

# Salvation of other believers

*Exclusivist, inclusivist and pluralist views  
on salvation in Islam and Christianity*

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## The Score

*Because I've come to eighty odd,  
I must prepare to meet you, God.  
What should I do? I cannot pray,  
I have no pious words to say;  
And though the Bible I might read,  
Scriptures don't meet my need.*

*Please tell me God what can I do  
To be acceptable to you?  
I've put in order my affairs,  
And left their portion to my heirs;  
And what remains I've willed to be  
A gift to Charity.*

*What must I do? I cannot kneel,  
Although a sense of you I feel,  
I will not show a coward's fear,  
Waiting until the end be near  
To pester you with mercy plea,  
--You'd be despising me.*

*I hope I have been kind and true;  
I've helped to happiness a few.  
I've made a mother's eye to smile,  
I've played with little ones a while.  
I do not know what is the score;  
Of good I might have done much more:  
But now I guess my exit's due;--  
Dear God, it's up to You!*

Robert William Service

## Introduction

Death poses enduring and fascinating questions. Is there an afterlife? As a child, when someone died in my neighborhood, I always wondered what would happen to that person afterwards: Can that person still see or hear us in this world? Is there a burning fire and a beautiful heaven, like they told me at my Catholic elementary school? Are we coming back on earth because of or karma? Or is there just nothing and is religion all but a “joke”? For religious people this question is nothing but a joke and what their religion says about the afterlife is for most of them of extreme importance, in fact it gives their life a goal. This thesis, then, explores the topic of salvation, and the different stories that religions tell about what will come after death. This is closely connected to the question: What do religions consider as the Truth? Almost every world religion claims that it is the right one, so how is it possible that they all live quite peacefully next to each other? Religious people often based their Truth claims on their views of the afterlife. Therefore eschatology and pluralism should be studied together.

Christianity and Islam are the two biggest religions in the world and they have a common Abrahamic history. Christianity has around the 2,0 milliard followers and Islam around the 1,5 milliard.<sup>1</sup> I would like to compare their views on salvation and their tolerance of other religions, because Christianity is a religion close to home and Islam is getting closer to home too. Besides, Christian-Muslim relations is a hot topic nowadays in the media. There is a lot of literature about salvation in Christianity and in Islam, but there is less written about salvation of non-Christians in Christianity and of non-Muslims in Islam. This thesis, therefore, aims to shed some light on this understudied topic.

Therefore the central question in this thesis is: Can other believers be saved according to Christianity and Islam? And what are the agreements and differences between the two religions? The word salvation has two definitions, namely 1) salvation in this life and 2) salvation in the life to come, that is, after death. In this thesis salvation always refers to the second definition; salvation after death. Other believers in this context are people who do not believe in Christianity or Islam, but are believers of another religion, also known as the “religious Other”. I will answer the main question in three chapters where I will present a general view of both the religions and the theories of different contemporary thinkers on the subject of salvation of other believers. These contemporary thinkers are categorized in three different groups, namely the exclusivist view, the inclusivist view and the pluralist view. Most thinkers define the terms exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism in context of their own religion and with small different details. Therefore, I want to present two definitions: one from a Christian perspective and one from an Islamic perspective. In Christianity exclusivism means that ‘salvation is possible only for Christians, and those

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<sup>1</sup> Robinson, B.A., *Religions of the World*, <http://www.religioustolerance.org/worldrel.htm> (25-06-2013).

outside of Christianity are excluded from salvation.<sup>2</sup> Secondly, 'according to inclusivism, salvation is possible outside Christianity, but only because of what God has done in Christ. That non-Christians can also be saved, does not entail that inclusivists hold that all religions are of equal value.'<sup>3</sup> Marianne Moyaert explains the following about what pluralism means:

(1) Pluralists presuppose a positive valuation of the religious diversity and reject all attempts to reduce the religious field to unity under one absolute and universally valid norm. (2) Pluralism affirms "the independent validity of other ways" (Knitter 1987: vii). (3) It emphasizes that no one religion can be in complete possession of the truth. From this perspective, the theme of "deabsolutization of the truth" constantly arises. (4) Finally, pluralists uncouple unicity and the finality of salvation. A religion can be unique without claiming to have the last word about salvation.<sup>4</sup>

The Islamic thinker Mohammad Hassan Khalil defines exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism in almost a similar way, but less detailed:

I define these terms as follows: "exclusivists" maintain that only their particular religious tradition or interpretation is salvific and that adherents of all other beliefs will be punished in Hell. "Inclusivists" similarly affirm that theirs is the path to Heaven but hold that sincere outsiders who could not have recognized it as such will be saved. "Pluralists" assert that, regardless of the circumstances, there are several religious traditions or interpretations that are equally effective salvifically.<sup>5</sup>

To summarize, in both religions exclusivism means that other believers cannot be saved and that they do not have the Truth. Inclusivists believe that their way is the one to salvation, but some other believers could be saved too. This does not mean that other religions are equal. In pluralism every religion is an equal way to salvation and they all have a part of the Truth. Other difficult concepts, which needs an explanation, will be explained in the separate chapters.

## Method

In each chapter I will deal with a short general view on the subject, then I present one or two contemporary thinkers, first a Christian and then a Muslim. In the last paragraph I will compare them, through looking at the differences and agreements. If there is something else that is remarkable I will make a note of it too in this last paragraph. At the end I will

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<sup>2</sup> Moyaert, M., *Fragile Identities: Towards a Theology of Interreligious Hospitality*, Amsterdam: Rodopi B.V., 2011, p. 15.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 23.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 34.

<sup>5</sup> Khalil, M.H., p. 7.

answer the central question of this thesis in the conclusion and discuss some interesting points. This thesis is based on literature research. I have spent hours in the library and on internet to find sources that said something about salvation of the religious Other. A lot of books do talk about salvation, but did not have the specific information I was looking for. Some important books, I used, are from writers like Knitter, Heim, Sanders, Aslan, Esack, Ayoub, Hick and Moyaert. There is a lot of literature about salvation in the hereafter and a lot of contemporary thinkers published their enormous theories about salvation and interreligious dialogue. To compare the attitudes towards the religious Other in Islam and Christianity is really hard, definitely when they have such different theories and argumentation structures to support their view. It makes it even harder, because there are so many theories and you wonder which are comparable and which are not. In this thesis I did not have the space to delve into these theories and thereby I think that on some points this thesis does not give a complete view of how things exactly are. Besides, the categories *Christianity* and *Islam* are very big and there is a lot variety in these religions. I chose to be not too specific and to take a closer look at the bigger traditions. For example in Christianity, I talk about Catholicism, Calvinism and the Evangelicals, all big branches of Christianity. In Islam I especially talk about the Wahhabi movement and Sunni Islam. So, this thesis is therefore a quite general view of both religions, because I do not deal with all the cleavages and little groups who have designed their own theories.

One important last thing to note is my own background and standpoint towards this subject. I have been baptized in the Catholic Church when I was 7 years old and I did my First Communion around the same age. I went to a Catholic elementary and high school and that is approximately all contact I had with religion. I have never been seriously active in the Catholic Church, but I am fascinated by religion from the beginning of my life. Apparently, this fascination with religion never disappeared. So, I approach this subject of salvation of other believers as an outsider to know more about salvation, because like I already mentioned I do wonder what will be there after dead, and because I want to know more about the openness of religions, specifically Islam and Christianity. Hopefully this thesis can help clarifying some of my own questions and will give us a good overview on the different thoughts in Christianity and Islam.

