Education for Religious Pluralism in Islam: One Book or Series of Books, a Singular Message or Myriad Messages?

Ayman Agbaria

Department of Leadership and Policy in Education, University of Haifa, Haifa 3498838, Israel; aagbaria@edu.gaiifa.ac.il

Abstract: As the literature on the philosophical and theological aspects of religious pluralism concerning Islamic education is indeed scarce and sporadic, this article discusses the complexity of religious pluralism in the Quranic discourse, while highlighting the tension between inclusive and exclusive interpretations. In doing so, the article reflects on the notion of religious pluralism, arguing that this notion should not be approached as a truth to be verified, but as a hypothesis to be tested. Additionally, the article presents various educational implications as to how to encourage religious pluralism in Islamic education. Specifically, I will advocate for a new type of education: education for religion.

Keywords: pluralism; religious pluralism; Islamic studies; Islamic education

1. Introduction

This article aims to discuss the theology of religious diversity from an Islamic perspective. Using techniques of theoretical analysis, comparison, contrast, analogy, metaphor, and illustrations from the Quran and the Islamic exegesis as often used in conceptual papers (Jaakkola 2020), the article presents a philosophical investigation into how religious diversity should be tolerated. Following Cohen’s (2004) argument that toleration is not indifference, moral stoicism, pluralism, non-interference, permissiveness, neutrality, and tolerance, this article approaches toleration as an activity of enduring. Notwithstanding the difference between the virtue of tolerance and the activity of toleration (see more in Cohen 2004; Forst 2012; Walzer 1997), this paper is about how religious diversity can be theologically endured, rather than sociologically tolerated.

Admittedly, the history of Muslims is abundant with examples of religious tolerance (Carney 2008; Esack 1997; Sachedina 2001). Kamali (2018), for example, observed that ‘The Constitution of Madinah’ (Arabic: Dustur al-Madinah), instated by Prophet Muhammad after he migrated to Madinah in 622 CE, established a new community of believers based on religious tolerance. He elaborates that: “Issues of leadership and subjugation of powerful tribes to the authority of the nascent government, principles of equality and justice, freedom of religion, right of ownership, freedom of movement and combating crime were among the main preoccupations of this document” (Kamali 2018, p. 20). The treaty signed by Prophet Muḥammad with the Christians of Najaran is another example of tolerance and noninterference in the religious affairs of non-Muslim groups. The treaty stipulates that:

To the Christians of Najran and the neighboring territories the security of God and the pledge of His Prophet are extended for their lives, their religion, and their property—to the present as well as the absent and others besides; there shall be no interference with the practice of their faith, in their observances; nor any change in their rights or privileges; no bishop shall be removed from his office; nor any monk from his monastery, nor any priest from his priesthood, and they shall continue to enjoy everything great and small as heretofore; no image or cross shall be destroyed; they shall not oppress or be oppressed ... no tithes shall
be levied from them, nor shall they be required to furnish provision for troops.
(Ali 1946, p. 273; cited in Asani 2003, p. 45)

That said, this paper limits itself to reflecting on the theology of religious pluralism in Islam vis-a-vis other religions (see more in Dag 2017; Legenhausen 1999; Salroo 2006). It is less concerned with the sociology or the history of religious pluralism in Muslim contexts. Risking overgeneralization, this paper asks: What kind of religious imagery is needed in confessional Islamic education to develop religious pluralism? Additionally, to what extent can Muslim educators in this type of education candidly advocate that: “truth is indeed absolute and irrefutable, however, the forms and languages in which it is revealed may differ and even exhibit inconsistencies.” (Aslan 2016, p. 32)

In search of answers, the paper is further limited to discussing inter-religious pluralism in Islam concerning other religions. Although both types overlap, this paper is less concerned with intra-religious pluralism (internal pluralism), because not only is the literature on this issue extensive, but it is also consistent in arguing that internal diversity within Islam is indeed attesting to the pluralist nature of Islam (Alalwani 1996). Focusing then on inter-religious pluralism, following Eck (2001), ‘religious pluralism’ is understood here as a dialogical engagement with religious diversity.

Adopting such a perspective involves critical examination of socio-cultural and theological differences to develop an enlightened view of others’ religious beliefs, yet without loosening one’s religious conventions and commitments. Religious pluralism requires active engagement with other religions and forms of religiosity that goes beyond passive tolerance. As “religious differences . . . have been manipulated to burn bridges between communities” (Sachedina 2001, p. 35), the history, sociology, and theology of religious pluralism can provide incentives, justifications, and resources for education for dialogue, reconciliation, justice, and peaceful coexistence (Hussain 2003).

Undoubtedly, this paper is limited in its content and scope, as it does not engage with non-Abrahamic and non-monotheistic religions. Furthermore, I should acknowledge the fact that the paper does not consider atheistic worldviews and the place of ‘non-believers’. To give a thorough answer to how these religions and worldviews should be approached necessitates a theoretical investigation that is beyond the goals of this paper. Yet, one can refer to Noddings (1993, 2006) and Kunzman (2012), among others, who argue that schools in a democratic society need to encourage teachers and pupils to engage with questions such as whether God exists, and whether we can live moral lives without God. “Should we reject the notions of hell and damnation as incompatible with the belief in God’s goodness? . . . Can we have a satisfying spiritual life without religion?” (Noddings 2006, p. 280).

