life, Muslims judge only by outward appearances, but as for the Hereafter, knowledge of it belongs entirely to Allah's perfect Justice. As long as a person is alive, the door to guidance remains open, and Muslims are encouraged to pray for themselves and for others. In this way, Islam combines doctrinal clarity with mercy in dealing with others.
25. The term *kāfir* literally means someone who conceals, covers, or rejects the truth.
26. At this point, I am deliberately refraining from giving a specific definition, because as Muslims we are all too familiar with how problematic it can be when outsiders oversimplify religious terminology, generalize them, or assign meanings to them that are completely inaccurate. In forums and discussions among Jehovah's Witnesses, various explanations can be found regarding the term “worldly people,” ranging from relatively neutral descriptions of non-members to more morally or theologically charged interpretations. Regardless of these variations, the term clearly serves a function of distinction and categorization.

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