## 1. Exclusivism

Exclusivism, you could say, is not the most rewarding subject to discuss, because exclusivism means that believers of a particular religion think that no one can be saved outside this particular religion. The theories that are written about this subject all come to the same conclusion, but of course just like in the other two chapters, there are different arguments which support this conclusion. Where does this idea of exclusivism come from and which arguments are used to support it? Besides, I want to discuss this topic because it gives some background information about the other more open views in the next chapters, which were mostly a reaction against exclusivist's claims. In this chapter I will deal with the opinion of the Catholic Church and the Evangelicals. Karl Barth is an extreme example of an exclusivist theory and therefore I will discuss his ideas. In Islam the Wahhabis are an example of a branch who think that only good Muslims can be saved. I close this chapter with a comparison of the Christian and Muslim thoughts, where I try to compose an answer to this question: What are the differences and agreements in argumentation and opinion?

### 1.1 Christianity

For over hundreds of years, the Catholic Church confessed that outside the Church there is no salvation, also known as *extra ecclesiam nulla salus*.<sup>6</sup> The majority of Catholics still believes that only they can be saved, although the Church became a bit opener the last fifty years. We deal with this more open view in the next chapter.

Protestants think you could only be saved by the grace of God, not by good work. This doctrine of *sola gratia* means that human beings do not really have a meaningful life, but must follow Jesus' way, because only through Him can they be saved. Of course, there are different kinds of Protestants and not every group thinks the same about the salvation of the religious Other. Especially, Fundamentalists and Evangelicals think that salvation is only possible in their religion and only through Jesus Christ. These Evangelicals are a majority in the United States and therefore they have a huge influence on other Christians when it comes to the attitude towards the religious Other.<sup>7</sup> Evangelicals believe that dialogue with other religions is necessary, but not to become more open to these religions. They think you need to understand people first, before you can convert them to your true belief. Therefore, Evangelicals have a missionary obligation, so they can speak to other believers. In their eyes

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<sup>6</sup> Gillis, C., *A Question of Final Belief: John Hick's Pluralistic Theory of Salvation*, London: Macmillan Press Ltd, 1989, p. 117.

<sup>7</sup> Knitter, P.F., *No Other Name?: A Critical Survey of Christian Attitudes Toward the World Religions*, New York: Orbis Books, 1985, p. 78.

other beliefs are no ways to salvation, because there is a difference in nature between these religions and Christianity.<sup>8</sup> To start a dialogue is to start conversion of human beings.

A well-known theologian who composed an extreme exclusivist theory is Karl Barth (1886 – 1968). Barth is the most important Swiss theologian of the twentieth century, because ‘He gave new impulses to Protestant theology during a critical phase, reshaping it fundamentally toward a systematic theology that had to cope with the grim realities of the 20th century.’<sup>9</sup> Barth was against National Socialism and resisted the Third Reich and he have had a huge influence on the mainstream American religious culture.<sup>10</sup> Not many Protestant theologians would say the same as Barth, because they think it is too extreme.<sup>11</sup> One important thing Barth says about God is the following, summarized by Paul Knitter:

Barth both affirms and negates the human being’s ability to know God. He tells us that the truth that only God makes God known is a truth that humans are able to know; but they can know it only if God tells them. So Barth concludes: “We need to see that in view of God all our activity is in vain even in the best life; i.e. that of ourselves we are not in a position to apprehend the truth, to let God be God and our Lord.”<sup>12</sup>

This knowledge that *only God can make God known* is important for the exclusive claims he made. Secondly, Barth thinks that salvation can happen only through Christ, a viewpoint which is called “Christocentrism”. A striking view of Barth is that for him there is no real difference between Christianity and other religions, because all ‘religion is unbelief’.<sup>13</sup>

There is the same unbelief, i.e., opposition to the divine revelation, the same active idolatry and self-righteousness that is rampant in other religions.<sup>14</sup>

But still he claims that Christianity has the only Truth. On which argumentation does he base this claim? Barth says it is the “true religion”, because you can compare the religion with a “justified sinner” and God decides if this sinner will be accepted.<sup>15</sup> ‘Religion offers nothing, God does everything’.<sup>16</sup> The following is a better explanation of his idea why Christianity is different from other religions:

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<sup>8</sup> Knitter, p. 78.

<sup>9</sup> Pfenninger, M., *Bibliography*, [www.kbarth.org](http://www.kbarth.org) (26-06-2013).

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Surin, K., ‘Revelation, Salvation, the Uniqueness of Christ and Other Religions’. *Religious Studies*, vol. 19, no. 3 (1983), p. 323.

<sup>12</sup> Knitter, p. 82.

<sup>13</sup> Knitter, p. 82.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 84.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 85.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., p. 85.



What makes the difference is that, thanks to revelation, Christianity *knows* all this! It knows that it was and remains sinful but that despite such sinfulness (Luther's *trotzdem*) God, because of the "infinite satisfaction for our sin" made in Christ, accepts this religion.<sup>17</sup>

So, Barth believes that Christianity knows that God accepted it as a religion, through the savior Jesus Christ. Besides, Barth claims that human knowledge is limited and we cannot really know God.<sup>18</sup> We cannot find salvation or know God through works, but we must have faith in Him.<sup>19</sup> If we have faith, then we will know. Some religious people did get some knowledge from God, but did not use this knowledge and therefore they sink much deeper.<sup>20</sup> For Karl Barth there are two really important things and that is to have faith in God and believe in Jesus Christ because He is the savior.

A theologian who gave a twist on the Barthian point of view is John Baillie (1886-1960). Baillie is born in Scotland and grew up in the Calvinist tradition. He taught in Canada, the United States and on the Edinburgh University. He believes that there is revelation and good in other religions, but that there is much more falsehood in these religions. He states:

There is something in each [religion] that makes for spiritual health, but there is also much that makes for spiritual disorder and sickness. [...] I have thus no hesitation in reaffirming my conviction that only by following the Way of Christ there is any hope for the ultimate salvation of mankind.<sup>21</sup>

Non-Christian religions could have a piece of the divine truth and some saving possibilities, but Christianity is superior to them all, because only this religion 'contains God's definitive revelation of himself.'<sup>22</sup>

To conclude, Christianity, or at least a number of significant branches within it, like Evangelical Christianity, is a religion with an exclusivist view towards the salvation of non-Christian believers. The majority of the Protestant Church think you can only be saved through Christ and many Catholics do think you can only be saved by the Church.<sup>23</sup> Now, I will take a look at the Muslim thoughts regarding this subject.

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p. 85.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 81.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 81.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p. 83.

<sup>21</sup> Surin, p. 326.

<sup>22</sup> Surin, p. 327.

<sup>23</sup> Knitter, p. 77.

## 1.2 Islam

In the West Islam is nowadays best known because of her exclusivism towards other religions. Over the past ten years we hear terms like holy war, *jihad*, fundamentalism, *sharia*, hatred towards the West, etc. But are these attitudes really applicable to the whole of Islam? I will look at that question in the next chapters. For now I will continue with the view that only true Muslims can be saved. First of all, on what verses in the Quran does this view stands? There are three passages which are frequently used to support an exclusivist argument:

The Religion before God is Islam.<sup>24</sup>

If anyone desires a religion other than Islam, it never will be accepted of him.<sup>25</sup>

This day have I perfected your religion for you, completed my favour upon you, and have chosen for you Islam as your religion.<sup>26</sup>

Exclusivist Muslim thinkers believe that the term *Islam* in these verses refers to the one religion. In the chapter about pluralism we shall see that there is discussion about this reference. Especially the second verse that is mentioned here, says something about the acceptance of other religions. Indirectly you could say that if another religion is not accepted, then salvation of non-Islamic believers will not be accepted too.