Bearing this limitation in mind, I will first discuss the complexity of religious pluralism in the Quranic discourse, while highlighting the tension between inclusive and exclusive interpretations. Because of space limits, this part does not consider religious pluralism in Prophet Muḥammad’s tradition (Hadith). Second, I will introduce the notion of religious pluralism, arguing that this notion should not be approached as a truth to be verified, but as a hypothesis to be tested. Third, as the literature on the philosophical and theological aspects of religious pluralism concerning Islamic education is indeed scarce and sporadic (e.g., Adam 2017; Kadiwal 2014; Niyozev 2016), I will reflect on the educational implications of encouraging religious pluralism. Specifically, I will advocate for a new type of education: education for religion.

2. The Discourse on Pluralism in Al-Quran

Let me start with the following two verses from chapters 1 and 5 (Surat Al-Baqara and Surat Al-Ma‘aída, respectively):

The Messenger has believed in what was revealed to him from his Lord, and [so have] the believers. All of them have believed in Allah and His angels and His books and His messengers, [saying], “We make no distinction between any of His messengers.” And they say, “We hear and we obey. [We seek] Your forgiveness, our Lord, and to You is the [final] destination”. (Al-Quran, chapter 2: verse 285)
O Messenger, announce that which has been revealed to you from your Lord, and if you do not, then you have not conveyed His message. And Allah will protect you from the people. Indeed, Allah does not guide the disbelieving people.” (Al-Quran, chapter 5: verse 67)

Commenting on the first verse in his exegesis (Tafsir), al-Tabari (d. 923) (Al-Tabari 1999) noted that the word “Books” can be read in a singular form “Book”, as did the inhabitants of Madinah. “Books” refer to all other prophets’ scriptures, while “book” refers to Quran solely. As for the second verse, al-Qurtubi (d. 1273) (Al-Qurtubi 2010), in his exegesis, recalled that the people of Madinah used to read this verse with “Messages” (in plural) instead of a “Message” (in singular). He asserts that both readings are correct, advising to combine both when reciting this verse.

The idea that Prophet Muhammad has multiple books and messages that he is required to convey and that believers “should make no distinction between any of His messengers” opens a hermeneutical space for embracing religious pluralism. Nonetheless, these different readings signify the tension between two competing normative positions on how to judge the truth of other religions and their potential to deliver salvation to their believers. These two are the exclusive position and the inclusive one.

Muslim exclusivists believe that truth lies only within their religious tradition. Muslim inclusivists believe that the full truth lies within their religion, while other religions express that truth, partially or in full. Inclusivists can be divided into two subgroups: those who believe the truth is fully expressed in other religions and scriptures, and those who believe truth is rendered partially in other people’s religions and is conditioned by adhering to the principles of Islam. Accordingly, exclusivists often argue that only and solely the commitment to their version of Islam is the true path to salvation, whereas inclusivists believe that their version of religion is essential and even preferable for purposes of salvation, yet other religions also can and to some extent will facilitate salvation to their believers (See more on the typology ‘inclusivism—exclusivism—pluralism’ in Race 1983; McKim 2012).

Noticeably, both groups value diversity (Ikhtilaf) and perceive it as a manifestation of God’s will. This appreciation of Ikhtilaf is based on, for example, the verse “And if your Lord had willed, He could have made mankind one community; but they will not cease to differ” (Al-Quran, chapter 11: verse 118). Yet, although both groups appeal to the same religious texts, both differ in their approach to religious pluralism.

Exclusivists believe truth is single, absolute, and is embedded in the literal meaning of the words as uttered in Al-Quran. Exclusivists tend to reject the possibility of multiple, equally valid truths. For Muslim exclusivists, the correct religion ordained by God is that revealed to Prophet Muhammad. In their view, as Quran asserts, even though Muslims should believe in “ . . . what was revealed to Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob, and the Descendants, and in what was given to Moses and Jesus and to the prophets from their Lord” (Al-Quran, chapter 3: verse 84), Muslims must eventually answer to Islam, which has the higher authority. They must do so because “And whoever desires other than Islam as religion—never will it be accepted from him, and he, in the Hereafter, will be among the losers” (Al-Quran, chapter 3: verse 85). For the exclusivists, Islam directly addresses itself to the question of religious diversity and calls for the dominion of Islam over all other religions, drawing on verses such as: “It is He who has sent His Messenger with guidance and the religion of truth to manifest it over all religion, although they who associate others with Allah dislike it” (Al-Quran, chapter 9: verse 33).

In opposition, inclusivists advocate that: “There shall be no compulsion in [acceptance of] the religion. The right course has become clear from the wrong . . . ” (Al-Qur’an, chapter 2: verse 256), and “ . . . The truth is from your Lord, so whoever wills—let him believe; and whoever wills—let him disbelieve . . . ” (Al-Quran, chapter 18: verse29). For them, engaging with diversity is a universal Islamic value, because God asserts “O mankind, indeed We have created you from male and female and made you peoples and tribes that you may know one another. Indeed, the most noble of you in the sight of Allah is the most righteous of you. Indeed, Allah is Knowing and Acquainted. (Al-Quran, chapter 49: verse
Inclusivists argue that diversity has a purpose and that is to know each other, and righteousness is tested vis-a-vis fulfilling this goal.

As for the option of salvation, inclusivists believe that “Paradise is not [obtained] by your wishful thinking nor by that of the People of the Scripture. Whoever does a wrong will be recompensed for it, and he will not find besides Allah a protector or a helper” (Al-Quran, chapter 4: verse 123). For them, the universal salvific will of Allah is highlighted through verses such as: “Indeed, those who believed and those who were Jews or Christians or Sabaeans [before Prophet Muhammad]—those [among them] who believed in Allah and the Last Day and did righteousness—will have their reward with their Lord, and no fear will there be concerning them, nor will they grieve” (Al-Quran, chapter 2: verse 62). In this verse, the reward is even promised to the Sabaeans, whom many commentators agree were star worshippers, provided they believe in Allah and the Last Day and do good.