For the Islamic *ilm al-kalam* (the speculative science) you must be a Muslim to have a chance of salvation.<sup>27</sup> Their reasoning is based on the idea that Muhammad is the last prophet who gave mankind the last and unchanged message of God.<sup>28</sup> Because we know Muhammad is the last prophet (as is stated in the Quran), the theologians (*mutakallimun*) say that everyone must follow his message, otherwise you disobey God and that means you are an unbeliever and will end in hell.<sup>29</sup> The theologians think that there is no salvation outside Islam too and disbelief will mean 'eternal punishment in hell' after this life.<sup>30</sup> The theologians say about the People of the Book, that they corrupted their books and therefore they have a smaller chance to be saved. But the People of the Book do not belong to the group of polytheists (*mushrikun*). So, there are gradations of unbelief in non-Muslim groups, but still these groups cannot be saved outside Islam.

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<sup>24</sup> Qur'an 3:19.

<sup>25</sup> Qur'an 3:85.

<sup>26</sup> Qur'an 5:3.

<sup>27</sup> Frank, R.M., 'The Science of Kalam'. *Arabic Sciences and Philosophy*, vol. 2, no. 1 (1992), p. 10.

<sup>28</sup> Kalisch, M., 'A Muslim View of Judaism', in: Schmidt-Leukel, P., Ridgeon, L. (ed.), *Islam and Inter-Faith Relations: The Gerald Weisfeld Lectures 2006*, London: SCM Press, 2007, p. 68.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p. 68.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., p. 69.

The most extreme exclusivist view in Islam is that of the Wahhabis. In the 17<sup>th</sup> century the Wahhabi movement started a great revival of orthodoxy.<sup>31</sup> They thought their duty was:

To call the entire Islamic world to repentance for having espoused corrupt and decadent beliefs and practices incompatible with Islam.<sup>32</sup>

To achieve this duty, they went back to the sources of Islam and therefore the Wahhabis are not exactly original thinkers, they just wanted to confess and explain the truth like it is literally stated in the Quran and Hadith.<sup>33</sup> Because they are convinced that a huge part of the Islamic world is corrupt, they call a lot of other Muslims *kafirs* (unbelievers). For example 'many aspects of Sufism, popular cults of saints, Shi'ite heterodoxy, mingling of Jewish and Christian observances with those of Islam' are seen as *shirk* and thus a form of unbelief.<sup>34</sup> Polytheists were also seen as unbelievers and definitely will not be saved in the hereafter.<sup>35</sup> Jews and Christians were of course seen as unbelievers too, but for the Wahhabis the Christians were less of a threat than the Muslim Ottomans.<sup>36</sup> Though, the Christians were seen as less monotheistic than the Jews, because the Christians gave God an associate and that is another example of *shirk*.<sup>37</sup> A striking thing is that the Wahhabi movement sees a lot other Muslims as unbelievers or as hypocrites. Especially hypocrites are condemned by the Wahhabis.<sup>38</sup> Hypocrites accepted Islam, but do violate its rules, because for example it does not fit in their lifestyle. If necessary they can fake that they are good Muslims, but if not necessary they will not follow the Quranic guidelines.<sup>39</sup> Wahhabis think these people are sometimes worse than a real unbeliever, therefore they will be 'punished in the lowest part of hell'.<sup>40</sup>

Exclusivist thinkers believe that 'Islam' in some Quranic verses refers to 'the religion Islam' and therefore they plea that only Muslims can be saved. The Wahhabis went a step further and proclaimed that all non-Islamic believers will go to hell. Besides, they see a lot Muslims as hypocrites who do not follow the true way of Islam, therefore they also will stay in hell for some time.

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<sup>31</sup> Sirriyeh, E., 'Wahhabis, Unbelievers and the Problems of Exclusivism'. *British Society for Middle Eastern Studies*, vol. 16, no. 2 (1989), p. 123.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 123

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 125.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 125.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 125.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 126.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 126.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 127.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 127.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 127.

### 1.3 Comparison

This chapter was a short introduction to the exclusivist theories of some Islamic and Christian thinkers. For the Lutheran Protestant Karl Barth salvation can only come through faith, not through good works. You can be saved as a Christian only through grace and through Jesus Christ. In Wahhabi Islam you can be saved when you have faith and if you do good deeds. But for Sunni Muslims faith is a more important aspect of belief than good deeds:

Men and women still bear the echo of this “yes” deep down within their souls, and the call of Islam is precisely to this primordial nature, which uttered “yes” even before the creation of the heavens and the earth. The call of Islam therefore concerns, above all, the remembrance of a knowledge deeply embedded in our being, a confirmation of a knowledge that saves, hence the soteriological function of knowledge in Islam. The great sin in Islam is forgetfulness and the resulting inability of the intelligence to function in the way that God created it as the means to know the One. That is why the greatest sin in Islam and the only one God does not forgive is *shirk*, or taking a partner unto God, which means denying the Oneness of God.<sup>41</sup>

So, the most important aspect of Islam is to believe and have faith in the one and only God. To do good deeds is an extra pro, but not the most important criteria for salvation. Still, this is a difference between the two faiths and this has an influence on the argumentation structure of the contemporary thinkers. Next, Barth is convinced that all religions are equally bad. God gave the Protestants this knowledge and therefore they are the one religion that can be saved, because God chose it. The Wahhabi movement in Islam only believe what is literally in the Quran. So, for them a good Muslim has to believe in the One God (*tawhid*), in the prophecy of Muhammad, in the life after death and in God, the Angels, the Book and the prophets.<sup>42</sup> Just like Barth the Wahhabi movement has an explicit view on who can be saved. Probably, it is only their own group who has a good chance, because all the other believers (and especially other Muslims) are corrupt and changed the religion to their own benefit. Barth does not condemn other Christians as hard as the Wahhabis do, but of course the Protestants are a group who rejected the thoughts and actions of the Catholic Church, so I doubt if they believe that the Catholics have a chance of salvation. All in all, Protestants and Wahhabis both think that the religious Other cannot be saved. The Protestants think they cannot, because they do not have the knowledge or do not use this knowledge. And the Wahhabis think they do not follow the clear guidelines of the Quran. Now, we will move forward to a more open view towards other religious believers.

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<sup>41</sup> Khalil, p. 5.

<sup>42</sup> Rippin, A., *Muslims: Their religious beliefs and practices*, New York: Routledge, 2005, p. 74.

## 2. Inclusivism

You could say that inclusivism is “better” than exclusivism when it comes to salvation of other believers, but in the end there is still one religion that has the complete truth. The other religions do only possess a piece of the truth. How contemporary thinkers create an inclusivist theory of salvation and which arguments they bring up to defend their opinion, will be discussed in this chapter. First I will deal with the attitude of the Protestant Church to other religions. Then I want to discuss the change in attitude of the Catholic Church towards others. The Catholic Church was for a long time not open to other religions, but this changed after the Vatican Council II in 1962. To conclude the first part I discuss the ideas of the Catholic theologian Karl Rahner. After this, I will move to the Muslim thinkers. One I want to talk about is Farid Esack, a Muslim from South Africa who lived there when the apartheid was still present. It is debatable if he is an inclusivist or a pluralist and I would like to find out in this chapter. I will finish this chapter by comparing the two religions with each other. The question which I keep in my mind is just like in the other chapter: What are the differences and agreements in argumentation and opinion?