These two groups “are not necessarily entirely different groups of people”. Rather, “these are ways of thinking about diversity and they may well be part of the ongoing dialogue within ourselves” (Eck 2005, p. 41). Furthermore, the interpretations of many of the verses mentioned above are highly debated. Many of them could be reinterpreted in line with what beliefs and attitudes the reader approach them. For example, in the verse “And whoever desires other than Islam as religion—never will it be accepted from him . . . ” (Al-Quran, chapter 3: verse 85), it is not clear what Islam means here.

On the one hand, all of the divinely revealed religions are called Islam in the general sense of complete submission to God. On the other hand, Islam is also used in a specific sense to refer to the final version of Islam brought by Prophet Muhammad (Aslan 2016). Another example of ambiguity is the verse: “There shall be no compulsion in [acceptance of] the religion . . . ” (Al-Quran, chapter 2: verse 256). Similar to almost all Muslim exegetes, al-Tabari noted that there is no agreement on this verse’s meaning or to whom it is referring to. Risking oversimplification, al-Tabari presented two camps. One camp believes that this verse renders a universal principle for all human beings, and the other camp perceives it as referring to particular groups in a specific historical context. Most importantly, al-Tabari points to the debate on whether or not this verse was abrogated by other verses that were revealed later in the Quran, such as “And when the sacred months have passed, then kill the polytheists wherever you find them and capture them and besiege them and sit in wait for them at every place of ambush . . . ” (Al-Quran, chapter 9: verse 5).

The attempt to consider the Verse 256 in Chapter 2 with its universal principle of ‘no compulsion in religion’ as being subjected to abrogation (Naskh) is indeed typical of how Muslim exclusivists devised terminological and methodological strategies to mold the exegesis of Al-Quran to force exclusivist meanings (Asani 2003; Duderija 2017; Sachedina 2001, 2010). Asani (2003, pp. 46–47) asserts that:

“It is only by decontextualizing the exegesis of such verses, by disregarding their original historical context of revelation and by using them to engage in a large-scale abrogation of contradictory verses, that the exclusivist Muslim exegetes have been able to counteract the pluralist ethos that so thoroughly pervades the Quran.”

Commenting on the uses of these strategies concerning religious pluralism, Sachedina (2010, p. 229) argued:

“Some classical Muslim scholars of the Qur’an attempted to separate the salvation history of the Muslim community from other Abrahamic faiths by attesting to the superseding validity of the Islamic revelation over Christianity and Judaism. In an attempt to demand unquestioning acceptance of the new faith Muslim theologians had to device terminological as well as methodological stratagem to circumscribe those verses of the Qur’an which tended to underscore its ecumenical thrust by extending salvific authenticity and adequacy to other monotheistic traditions.”
To be more specific, one of the strategies to endow verses with universal meanings of tolerance and incisiveness with messages of exclusiveness and absolutism was to claim these verses’ abrogation by other verses. Sachedina (2001) argued that exclusivists were able to promote their absolutist views through the declaration that the many verses calling for pluralism, commanding Muslims to build bridges of understanding with non-Muslims, had been abrogated by other verses that call for fighting the infidel.

To summarize, taking the side of the inclusivists, the direct universal request to “know one another” (Al-Quran, chapter 49: verse 13) encompasses all human beings and serves to remind them of God who unites them all despite their differences. This is also to remind that difference is a necessary condition for the proliferation and continuation of life. Thus, Muslims should not be neutral about diversity. Rather, they are asked to engage with it actively. In this regard, the call to “know one another” should not be limited to knowing each other as individual persons, but also to know each other’s cultures, religions, and theologies. This is indeed a call for ‘experiential religiosity’, in Soroush's (2009, p. 190) words that is ‘passionate, revelatory’ and ‘individualistic, deterministic, quintessential, reconciliatory, ecstatic, intimate, visual and saintly’.

With this type of religiosity vis-a-vis diversity, the believers are expected not only to know one another but also to know God through the diversity of his creations and revelations. This twofold knowledge of man and God cannot but be obtained through educational experiences of dialogue, recognition, and reflection. In religious education, ‘experiential religiosity’ allows more room for creativity and freedom of self-expression. Teachers and pupils can potentially enjoy more freedom of both religion and education. As I advocate for religious pluralism in religious education, I am indeed advocating to increase the space of freedom in religious education. Both religion and education should be freest. Education should be from the manipulations of the modern nation-state and the political-religious movements (Agbaria and Mustafa 2014).

On the one hand, most of the modern nation-states have accommodated religion, and Islam in particular, as a school subject in the national education systems in ways that reflect the existing traditions of state–church/Mosque relations and in service of each state’s political interests in legitimacy, stability, and social cohesion. Specifically, in Islamic confessional religious education, Islam has been rendered as a monolithic faith that ignores the sectarian differences and the intellectual and religious debates in Islamic theology and Jurisprudence. In this type of education, Islam is instructed as abstract, idealized, and unattained moral virtues and good deeds that are detached from the socio-political reality of the pupils (Agbaria 2012). As such, Islamic education is reduced to a thin life skills-oriented version of “character education” that seeks to cultivate discipline and conformity and elicit acceptance of and cooperation with the existing socio-political order. On the other hand, the political Islam movements challenge the official knowledge of Islam through the media, suggesting competing conceptualizations of the essence and role of Islam in the lives of the pupils. Amidst these competing forces, teachers are required to mediate, negotiate, and rework various types of religiosity and Muslim identity (Agbaria and Mustafa 2014).

That said, experiencing religious pluralism can potentially lessen the burden on the teachers’ shoulders. They do not need to comply with what the state dictates regarding the image of the true believer, and they do not need to surrender to the temptations of the Islamic political movements’ repertoire of ideas. Rather, they can function as enablers, facilitators and make religious education freer, and more open to agency and hermeneutics. Yet, the two freedoms of religion and education may exist in tension, as the freedom of education might jeopardize one commitment to his or her particular religion, and the freedom of religion might risk the very nature of confessional education being predicated on the idea of one ultimate truth. In what follows, I will try to target this tension, while addressing the dynamics between education for one religious truth vis-a-vis education for religious pluralism.
3. Religious Pluralism: A Truth or a Hypothesis

Skeie (2009, p. 308) differentiated between plurality and pluralism, suggesting “using the word ‘plurality’ in cases where a description of diversity is intended, and the word ‘pluralism’ where the intention is to give a normative valuation of the plurality”. In line with this distinction, religious pluralism, for this paper, signifies the normative judgment that no single religion can claim a monopoly of the truth, thus many religious world views can coexist in harmony, or at least in a fruitful dialogue.

John Hick (1985, 1989, 2006) is widely considered as one of the founding fathers of the modern philosophy and theology of religious pluralism (Aslan 2013). Generally speaking, based on his analysis of a variety of religious experiences and forms of religiosity, Hick concluded that the great religious traditions affirm that beyond our ordinary experience there is a limitless greater and higher, transcendent, and ultimate Reality. Specifically, he argues that the world religions present different conceptions of that reality and provide their believers with different legitimate responses that are all historically and culturally conditioned interpretations of the same ultimate reality. Therefore, and as these religions embody equal alternatives for salvation, there should be no difference in the way adherents are to treat the followers of other religions. Hick’s notion of religious pluralism has generated a variety of critical responses (Saad 2011). In these responses, Hick was criticized for reappropriating other religious traditions to undermine significant differences among them, for overlooking the importance of juridical traditions and community customs in religious life, for marginalizing reason in religious experiences, and for idealizing mysticism.

For example, Legenhausen (1999) criticized Hick for his attempt to reconcile irreconcilable religious experiences. He points out that if the spiritual experience of an individual “conveys him the information that God is the Greatest, while another person claims that he spiritually perceives that Brahman is the greatest, one might attempt reconciliation by showing that Brahman is the name Hindu use for God” (p. 9). In this regard, Legenhausen (1999) emphasized that God and Brahman are different theological concepts. Therefore, Legenhausen is skeptical of the possibility of a full-scale implementation of religious pluralism. Yet, and to do justice with Hick, who was genuinely interested in exploring the possibilities for religious pluralism in Islam (e.g., Hick 1985, 2006), he was well aware that Islam “does not naturally encourage a full and unqualified acceptance of religious pluralism” (Hick 1985, p. 49).

Here, it is important to acknowledge the contribution of Abdolkarim Soroush (Soroush 1995, 1998, 2000, 2009) who engaged critically with the notion of religious pluralism from within the Islamic tradition. Like Hick, Soroush believed that “the epistemic validity of a religious tradition can only be a matter of hermeneutical effort, which is ultimately related to individual experiences of believers” (Akbar 2017, p. 322). For him, the nature of religiosity and its endurance hinge on religious experience, thus he prioritizes ‘experiential religiosity’ over other forms of religiosity, namely ‘instrumental religiosity’, which is based on emulation and obedience, and ‘reflective religiosity’, which is more rational and discursive. With ‘experiential religiosity’, ‘religious truth’ becomes a resource, a reference, or a reliance rather than absolute certainty or objective truth. As such, ‘religious truth’ is always intimately contingent on the believer’s experience of the divine and is always molded within specific socio-cultural contexts.

As for his stance on religious pluralism, Soroush distinguishes between ‘diversity of understanding religious texts,’ and ‘diversity of interpretation of religious experiences’ (Hashas 2014). Respectively, these produce two entwined types of pluralism: intra-religious and extra-religious pluralism. As for the diversity of understanding religious texts, Soroush acknowledges that historically no sacred text has been interpreted without contestation. This type of diversity generates a variety of religious experiences because humans differ in the way in which they interpret meanings and engage with texts. Specifically, he asserts that the interpretation of religious texts “is subject to expansion and contraction according to the assumptions preceding them and/or the questions enquiring them” (Soroush 1998,
Accordingly, for Soroush, religions are similar in their essential principles; yet they differ in their contingent aspects (see more in Akbar 2017; Fletcher 2005; Hashas 2014). Aslan, in his search for an Islamic theology of religious pluralism, challenged exclusivist interpretations of many verses in Al-Quran to advocate for moving from the dominant thin version of tolerance to a thicker conception of pluralism in Islam. Specifically, he expands the definitions of both religion (Din) and Islam, arguing that Din does not refer only to Islam, but also to the essential core of all religions. For him, Islam and Muslim should be understood “not only in terms of a specific institutionalized religion (Shariah Islam) and its adherents but also in relation to the foundation of faith for all people who believe in God” (Aslan 2016, p. 26).

That said, it seems that the idea of religious pluralism centers on the value of equality. Religious pluralism requires various types of equality in the theology and practice of religion. Specifically, it asks for soteriological equality of salvation, normative equality in the treatments of all followers of other religions, epistemological equality in viewing religions as equally justified, alethic equality of the truth of beliefs, ethical equality of the moralities and obligations among religions and adherents. In a nutshell, a full religious pluralism means recognizing the equal worth of religions and their believers.