### 2.1 Christianity

The mainline Protestants all believe in the same when it is about the attitude towards other religions. The Protestant theologians who said something about this subject are *inter alia* Tillich, Pannenberg, Braaten and Ratschow.<sup>43</sup> In summary, they think that believers outside Christianity can have revelation, but salvation is impossible. Revelation means to feel a “sense of God”. So, when it comes to religious truth they are inclusive, because they believe other religions can receive revelation, but with regard to salvation they are exclusivists. The theologians based their assumption on the Gospel, theological considerations and on human experience.<sup>44</sup> They have another definition of “salvation” than I use in this thesis and therefore I will not discuss their views in a very detailed manner. When they speak about “salvation” they mean salvation in this life, not the afterlife. Believers from other religions cannot be saved, because these believers are looking for the Truth by themselves instead of having faith in God, because only his grace can save you.<sup>45</sup>

The Catholic Church was for a long time not open to other religions. For them the standard doctrine was that *extra ecclesiam nulla salus* (Cyprian), as I noted before in chapter 1. You could only be saved by grace and the only place where this was to be found, was in the Church. After the Vatican Council II in 1962 the Catholic Church became more open towards other religions, but they still thought the best way to be saved was through the

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<sup>43</sup> Knitter, p. 101.

<sup>44</sup> Knitter, p. 98.

<sup>45</sup> Knitter, p. 102.

Church (but this mean there were possible other ways too). Actually, this does not mean that they also developed a more positive view of other religions.<sup>46</sup> Here is a passage from *Nostra Aetate*, a paper which was published after the second Vatican council:

The Catholic Church rejects nothing that is true and holy in these religions. She regards with sincere reverence those ways of conduct and of life, those precepts and teachings which, though differing in many aspects from the ones she holds and sets forth, nonetheless often reflect a ray of that Truth which enlightens all men. Indeed, she proclaims, and ever must proclaim Christ "the way, the truth, and the life" (John 14:6), in whom men may find the fullness of religious life, in whom God has reconciled all things to Himself.<sup>47</sup>

This passage shows best that the Catholic Church became more open, but that they are still convinced that they have the whole Truth. Other religions 'often reflect a ray of that Truth', so they only have a small piece of it. The Catholic Church claims in this sentence that they actually do have the whole Truth.<sup>48</sup> Besides, this ray of Truth 'must proclaim Christ in whom men find the fullness of religious life'.<sup>49</sup> This would mean that if a religion does not proclaim anything related to Christ, it does not have a share in the Truth and therefore the followers of this religion probably cannot be saved. It is clear that the Catholic Church has an inclusivist attitude towards the religious Other with regard to religious truth. But in *Nostra Aetate* the Catholic Church does not speak in clarity about salvation of the other, this remains quite unclear. Theologians did speak about this salvation of other believers, in such a way that salvation was a private privilege for some individuals.<sup>50</sup>

A theologian who build a whole theory around this "private salvation" was the Catholic Karl Rahner. Actually, he laid the cornerstones for *Nostra Aetate* with his inclusivist theory in 1960.<sup>51</sup> Karl Rahner grew up in Germany in a Catholic family, later he became a Jesuit. His theology was really important for the new attitude of the Catholic Church. He made a theory about anonymous Christianity to deal with the tension between the universal salvific will of God and the claim of the Catholic Church.<sup>52</sup> He attempts to break through the thought of exclusivism, because he thinks that 'God is greater than human nature and the church'.<sup>53</sup> There could be believers in other religions who already feel the love of God, and therefore they are Christians, although they do not know it. Rahner's theory is meant to broaden and show a more optimistic Christian attitude towards the religious Other and to promote dialogue.<sup>54</sup> Still, it does not mean that all other religious people can be saved, it is God who decides. Besides, Rahner has put a time limit to his "anonymous Christianity":

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<sup>46</sup> Knitter, p. 123.

<sup>47</sup> *Nostra Aetate*, 1985

<sup>48</sup> *Nostra Aetate*, 1985

<sup>49</sup> *Nostra Aetate*, 1985

<sup>50</sup> Knitter, p. 123.

<sup>51</sup> Knitter, p. 130.

<sup>52</sup> Knitter, p. 129.

<sup>53</sup> Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, vol. 5, p. 131-134, In: Knitter, p. 128.

<sup>54</sup> Knitter, p. 128.

When the Gospel is made known in a country and translated in the language of that new culture, then the other religion loses its validity.<sup>55</sup> If you know Christianity as another believer and do not convert to it, then you consciously reject it, which means that you lose your option to be an anonymous Christian and your chance of salvation.

So, for Rahner the best way to salvation is through Jesus Christ. But if you live your life in the same way as a Christian, although you do that unconsciously, you have a chance of salvation too and that makes his theory a good example of an inclusivist view on salvation of non-Christians.

## 2.2 Islam

Some contemporary thinkers do talk about religious pluralism, but it is not always immediately obvious that they are really pluralists. Sometimes it looks like they are, but their point of view is debatable. Here I want to discuss Farid Esack, because I think he is speaking in an inclusivist manner, while other people will say that he is a pluralist.

Like I already noted Farid Esack is a Muslim from South Africa. During the apartheid black people suffered together under the regime of the white colonists. These black people had different beliefs, some were Muslims and Christians, and others had their own belief. Although these people suffered together and that gave some kind of bond, they still thought that the religious Other could not go to paradise.<sup>56</sup> Esack did not understand this and he wanted to know about this exclusive thought in religions. On his quest he found answers and wrote his findings down in his book *Qur'an, Liberation & Pluralism: An Islamic Perspective of Interreligious Solidarity against Oppression*. Esack starts one of the chapters where he talks about the attitude of the Quran towards the other with the following sentence:

The Qur'an presents a universal, inclusivist perspective of a divine being who responds to the sincerity and commitment of all His servants.<sup>57</sup>

This sentence raises immediately some questions. First of all what is exactly the difference between universal and inclusivist? Universal counts for everyone on this planet and inclusivist can count for everyone on this planet, but not necessarily. These two terms clash with each other. Another question is who are meant by "all His servants"? Are that all the people on this planet, the people who believe in one God and do good deeds or are it the people who follow the way of Islam? Esack also thinks that some messages in the Quran clash with each other. How is it possible that a universal message can go along with an

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<sup>55</sup> Knitter, p. 128.