However, this universal and all-encompassing recognition of equal worth might come into conflict with the particularity of individual religion in that it revokes and destabilizes distinct religious identities “by forcing people into a homogeneous mold that is untrue to them” (Taylor 1992, p. 43). Put differently, the idea that there is a universal standard of the equal worth of all religions is a prejudiced imposition on religions that preach for other standards of equality and worth. Therefore, the demand for the equal worth of religions should be a starting presumption to test with the quality and degree of religious pluralism in practice. Although the doctrine of religious pluralism provides motives for considering that particular religions affirm the equal worth of all religions, at least those who believe in a divine ultimate one God, it does not provide a conclusive argument for this perspective. Rather, it defends the possibility of equal worth as demanding in itself a leap of faith.

Based on Taylor’s (1992) intellectual treatment of the idea of ‘equal worth’, what is needed for the cultivation of religious pluralism is a ‘fusion of horizons’ (Gadamer 1976). What is required is “an admission that we are very far away from that ultimate horizon from which the relative worth of different cultures might be evident” (Ibid, p. 73). Taylor’s view is that the equal worth premise is not an a priori truth but rather a starting hypothesis, an article of faith, which in some cases might turn out to be incorrect, and in others might be validated. To test this hypothesis, one must make a concrete investigation of the other culture in question. This is done by “fusion of horizons” (Gadamer 1976) that would enable us to understand other religions from within their history and values while developing new vocabularies for examining the similarities and contrasts between cultures and religions. Taylor’s explanation of this strategy is worth quoting at length:

“What has to happen is what Gadamer has called a “fusion of horizons”. We learn to move in a broader horizon, within which what we have formerly taken for granted as the background to valuation can be situated as one possibility alongside the different background of the formerly unfamiliar culture. The “fusion of horizons” operates through our developing new vocabularies of comparison, by means of which we can articulate these contrasts. So that if and when we ultimately find substantive support for our initial presumption, it is on the basis of an understanding of what constitutes worth that we couldn’t possibly have had at the beginning. We have reached the judgment partly through transforming our standards.” (Taylor 1992, p. 67)

Accordingly, one might argue that we owe not only all cultures, but also all religions a presumption of the kind described in Taylor’s quotation above. In a ‘fusion of horizons’, religious pluralism is explored in search of an ‘overlapping consensus’ (Rawls 1993). In this regard, it seems that developing a stance of religious pluralism among religious believers is not less important than the ability to reason and deliberate in the public sphere in support
of a just democratic regime. Following Macedo (1995), one may argue that for “people who disagree about the highest ideals and their conception of the whole truth”, facilitating a stance of religious pluralism can be critical to agree on the importance of “public aims such as peace, prosperity, and equal liberty” (Ibid, p. 474), as these aims are often framed and rendered in religious language.

Nonetheless, an ‘overlapping consensus’ in religious beliefs is always a matter of degree and type. It is a ‘religious pluralism to come’. Engaging with Derrida’s (2005, p. 87) notion of ‘democracy to come’, Arfi (2015, p. 670) defines religious ‘pluralism to come’ as follows:

“It is a continuous call for change and self-critique and therefore takes into account the right to self-critique and perfectibility while assuming no telos of perfect pluralism. Pluralism to-come has thus the structure of a promise that never ceases to call for non-teleological self-critiques, changes and perfectibility of any ‘here and now’ form of pluralism.”

Thus, religious pluralism as a hypothesis does not mean that the theological doctrines and moral blueprints of all religions are equally valid. Rather, it means that each religion’s theology and morality is right in its ways, and there is no absolute position from which one could be said to be closer to God than any other. With the idea of religious pluralism as a hypothesis, there is no need to impose any ‘universal’ religious pluralism. To emphasize this further, the cornerstone of the idea of religious pluralism as a hypothesis is that it cannot be imposed as an ultimate truth or set of transcendental principles. Rather, each tradition can evoke its type or degree of religious pluralism from its own historical experience, cultural roots, and theological principles. Religions are expected to observe religious pluralism, not because of the need for cosmopolitan sensibilities in increasingly multi-religious societies, but because their tradition led them to it. Panjwani (2016, p. 334) aptly summarized this point in what follows:

“The point being not only that imposing values is both ethically and practically suspect but also that all major religious and cultural traditions are plural and carry within them resources that can lead them to acknowledge the values of peace, prosperity and equal liberty as the common ground for coexistence.”

With religious pluralism as a hypothesis, as Sorosh suggested, one should not only choose an a priori approach to religions but should also opt for an a posteriori method, taking their histories and broader contextual framework into consideration (Soroush 2009, p. 132). Akbar (2017, p. 325) explained Sorosh’s approach in the following word:

“... the plurality of religious traditions does not only mean that there are various ways to God, as the classical Sufis asserted, but that this plurality should also be seen as a reflection of different historical as well as cultural circumstances within which different religions emerged and evolved ... Accordingly, the intention of Sorosh’s approach is not simply to establish the truth of one religion and the falsehood of others. His approach serves to fulfill the ultimate goal of religious pluralism, which ... encourages believers to arrive at mutual understanding rather than simply tolerating each other ... Sorosh emphasizes that this idea by no means implies that rituals and beliefs of religions must be left aside in order to promote pluralism.”

To explore the relevance and scope of religious pluralism in a particular religion, one cannot escape comparing religious beliefs. Nevertheless, these cannot be compared in “type” but in degree, not only because they all convey a version of the truth from the same God, as a pluralist theologian would argue, but also because pluralism is a matter of degree. McKim (2012) commented on Race’s (1983) typology, which distinguishes between ‘inclusivism’, ‘exclusivism’, and pluralism’, that this typology consists of flexible and overlapping categories that are extending over continuums. One might have different positions towards different religious issues in other traditions, perhaps being exclusivist about some and inclusivist about others. Thus, pluralism is no longer about asking if a
Religion or an interpretation is true or false, but about seeking to understand the meaning in it.

4. Educational Implications

To start with, let me remind the reader of the verse mentioned previously from Surat Al-Baqara: “. . . All of them have believed in Allah and His angels and His book and His messengers, [saying], “We make no distinction between any of His messengers” (Al-Qur’an, chapter 2: verse 285). Although this verse can be read with ‘books’ instead of ‘book’, believers are asked to make no distinction only between “His messengers”, but not between “His books”. Therefore, one can argue that Muslims should believe in all books because they come from the same divine source; yet they should treat them differently, or distinctively, because they have different purposes, were revealed in different contexts, and are interpreted in various ways. It is the prophets who should be treated with no differentiation in terms of the validity, authenticity, and truthfulness of their prophecy. In this regard, there is no wrong in being ‘selective pluralists’ (Kadiwal 2014, p. 189). One can select a religion, as an act of boundary-making of his own religious identity, and still cultivate sensibilities of religious pluralism. Being a ‘selective pluralist’ is accepting being an ‘inclusive exclusivist’ who values the truths of other religions and learns from these about his own, yet without relinquishing his or her religious commitments and beliefs.

In confessional Islamic education, the endeavor is then for a notion of religious pluralism that is ‘rooted’ in the theology and history of particular Muslim religious communities (Kadiwal 2014), and that is not reductive to Islam, or relativistic to other religions (Legenhausen 1999). That said, the question remains how to approach Quranic verses such as “We sent down the Torah, in which was guidance and light . . . ” (Al-Quran, chapter 5: verse 44), and “And We sent, following in their footsteps, Jesus, the son of Mary, confirming that which came before him in the Torah; and We gave him the Gospel, in which was guidance and light . . . ” (Al-Quran, chapter 4: verse 123). As these verses affirm that God’s ‘light’ exists also in the other scriptures, one might ask how we should educate Muslims in ‘light’ of other religions’ ‘light’. What is needed to convince people that Jalal al-Din Rumi (d. 1273) was right in arguing that “The lamps are different, but the Light is the same” (cited in Legenhausen 1999, p. 21)? Additionally, how can a heart be educated that it could potentially “take on any form”? As suggested by Ibn Arabi (d. 1240):

My heart can take on any form:
For gazelles a meadow,
A cloister for monks,
For the idols, sacred ground,
Ka’ba for the circling pilgrim,
The tables of the Torah,
The scrolls of the Qur’an (Ibn Arabi, Translated by Sells 2000, p. 75)

That asked, the literature on pluralist approaches to religious education is extensive (see a recent review of the various educational approaches to religious pluralism in Kadiwal 2014). Generally speaking, these approaches use phenomenological, experiential, dialogical, existentialist, dialogical, and interpretative methodologies to promote acceptance, reconciliation, and peaceful coexistence (Aslan 2016; Niyozov 2016). In this regard, the promotion of reflexivity, hermeneutics, and the value of ambivalence and doubt is most needed in confessional Islamic education, let alone in pedagogues for religious pluralism. Nonetheless, I think that the educational answer to the questions raised above should start elsewhere. Specifically, I suggest theorizing a new type of religious education that centers on the idea that the ontology of the believer supersedes the epistemology of his or her religious beliefs.

In many places in Al-Quran, the believer is constituted as an actor and as an ontological entity earlier than detailing his or her beliefs. The status of the believer is established not
through the type or quality of his or her faith, which arrives at the scene later, but through experience. For example, Al-Quran is revealed as a book about which there is no doubt and as a guidance “for those conscious of Allah” (Al-Qur’an, chapter 2: verse 1). Elsewhere, Al-Quran is described as “guidance and good tidings for the believers” (Al-Qur’an, chapter 2: verse 97). In both verses, “those conscious of Allah” and the “believers” are those who could see the truth of Al-Quran and can use guidance. The believers (Al-Mumenon) are those who can reason and value the message that is addressed to them: “... And they say, “We hear and we obey. [We seek] Your forgiveness, our Lord, and to You is the [final] destination (Al-Qur’an, chapter 2: verse 285); “... Indeed in that is a sign for you, if you are believers” (Al-Qur’an, chapter 3: verse 49); “And We have not revealed to you the Book, [O Muhammad], except for you to make clear to them that wherein they have differed and as guidance and mercy for a people who believe” (Al-Qur’an, chapter16: verse 64).

Here, I want to distinguish between the general believer and the specific believer. I propose that being a believer, in the general sense, supersedes being a believer in a specific religion. Being a general believer is being in a state of mind that allows one to embrace any specific religion or faith. It is the pre-consciousness that supersedes being a follower of any religion. To specify this pre-language and pre-religion experience, imagine moments when we stand in front of a splendid view of an ocean, a mountain, a forest, or even a skyscraper. You are first amazed and speechless and it is only then that you reflect on your astonishment and about how wide the ocean is, or how high the mountain is in meters or inches. In other words, being a general believer is experiencing a posture in front of what we perceive as almighty, omnipotent, and supreme, whatever that might be. Accordingly, being a Muslim, in the general sense, is being in a submissive position in front of what we perceive as ‘beyond’ our existence and experience. In this submissive position, we are exposed to what we perceive as solemn, magnificence, sublime, before we adopt specific beliefs and practice to process and sacralize that immature and ‘clean’ experience with words and rituals, which transform us in turn into followers of specific religions.