<sup>56</sup> Esack, F., *Qur'an, Liberation & Pluralism: An Islamic Perspective of Interreligious Solidarity against Oppression*, Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 1997, p. 3.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., p. 146.

evident exclusivist message, where even violence against non-believers is supported?<sup>58</sup> He does not give a direct answer to his own question, but he shows that this clash has been a struggle for many earlier interpreters. Esack does not agree with the way they interpreted verses about the Other. Most traditional interpreters contextualize verses and thereby limiting their application.<sup>59</sup> Especially when it is about inclusivist passages where the Quran speaks positive about the religious Other, they contextualize it to a particular person or group, for example the King of Abyssinia.<sup>60</sup> The problem for Esack is that they do put inclusivist passages in a context and they do not put the exclusivist passages in a particular context, and make them universally valid in this way. Actually, it is like they are twisting the truth of the Quran. Esack thinks that what is written in the Quran must not be followed blindly:

The Qur'an provides only the basis for the attitude of Muslims towards the Other at any given time.<sup>61</sup>

The attitude towards the Other is always dependent on the given context. In our time we need to think about the historical context in which the Quran is written, because when we adapt the passages about the Other to all Jews and Christians and even other believers that would be really easy and simplistic to do. Because are the Christians of our time the same as the Christian believers from more than 1000 years ago? I do not think so and Esack wants us to think for ourselves. Above, I have referred to Christians and Jews as the religious Other, but are they alone meant when speaking about the religious Other? Mostly, the Other is mentioned in the Quran as the People of the Book. During the course of my research, I found that overall the Christians and Jews are the People of the Book, but Esack says that this depends on the geo-political context wherein the Muslims lived.<sup>62</sup> Muslim scholars who lived in India or near the borders, called *inter alia* Hindus, Buddhists and Zoroastrians sometimes too People of the Book.<sup>63</sup> Besides, at one moment these groups were included and the other moment they were excluded from the People of the Book. History shows us that it varies from time to time and place to place which religious groups are called the People of the Book.

Islam is in line with the other Abrahamic religions, which both claim that they are the true way to salvation. The Quran dedicates a lot of verses to this exclusive claim of the Jews and Christians and it becomes obvious that the Quran does not accept their message.<sup>64</sup> It would be hypocrite if the Muslims also claim exclusive rights to salvation, therefore the

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid., p. 146.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., p. 147.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., p. 147.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., p. 147.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., p. 153.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., p. 153.

<sup>64</sup> Quran, 5:18, 2:111-113.



Quran 'is explicit in its acceptance of religious pluralism'.<sup>65</sup> Islam had to be better than its predecessors, so Muslims lived in coexistence with other religious communities and respected their values and they accepted that the faithful religious Other could also attain salvation.<sup>66</sup> But next, Esack makes a point why Islam is inclusive:

Given the widespread acceptance, among the most conservative Muslims, of respect for the laws of the religious Other, even if only in theory, and the equally widespread rejection of their salvation, I want to focus on the latter.<sup>67</sup>

So, other religions can have a part of the Truth, but the believers cannot be saved. Farid Esack does not agree with the latter part and still speaks about religious pluralism in his book, but for me his arguments are not strong enough to name him a pluralist. He says that among the religious Other there are some very pious men and women, who 'sincerely recognize and serve God' and they will be recognized on the Day of Judgment, because they lived a righteous life.<sup>68</sup> The majority of the religious Other will not be saved, only a small group who lived their lives sincerely. It almost sounds like they are "anonymous Muslims", like the theory of Rahner. Farid Esack is an inclusivist, because in his vision not everyone can be saved on the Day of Resurrection, only right Muslims and some other pious believers, and in comparison with theories of pluralist thinkers that group is too small.

## 2.3 Comparison

In this chapter I discussed the position of the mainline Protestant and Catholic Church towards the religious Other and gave special attention to the inclusivist theory of theologian Karl Rahner about "anonymous Christians". Besides, I discussed the opinion of the Muslim thinker Farid Esack about the inclusivist message of the Quran. Both thinkers have a totally different background and grew up in very different circumstances: Rahner in Germany during the World War period and Esack in South Africa during the apartheid regime, though they both have been in contact with discrimination, indignity and inequality. They did not use the same strategy to conclude approximately the same.

Esack based his ideas mostly on the Quran. He discusses passages which are in the Quran. He wants to know what earlier interpreters said about these verses and if they are right about these verses. An important thing he said, is that the Quran is a guide not an unchangeable book where no free interpretation is possible. Esack says that the inclusivist verses in the Quran need to be interpreted in a context of a specific place and time. This means that what was 1000 years ago the standard approach towards other religions, that

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<sup>65</sup> Esack, p. 159.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., p. 159.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., p. 159.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., p. 161.

approach can be different now. You must not follow blindly what the Quran says, but need to think for yourself too, especially in such a globalizing world. Rahner's theory is a much bigger theory of inclusivism than Esack's and has a "deadline". His theory is a counterargument to the exclusivist claim of the Catholic Church. It is not explicitly based on passages from the Bible, but he believes in a loving God, who is much bigger than mankind. He thinks that "anonymous Christians" are present in other religions. They feel God and live a life in His way, therefore salvation is possible for them outside the Church. But, like I said there is a deadline, because when Christianity is made known to other cultures (through for example missionary work) you cannot be an anonymous Christian anymore, you must convert to the Catholic Church to have a chance of salvation. So, both contemporary thinkers do accept other religions, but salvation is for most other believers not possible. The Catholic Church became more open to other religions, but you can only be saved through Christ. Also the Protestant Church believes that other believers can receive revelation, but that does not mean they can be saved too.

There is one last thing that strikes me. In Christianity it seems like there is a continuous line through the centuries from a closed to a more open attitude towards the religious Other. For a very long time the church, especially the Catholic Church, presented an exclusivist claim on salvation. Then in the twentieth century this attitude became a bit more open through the Vatican Council II and after this there came more pluralist theories, which still grows. In Islam the different views have always been present next to each other. The Sufis have been the most open Muslims towards other religions and in general the Sunnis have been most closed to other people's possibilities of salvation. There are no big changes in attitude in Islam compared to Christianity.

### **3. Pluralism**

In the introduction I already talked about what the term 'pluralism' means. To refresh our memory pluralism considers all the religions as equal routes to salvation in the world to come.<sup>69</sup> There is no superior religion and no one has the absolute truth. A pluralist view is probably the best way to interreligious dialogue, because every believer is equal. So, pluralist thinkers will most likely be the most open thinkers regarding salvation of non-believers and other believers. To see if this is really true I will discuss some contemporary thinkers in Christianity and Islam. One of the biggest and most renowned pluralist thinkers in Christianity is John Hick. I will discuss his theory and I will give examples of some of the critiques against Hick's argumentation. There are more Christian pluralists, for example Willfred Cantwell Smith and Paul Knitter. I will only discuss John Hick's theory, because he

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<sup>69</sup> Moyaert, M., *Leven in Babelse Tijden: De Noodzaak van een Interreligieuze Dialoog*, Zoetermeer: Uitgeverij Klement, 2011, p. 29.

has a really extensive hypothesis and is well-known around the world. In the part about Islamic thinkers I will discuss the contemporary thinkers Fazlur Rahman and Mahmut Aydin, who bases some of his arguments on those of Mahmoud Ayoub. All men are proponents of the interreligious dialogue and of course I want to find out what their opinion is about salvation of believers outside the Islam. After this I will make a comparison, just like in the other two chapters, between the Christian and Islamic thinkers: What are the differences and agreements in argumentation and opinion?