Grimmitt (2000) proposed three models of religious education, distinguishing between educating into, about, and from religion. Educating into religion involves a confessional approach, in which a single tradition is taught by members of the faith to socialize pupils into the beliefs and the practices of a specific religion. Educating about religion is taught non-confessionally and from a neutral standpoint, using descriptive and historical methods to educate about the beliefs, values, practices, and influences of religion on individuals and communities. Finally, educating from religion provides the learners the opportunity to consider various moral dilemmas, and allows them to develop their ideas and views. However, implementing these approaches might prove counterproductive without suitable preparation to foster sensibilities of religious pluralism. Therefore, I propose to add another approach to Grimmit’s typology: education for religion.

This type of education centers on the encounter with the presence of the transcendent. It seeks to assist the pupils to reflect on their engagements with the certainties and uncertainties of what they consider as beyond human reason and experience. Following Hick who substantiated the distinction between the ‘Real’ as-it-is-in-itself (noumenal Real) and the Real as-it-appears in the act of human perception (phenomenal Real), this type of education aims at encouraging pupils to engage with and reflect on the infinite noumenal Real with their vocabulary. For Hick, the Ultimate Real, the Divine, is unlimited and exceeds human thought and language; therefore, it “cannot be said to be one or many, person or thing, substance or process, good or evil, purposive or non-purposive ... We cannot even speak of this as a thing or an entity”. (Hick 1989, p. 246). Therefore, this type of education seeks refined moments in which the pupils reflect on the Real as it appears in their own experiences.

In this sense, this type of education targets the noumenal that is unthinkable to reflect on its presence in the lives of the pupils, yet without the sacred language of specific religions or scriptures. It is indeed a training to cultivate the pupils, if interested, in the sensibilities required to accommodate and the Real as it is in itself, in the pupils’ vocabulary and
expressions, a moment before it is transformed into the Real as-it-appears in the religious language of the various traditions. Therefore, this type of education endures avoiding indoctrinating what the different religious traditions subscribed as Real, allowing the pupils to experience the unexperienceable directly and with no mediation. It is only then that the pupils can learn and reflect on how the Real is indeed historically contingent on the language, culture, and sociopolitical conditions of the contexts in which religions emerged and developed. In this stage, using Soroush’s (2009) terminology, the level of religiosuity is minimal, yet the exposure to the ‘essentials’ of religion is maximal. Put differently, in this stage of education for religion, for the presence of the Ultimate, no religious literacy is required, and engagement, if any at all, with the ‘accidentals’ of specific religions should be deliberately overlooked.

Easy to say, hard to do. Given that religious students and teachers often act upon religious epistemologies and axiomatic facts that influence their engagement with what counts as legitimate knowledge, and what is not (Bekerman and Zembylas 2017), it would be difficult for them to escape the essentialized, particularized, and materialized conceptions of religion. Therefore, as suggested by Zembylas et al. (2018, p. 401).

“(1) religions should be represented in the classroom as internally diverse, contested and changing rather than as essentialised systems of beliefs and practice; (2) pupils’ own ideas, experiences, and perspectives should be integral in the learning process, therefore, pupils should be enabled to interpret religious material rather than merely understand or accept it unquestionably; and (3) the interpretive process should provide opportunities for reflexivity and edification, namely, re-examining one’s own understanding of his or her worldview in relation to what one studies.”

Admittedly, it might be impossible to overlook the ‘accidentals’ of ones’ own specific religions. What might be more realistic is to help the students acknowledge that their truth claims are always partial and incomplete. What is possible is to encourage the students to exercise reflexivity and search for the presence of the transcendent, not only by reading religious texts, but also by reading literature, experiencing arts, and contemplating nature.

To do so, teachers should function as ‘pedagogical bricoleurs’, who draw on an abundance of concepts, theories, and pedagogies in their teaching (Freathy et al. 2017). As ‘pedagogical bricoleurs’, teachers should approach the particular and the universal with reflective pedagogies of contemplation and mediation (See more in Manning 2019, 2020; Simmer-Brown and Grace 2011). With these pedagogues, the particular and the universal cease to be rival moments or competing directions and become dialectic and complementary. In the dialectic movement from the particular (the Quran) to the universal (all other religious traditions) and back forth, the teachers and their students are required to engage in inter-religious dialogue and inquiry because this is their religious duty as Muslims. At the same time, they are expected to experience, as significant as possible, unmediated encounters with the Real-as-it-is-in-itself. Undoubtedly, these encounters relativize the particular religious commitment of Muslims, as it subsumes the particular tradition under the universal category of an immediate encounter with the Real, which is pre-linguistic and pre-religious, and which seems to allow for more ambivalence and doubt.