### 3.1 Christianity

In the other chapters it already became clear that you cannot talk about one Christianity. There are branches which are totally different if you compare them, think about for example the Eastern Orthodox Church and Protestantism. So, there are also a lot of views and ideas, especially about the way to salvation. John Sanders splits the Christian believers up in two groups: people who believe that all the unevangelized are damned (Restrictivism) and people who believe that all the unevangelized are saved (Universalism).<sup>70</sup> Both groups based their arguments on passages in the Bible. I would like to present a few examples of passages which the universalists use, before I move on to the pluralist John Hick:

Not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance.<sup>71</sup>

God our savior, who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth.<sup>72</sup>

For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all men.<sup>73</sup>

One of the best known contemporary pluralistic thinkers is John Hick. Hick is born in 1922 in England.<sup>74</sup> As a teenager, he was already interested in philosophy. But first he went to Hull to study Law; there he met new friends and he joined the Presbyterian Church of England, this is an extremely conservative kind of Calvinist orthodoxy.<sup>75</sup> After this he studied at universities in Edinburgh, Cambridge and the United States of America. Back in England Hick received a post at the Theology Department at Birmingham University.<sup>76</sup> Birmingham is a multi-cultural city and this was really the end of his orthodox Christianity and the beginning

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<sup>70</sup> Sanders, J., *No Other Name: Can only Christians be saved?*, Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1992, p. vii.

<sup>71</sup> 2. Pet. 3:9.

<sup>72</sup> 1. Tim. 2:3-4.

<sup>73</sup> Tit. 2:11.

<sup>74</sup> Eddy, P.R., *John Hick's Pluralist Philosophy of World Religions*, Burlington: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2002, p. 23.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 24.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 26.

of a more open and pluralist view.<sup>77</sup> During this time he came in contact with different other religions, like Islam and Hinduism, and he saw that these believers were not very different from Christians. Christians were not better or more pious than they. So Hick started to doubt the Christian opinion that they were superior with respect to other religions. He doubted especially the doctrine of incarnation and the claim that Christianity was God's own religion.<sup>78</sup> Christians think that it's God's own religion, because he decided to send Jesus Christ, his own Son, to this world. Hick created his own theory where all the religions are equal and all have the same final goal: looking for the Ultimate Reality. He deliberately avoids to speak about a 'God', because this concept is not in every religion present. Actually, not one concept is present in all religions, but still we call them all 'religions'. Hick draws the comparison with the theory of 'family-resemblance' of Wittgenstein.<sup>79</sup> The concept 'religion' is comparable with the concept of 'games'. There are very different games: games which you can play alone, with an opponent or in a team, think about *patience*, *chess* and *basketball*. These games do not have much in common, but everyone on this planet calls them games. It is the same with religions; you can pray, you can make offers to a god or you can meditate. There are a lot of differences between religions, but for Hick transcendence is a common characteristic in most religions. So, transcendence is the starting point of his theory and because of that, the final goal of all religions is finding the Ultimate Reality. This Ultimate Reality is unspeakable, mysterious and untouchable; not one religion has the complete Truth, but they all have a piece of the Reality. It is like the parable of the elephant and the blind men. According to this tale, originated in India:

The king of Savatthi had all the people who had been born blind in his city brought together in one place on a certain day. Then he had an elephant brought, and each of the blind individuals could touch one part of the elephant's body, declaring: "This is what an elephant is like". Some blind people touched the elephant's head, others an ear, and still others a tusk, the trunk, its body, a leg, its behind, the tail, the hardened end of the tail. Whoever touched the head said that the elephant seemed like a winnowing basket; to those who touched the tusk like a ploughshare; to whoever touched the body, a granary, and to the ones who touched a leg a pillar. To those who touched the back a mortar, and to whoever touched the tail a club, and to the ones who touched the tip of the tail a broom. Because the blind people could not agree at all on what the elephant looked like they started fighting – to the king's dismay.<sup>80</sup>

The blind people all felt one and the same elephant, but everyone touched a different part and therefore they all had another truth about what an elephant looked like. So, all religions feel the Reality, but all touch a different part of that Reality and therefore they all have another piece of the Truth. The different religions are different roads to the same goal,

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid., p. 27.

<sup>78</sup> Moyaert, *Leven in Babelse Tijden*, p. 30.

<sup>79</sup> Heim, S.M., *Salvations: Truth and Difference in Religion*, New York: Orbis Books, 1995, p. 16.

<sup>80</sup> Moyaert, *Fragile Identities*, p. 88.

namely salvation/liberation.<sup>81</sup> To attain this goal believers need to move from self-centeredness to Reality-centeredness, Hick calls it the Copernican theology of world religions.<sup>82</sup> First is the ego the center of a human's life, but then a believer is searching for a new centering 'in the supposed unity-of-reality-and-value that is thought of as God, Brahman, the Dharma, Sunyata or the Tao.'<sup>83</sup>

Why are there so many names and concept for the same Ultimate Reality? And why do religions say that they are superior to others, while in Hick's theory they are not? Hick also has an answer to this question. He says:

Psychologically, this may well only be an instance of the corporate self-respect that characterizes any viable human group. The nearest parallel is national pride.<sup>84</sup>

You are automatically proud of your country and identity, because you do not know better. For a lot of people it is difficult to see foreign ways of life, because it is not familiar and that makes it strange and "not right". This could lead to a view of yourself as better than another. This could also happen with believers of a particular religion. Hick says the following about religious traditions and superiority feelings:

For we have, in most cases, been formed from infancy by our tradition, absorbing its values and presuppositions. It has become as much a part of us as our nationality, our language, and our culture, and alien religious traditions can seem as peculiar or comic or bizarre as can foreign names or customs or food.<sup>85</sup>

So, for Hick it is logical that believers have a religious pride and a feeling of superiority. It is an inevitable feature of human life.<sup>86</sup> But he warns us that this natural pride has a negative contribution to life, especially when believers think it is worth to express these feelings in doctrines about Truth or the way to salvation. When these doctrines are seen as an essential concept of faith, they could be standing in the way for the idea of religious pluralism, because that would be seen as a threat to their belief.<sup>87</sup> But it could also be fruitful for creative reinterpretations of the doctrines, like Hick's own theory.

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<sup>81</sup> Surin, K., 'Towards a 'materialist' critique of religious pluralism: An examination of the discourse of John Hick and Wilfred Cantwell Smith'. In: Hamnett, I. (ed.), *Religious Pluralism and Unbelief: Studies Critical and Comparative*, London: Routledge, 1990, p. 123.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., p. 122.

<sup>83</sup> Hick, J., *The Metaphor of God Incarnate*, London: SCM Press, 1993. In: Aslan, A., *Religious Pluralism in Christian and Islamic Philosophy: The Thought of John Hick and Seyyed Hoessein Nasr*, Richmond: Curzon Prezz, 1998, p. 147

<sup>84</sup> Hick, J., 'Religious Pluralism and Absolute Claims', In: Rouner, L.S. (ed.), *Religious Pluralism*, Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984, p. 196.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., p. 197.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., p. 197.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid., p. 197.

Hick's theory is quite elaborate and sometimes hard to follow. That is why he also received a lot of criticism, for example from Gavin D'Costa, John Cobb, Mark Heim and Adnan Aslan. I will highlight some of these critics, because I think it is interesting to show some counterarguments against Hick. First of all Mark Heim states that 'the pluralistic hypothesis still distinguishes true from false religion'.<sup>88</sup> You would think that Hick believes that all religions are equal and that every religion is a true way to salvation, but to Hick it is 'self-evident, at least since the axial age, that not all religious persons, practices and beliefs are of equal value'.<sup>89</sup> Hick found out on the basis of the ethical test that in some religious groups there is no evidence of a salvific transformation, these people are not looking for the Ultimate Reality. Because of that, these religions are worth less than the ones who has evidence of a salvific transformation. Heim states that you could call Hick an inclusivist, because Hick claims that 'other religious convictions can only be saved by means that he understands and they do not'.<sup>90</sup> It is like Hick owns the Truth all by himself: He knows which religions are better, what they are looking for in life and how they will achieve salvation. But does not only "God" knows this? A human being can only guess what will come after death, but Hick writes like he really knows, because he does not put nuances in his story. Secondly, Heim thinks that Hick uses the word 'salvation' too univocal, which means that there is only one explanation of the term possible, and uses it as a 'purely formal abstraction'.<sup>91</sup> Also Adnan Aslan thinks that Hick reduces religion to something too simple.<sup>92</sup> He wonders why there are mystics, wanderers and other extreme religious people while you also can achieve salvation if you live a comfortable life. For Aslan the way to salvation is too easy and oversimplified in Hick's hypothesis. For many other thinkers Hick's theory is on some points too simple and homogenizing. Still, I think that this will help in the religious dialogue. Will the ideas of the Islamic pluralistic thinkers help too?

### **3.2 Islam**

The last few years we hear a lot about Islam in the news and mostly it is not positive: the media speaks about holy wars, fundamentalists and intolerance. But is Islam really a religion which is negative against other religious people? As we have seen in the other chapters there are Muslim thinkers who believe that Islam is the only way to salvation, but not every Muslim shares this opinion. The most recited Quranic verses which could support, depending on the interpretation of the verses, the ideas of pluralistic thinkers are surah 2 verse 62 and surah 5 verse 69:

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<sup>88</sup> Heim, p. 19.

<sup>89</sup> Hick, J., 1989, p. 299, in: Heim, p. 19.

<sup>90</sup> Heim, p. 30.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., p. 30.

<sup>92</sup> Aslan, p. 149.

Surely, the believers, the Jews, the Sabians and the Christians – whoever believes in Allah and the Last Day and does good deeds – shall all have nothing to fear and they shall not grieve.<sup>93</sup>

You could interpret this verse as if all believers of the mentioned groups could be saved. Some Muslim thinkers see it this way and I will deal with their interpretation later. Now I want to start to discuss the ideas of Fazlur Rahman. Rahman grew up in traditional Pakistan and was professor at several Western Universities. Rahman talks mostly about the relation between Muslims and the People of the Book, i.e. the Jews and Christians. Since the beginning of Islam there is contact between these groups and Muhammad recognized without any doubt the prophets of these religions. Rahman's vision is that all prophets send messages to different groups and different nations, but that these messages were universal and the same.<sup>94</sup> He believes that these messages came from a single book, namely "the Hidden Book" or "the Mother of the Book", where the Quran makes several references to.<sup>95</sup> In Rahman's eyes God's guidance is universal and he finds support for this vision in the Quran. But there is one condition which you must accept as believer, of any religion, if you want to be saved and that is acceptance of the prophethood of Muhammad:

If Muhammad and his followers believe in all prophets, all people must also and equally believe in him. Disbelief in him would be equivalent to disbelief in all, for this would arbitrarily upset the line of prophetic succession.<sup>96</sup>

This is an important thought of Rahman, but it does not work (and Muhammad knew that too after a while) because the Jews and Christians do not want to believe in him.<sup>97</sup> They claim exclusive election, guidance and salvation for themselves and that is something the Quran really rejects.<sup>98</sup> Still, the Quran sees that some people of other religious communities are good and the passages 2:62 and 5:69 are an example of this. Rahman does not give his own clear opinion about these verses, but it is clear to me that he does believe in the obvious message because of what he says about other Muslim commentators:

The vast majority of Muslim commentators exercise themselves fruitlessly to avoid having to admit the obvious meaning: that those – from any section of humankind – who believe in God and the Last Day and do good deeds are saved.<sup>99</sup>

So, Rahman does think that other people beside Muslims could be saved, if they believe in one God, the Last Day and if they do good. God made the choice to split up humanity into

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<sup>93</sup> Qur'an 2:62.

<sup>94</sup> Rahman, F., *Major Themes of the Qur'an*, Minneapolis: Bibliotheca Islamica, 1980, p. 163

<sup>95</sup> Ibid., p. 163.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid., p. 164.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid., p. 164.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid., p. 165.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid., p. 166.

groups, because this could bring competition with each other “in goodness.”<sup>100</sup> This could make the world better, but did not mean that some groups could not be saved anymore.

Rahman does not say a lot about all the other verses in the Quran where Jews and Christians are presented in a bad light. He does talk about the Christian concept of Trinity and he makes clear that this concept is unacceptable for Muslims. But he still hopes to find common ground with the People of the Book and belief in the one and only God<sup>101</sup>:

But I believe something can still be worked out by way of positive cooperation, provided the Muslims hearken more to the Quran than to the historic formulations of Islam and provided that recent pioneering efforts continue to yield a Christian doctrine more compatible with universal monotheism and egalitarianism.<sup>102</sup>

The next contemporary pluralist Muslim thinker I want to discuss is Mahmut Aydin, who borrowed a few ideas of Rahman. For example the idea that Islam and other religions are one and the same and therefore Muhammad believed in previous prophets who send the same message as he did. Aydin writes that Muhammad once said that ‘prophets are brothers in terms of their father, their mothers are different, but their religion is one.’<sup>103</sup> Besides this he also repeats Rahman’s idea that every believer must also accept Muhammad as a prophet, otherwise they will disbelieve all other prophets.<sup>104</sup> In the chapter about exclusivism I already showed the Quranic verses which exclusivist use to defend their arguments. To refresh our minds it were these verses:

The Religion before God is Islam (submission to His Will).<sup>105</sup>

If anyone desires a religion other than Islam (submission to God), it never will be accepted of him.<sup>106</sup>

This day have I perfected your religion for you, completed my favour upon you, and have chosen for you Islam as your religion.<sup>107</sup>

Of course, like a lot of verses in the Quran, they are interpretable in several ways. In his lecture Aydin discusses the meaning of the word *islam* in the above verses. He explains that there are three layers of understanding of the word *islam*, as indicated by Ayoub.<sup>108</sup> The first definition is the widest and it ‘signifies the attitude of the entire creation before God’ and it

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<sup>100</sup> Ibid., p. 167.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid., p. 170 .

<sup>102</sup> Ibid., p. 170.

<sup>103</sup> Qu’ran 10:48, 4:41, 16:36 Aydin, in: Schmidt-Leukel (ed.), p. 38.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid., p. 39.

<sup>105</sup> Qur’an 3:19.

<sup>106</sup> Qur’an 3:85.

<sup>107</sup> Qur’an 5:3.

<sup>108</sup> Aydin, p. 43.



includes all human beings.<sup>109</sup> The second definition of *islam* is 'any human being or human community which professes faith in the One God and seeks to obey God'.<sup>110</sup> The last narrow meaning is that *islam* is the religion Islam of a special community which follow a particular divine law revealed by a special prophet.<sup>111</sup> The Quran uses the verb *islam* to express the submission to God. So, the argumentation of Aydin is that *islam* in the above verses expresses the submission of all religious people to God, starting at Abraham.<sup>112</sup> This is an argument in favor of pluralism.