Here, the reciprocal and circular relationship between the two mementos, the universal and the particular, is similar to what exists between the part and the whole in hermeneutics. Gadamer (1989) affirmed that “we must understand the whole in terms of the detail and the detail in terms of the whole” (p. 291). Furthermore, realizing that one’s perspective limits how one thinks about the world, Gadamer argued that the interpreter must think within the culture’s ideas, thoughts, and structure. Gadamer (1976) suggested that to view a different cultural horizon, one has to change one’s vantage point. By viewing the world from different vantage points, different horizons emerge. To make these different horizons into a cohesive worldview, the interpreter must fuse them in a hermeneutical process called the fusion of horizons.
5. Instead of a Conclusion

Whatever we say or do to express our understanding of or experience with the Ultimate as it is in itself as immutable, essential, and sacred, it remains human knowledge. As such, it is always changeable, constrained, context-dependent, and a matter of degree. Put differently, this paper’s call to unmediated encounters with the Real-as-it-is-in-itself should be seen as ‘encounters to come’, an ideal to aspire to. It is a circular and reciprocal movement of tensions and balances into the continuum of the universal and the particular. This idea of the continuum is in line with the way Walzer (1997) defines toleration as a continuum extending from a minimum to a maximum: “resignation, indifference, stoicism, curiosity and enthusiasm”, and with Forst (2012) who proposes four conceptions of toleration along a similar continuum, from less to more demanding motivations grounded in permission, coexistence, respect, or esteem.

Yet, as suggested by Forst (2012), esteem needs to be constrained and qualified, as it would otherwise run the risk of exploding toleration and substituting its conceptual core with that of unqualified and enthusiastic endorsement. Hence, according to Forst, tolerance is the space between affirmation, rejection, and indifference. This space nourishes doubt and ambiguity and thus might be deeply threatening to orthodox Muslim thought. Nonetheless, it might be that the ability to contain this difficulty is what the true believer is tested about. Anas ibn Malik reported: The Messenger of Allah, peace and blessings be upon him, said, “There shall come upon the people a time in which the one who is patient upon his religion will be like the one holding onto a burning ember”.

That said, we suggest looking at the plurality of religions as part and parcel of how the Ultimate is revealed to us. Similar to standing on the edge of a breathtaking cliff or diving into colorful reefs, we are asked to contemplate the diversity of the world, including the plurality of religions in it, with healthy fear, wonder, and glory. In this sense, education for religious pluralism is a human endeavor to understand a world that is a priori pluralist and diverse. Al-Quran states that “And among his [God] wonders is the creation of the heavens and the earth, and the diversity of your tongues and colours: for in this, behold, there are messages indeed for all who are possessed of [innate] knowledge! (Al-Qur’an, 23:30). Here, God raises the status of differences in languages and colors to that of a prodigy or miraculous sign that is connected to a similar one—‘the creation of the heavens and the earth’.

Al-Quran teaches that Allah deliberately created a world of diversity. The multiplicity of races, colors, communities, and religions are the signs of God’s mercy and glory. Diversity is divinely intended. Therefore, Muslims cannot avoid it, or be neutral towards it. Rather, they are required to engage with it as ‘selective pluralists’. Al-Quran asserts:

(48) And We have revealed to you, [O Muhammad], the Book in truth, confirming that which preceded it of the Scripture and as a criterion over it. So judge between them by what Allah has revealed and do not follow their inclinations away from what has come to you of the truth. To each of you We prescribed a law and a method. Had Allah willed, He would have made you one nation [united in religion], but [He intended] to test you in what He has given you; so race to [all that is] good. To Allah is your return all together, and He will [then] inform you concerning that over which you used to differ. (Al-Qur’an, chapter 5: verse 48)

Namely, it is not your task, as a Muslim, to judge the truth and method of other religions. Conversely, your task as a Muslim is to choose your truth. To exercise choice and test human’s free will, God provided humankind with a world that is a priori pluralist in all aspects. Therefore, plurality is a ground to be explored, and pluralism is a hypothesis to be tested in search of the unity of God. Unity does not mean the unification of religions, but their existence in dialogue. This approach is in line with Nasr’s understanding of Islam:

In fact, if there is one really new and significant dimension to the religious and spiritual life of man today, it is this presence of other worlds of sacred form and meaning not as archaeological or historical facts and phenomena but as religious
reality. It is this necessity of living within one solar system and abiding by its laws yet knowing that there are other solar systems and even, by participation, coming to know something of their rhythms and harmonies, thereby gaining a vision of the haunting beauty of each one as a planetary system which is the planetary system for those living within it. It is to be illuminated by the Sun of one’s own planetary system and still to come to know through the remarkable power of intelligence, to know by anticipation and without ‘being there’ that each solar system has its own sun, which again is both a sun and the Sun, for how can the sun which rises every morning and illuminates our world be other than the Sun itself? (Nasr 1989, p. 252; cited in Aslan 2015, p. 33)

Nasr’s ecological approach seems useful to address other faiths and doctrinal differences in Islam more seriously in Islamic education. With it, it would be more reasonable to perceive the principles of Islam, whatever these are, as divine, absolute, and irrefutable, and, in parallel, to embrace difference not out of passive relativism, but out of appreciation and understanding that the form and language of the sacred in which it reveals itself is varied and might even be conflictual. Doing so, the endeavor of Islamic education would not be directed to standardize Islam into a generic and monolithic version of Islam, but to multiply our perspectives on the universe of beliefs, yet without abandoning your “sun”.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Notes
1 All verses were cited from the electronic copy of Al-Quran published by King Saud University in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. Available at http://quran.ksu.edu.sa. (Last accessed on 24 March 2022).
2 All in-text citations from the Quran include first the number of chapter, and second the of the number of the verse. For example, 15 being the chapter and 25 being the verse.

References
Adam, Anas. 2017. The concept of pluralism in Islamic education. Ar Raniry: International Journal of Islamic Studies 4: 71–86. [CrossRef]
Asani, Ali S. 2003. “So that you may know one another”: A Muslim American reflects on pluralism and Islam. The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science 588: 40–51. [CrossRef]


Kamali, Mohammad. 2018. Classical Islamic political thought and its contemporary relevance. *Islam and Civilisational Renewal (ICR)* 9: 19–46. [CrossRef]