Aydin also deals with the famous verses (2:62, 5:69) and the claim of exclusivists that these verses were abrogated. One of the verses is revealed in the beginning of Muhammad's career in Medina and the other at the end.<sup>113</sup> Aydin thinks it is strange that commentators who say that these verses are abrogated, never discuss the repetition and the timing of revealing these verses.<sup>114</sup> To make his point he uses some ideas of Mahmud Ayoub:

Ayoub points out that there are important implications of this fact to weaken the claims of abrogation. Suppose the first one, 2.62, was abrogated, then the second one, 5.69, still stands. If it was abrogated already, why was it necessary to repeat it? That the second revelation is close to the end of the Prophethood of Muhammad makes it very unlikely that it is abrogated.<sup>115</sup>

The argument of abrogation is not very strong anymore. Aydin gives more arguments, in favor of pluralism, based on verses in the Quran and statements in the Hadith. I will not discuss them, but one thing is clear for Aydin and that is if you believe in One God and obey this God, then you could be saved.

### 3.3 Comparison

Before I begin with noting the differences and agreements, I want to say that it is really hard to compare because I could not deal with all contemporary thinkers who said something about pluralism. I would need to write a whole extra thesis to give a complete view about pluralism in these two religions. The thinkers which been dealt with here are John Hick, Fazlur Rahman and Aydin Aslan, whose ideas are in line with Rahman and Mahmud Ayoub.

Of course all men are in favor of religious pluralism, although some opponents reject this opinion. Rahman and Aydin based most of their argumentation on passages in the Quran. They did this to prove that the prophet Muhammad was in favor of pluralism and

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<sup>109</sup> Ayoub, M., 'Islam and Pluralism', *Encounters* 3/2, p. 114, in: Aydin, p. 43.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 43.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 43.

<sup>112</sup> Aydin, p. 43.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 48.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, 48.

<sup>115</sup> Ayoub, p. 113, in: Aydin, p.48-49.

especially to show that God's idea was that everyone has an opportunity to be saved. However, Hick bases his theory barely on the Bible. He has created his own pluralist hypothesis, thinking about religions from a metaperspective: his starting point is not from a Christian view, but a view above the religions. But he still uses the term "salvation" and that is clearly a term borrowed from Christianity. Hick's theory is elaborate and complicated, his theory covers a lot of religious people and even non-religious people! Rahman and Aydin arguments do not cover all religious people and definitely do not cover non-religious people, because these are not mentioned in the Quran. One condition for salvation is that you believe in one God and that you obey him. For Aydin and Rahman there is a good possibility that Jews and Christians could be saved, because they believe in one God and in the same prophets as Muslims (of course there is always the discussion about the status of Jesus). Other religious people can be saved too, if they can fulfill the condition I just mentioned.

Aydin and Hick both agree on the concept of "religious ethnicity". It is someone's fate where he or she is born, you do not decide where you are born and in which tradition you grow up, so you cannot decide either which religion you want to follow. Most people just follow the religion of their parents and they have no choice to choose another religion. Aydin and Hick both think it is not fair if God did not take this into account, because then people who are born in a land where the "true" religion is dominant, already have a lead in comparison with people with another faith. Hick and Aydin do not think this is what God would want, so He will give everyone a fair chance. God made different religions, so they could compete "in goodness" with each other and make the world better.<sup>116</sup> To conclude this chapter, the contemporary pluralist thinkers do have quite different theories and argumentation structures, especially when it comes to 'who can be saved'. They have some things in common, like the idea of religious ethnicity, the belief that God wants to save as many people as possible and the receiving of a lot of criticism. One criticism for example is that they are inclusivists instead of pluralists, because they decide which religion is good enough to be saved besides their own. Still, I think they are good examples of pluralist thinkers, because Hick tried really hard to build up a strong pluralistic hypothesis and Aydin and Rahman found strong evidence in the Quran for a pluralistic attitude towards other religions.

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<sup>116</sup> Aydin. P. 53.

## 4. Conclusion

In this chapter I will give an answer to the main question of this thesis. The central question, like it was described in the introduction, was: Can other believers be saved according to Christianity and Islam? There are different answers possible, because there are a lot of different views in both religions.

First of all, there was the exclusive view of some contemporary thinkers. It became very clear that in both religions the religious Other cannot be saved according to this view. In Christianity, because other believers did not have faith in Christ and in Islam, because they did not believe in for example one God, the prophet Muhammad, the Book, the Angels or the Last Day. Another point of view was that of inclusivism. In Christianity this meant that some other believers could be saved, but only through Jesus Christ. Whole religions could receive revelation from God, but most cannot have salvation. Rahner formulated a theory where some other believers were called “anonymous Christians”: these people never heard about Christ or the Gospel, but did live a life as God wanted it. For Rahner these people had a chance for salvation, but this became invalid when they came in contact with the message of Christianity. Islam has an inclusive message, which was made known in the Quran, in the eyes of Farid Esack. He sees that Islam wanted to be better than the other Abrahamic religions with their exclusive claims and therefore Islam became more open and more tolerant to other religions. But this does not mean that the religious Other could be saved, only when they lived a righteous life and did good deeds. The last and most open view was pluralism. The universalists in Christianity think that all people can be saved, because of the loving nature of God and because of Jesus Christ who is the savior. The Christian John Hick built a whole theory about salvation and liberation of religious people. He believes that all people are looking for the same final goal, namely the Ultimate Reality. When they find this, they also will find their salvation. For Islam, the story is a bit different. In the Quran are a few verses which state that the People of the Book can be saved too besides the Muslims. Many orthodox Muslims say that these verses are abrogated, but for Ayoub that is impossible. Besides, there are multiple interpretations possible when it comes to the word *islam* in some verses. There is always discussion about the interpretation of the Quran, but for pluralist thinkers the word *islam* means ‘submitting oneself to God’. This would mean that all believers who submits themselves to God will be saved in the Hereafter. So, to give an answer to the above question: Some thinkers believe that the religious Other can be saved too, but most of the thinkers believe that they cannot be saved or can only be saved through the One religion (for some is that Christianity and for others Islam).

To finish this thesis, I want to formulate some thoughts about the importance and influence of the different views I discussed in the previous chapters. I want to start with the views in Christianity and then in Islam. I think that in Christianity the exclusivist thought is still really important, especially among a huge group of (American) Protestants, Evangelicals and other orthodox or fundamental thinkers. For Catholicism I think this view became less important, because in the last 60 years they became more open to other religions. So, in

Catholicism the inclusivist view have had a lot influence the last decennia. This is especially because of the Vatican Council II, where the Catholic Church did get a whole new attitude towards other religions. Pluralism in Christianity is becoming more and more important in the West and I think that is because of the globalization and migration of human beings with other religions than Christianity. People actually get in contact with other religious people and some start wondering why such a good person, with another belief, cannot be saved according to the Scriptures. They could find satisfaction in for example a theory as Hick's.

In Islam exclusivist claims and thoughts do still have a huge influence on people's beliefs and practices, for example on Sunnis, the Wahhabi movement and extremists. But these examples are Muslims who find the television screens in the West a lot of times. Maybe "normal believers", or people who do not find the publicity, are more open to the salvation of non-Muslims, but they cannot show this to the outside world, because it is not accepted through the community. That is why I think you do not hear much about inclusivist thoughts, because the majority (of Sunni Islam) does not want to hear it. But I think the influence is slowly growing, because you can find quite a lot of literature from contemporary Muslim thinkers about this specific subject, take for example Khalil's book. I think pluralism is at the moment not of importance for normal believers, because they are stuck in their traditions and it is hard to accept a totally different view. But, pluralist thoughts do grow in academic circles, especially the pluralist passages in the Quran are a hot topic for debating and I think that will remain for quite a while! So, in both religions there is, in some branches of Christianity and Islam, a move to a more open view of other believers in general and salvation of them in particular.

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