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“ ‘Compete with One Another in Good Works’: Exegesis on Qur’anic Verse 5: 48 and Contemporary Muslim Discourses on Religious Pluralism”

By Mun’im Sirry
(Ph D Candidate, Divinity School, University of Chicago, IL)

Abstract:

The Qur’an’s attitudes toward other religious communities have intrigued many scholars. Even within the Muslim scholarship there is not a single, final word on the Qur’an’s ethical position on how Muslims ought to treat the “Other.” Taken as a whole, these exegetical exercises and controversies may leave one utterly confused and concluding that no coherent Qur’anic view is possible, that the Qur’an - like all scriptures - contains materials to justify whatever preconceived position the reader seeks to justify. Perhaps this is true. But the notion of religious diversity suggested in Qur’anic verse 5:48 is so arresting in its breadth and its self-confidence that it demands elaboration and contextualization. This paper addresses the following two questions by examining the ideas of three modern Muslim scholars: Nurcholish Madjid (Indonesia), Asghar Ali Engineer (India), and Abdulaziz Sachedina (United States), with a special reference to their interpretation of Qur’anic verse 5:48. How do modern Muslim scholars understand this verse and use it to support the idea that Islam advocates religious pluralism? Are the modern Muslims simply superimposing modernist notions on the premodern worldview of the Qur’an? Two lines of thought will be explored. First, an examination of the classical Qur’anic exegesis on verse 5: 48 will be reviewed in order to discover the teaching of the classical authorities on Islamic scripture on modern issues. Second, an analysis of the verse in light of modern debate on whether or not Islam advocates religious pluralism will be examined. Finally, possible explanations as to why these three Muslim scholars differ in their approach to what may be referred to as the “conservative legacy” of the classical exegeses will be discussed.

“The Qur’an is but a written text between two covers [of the *mushaf*]. It does not talk, but rather the people speak through it.”¹
Ali b. Abi Talib (d. 40/661)

There has been much written about the Qur’an’s attitude toward other religion, yet Muslim discourses on religious pluralism have generally been ignored. As Yvonne Haddad puts it, “[moderate and liberal Muslim’s] reflections and debates on pluralism have been generally ignored by Western scholars and members of the media who appear to prefer to highlight the sensationalism of extremist discourse that captures the attention of Western audiences.”² Recently Muslims have been questioned for having failed to publicize the pluralistic vision and for having hesitated to use the word “pluralism”, which seems to undermine the central Islamic principle of unity or *tawhīd*. This paper discusses contemporary Muslim discourses on religious pluralism with a special reference to their interpretation of Q. 5: 48. How do modern Muslim scholars understand this verse and use it to support their ideas that Islam advocates religious pluralism? Are the modern Muslims simply superimposing modernist notions on the premodern worldview of the Qur’an? I will pursue two lines of inquiry. First, I will examine the classical Qur’anic exegesis on Q. 5: 48 to discover the teaching of the classical authorities on Islamic scripture on these issues of modern concern. Second, I will analyze the verse in the light of modern debate on the question whether or not Islam (reified, objectified, and essentialised) advocates religious pluralism. The main thrust of this paper is therefore a consideration of three Muslim perspectives on religious pluralism, namely Nurcholish Madjid (Indonesia), Asghar Ali Engineer (India), and Abdulaziz Sachedina (United States).

¹Alī b. Abī Tālib said: “*Hādhā al-qur’ān innamā huwa khatt mastūr bayna daffatain, lā yantiq, innamā yatakallam bihī al-rijāl.*” See Muhammad Ibn Jarīr al-Tabarī, *Tārīkh al-Rusul wa al-Mulūk*, (ed.) Muhammad Abu al-Fadl Ibrahim (Cairo: Dal al-Ma’arif, 1973), vol. 5, 66.

²Yvonne Haddad, *Islamists and the Challenge of Pluralism* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University, 1995), 4.

Classical Exegeses on Q. 5: 48

The first question intrigues the classical exegetes is to whom the verse is addressed. For this purpose, the verse can be divided into two parts: First is: “*We have revealed to you the Book with truth, confirming the Book that came before it, and guarding it (muhaimin ‘alaih): so judge between them by what God has revealed, and do not follow their vain desires, diverging from the truth that has come to you*”, and second: “*For each one of you We have appointed a law (shir‘a) and a way (minhāj). If God had so willed, He would have made you a single people (umma wāhida), but (His plan is) to test you in what He has given you: so compete with one another in good works (khayrāt). The goal of you all is to God. It is He that will show you the truth of the matters in which you dispute*”. All classical exegetes agree that the first part is addressed to Muhammad, however, they differ on the second part. Is it addressed to the people of Muhammad or to them and others? If it is to the people of Muhammad and others, then who are those others?

For Muqātil b. Sulaymān (d. 150/767), “*wa likullin ja‘alnā minkum*” means “the Muslims and the people of the Book”, without explaining who would include “people of the Book.”³ Both Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 707/1209) and Tabarsī (d. 548/1153) specify that this part of the verse is addressed to three groups of peoples (*khitāb li al-umam al-thalāth*), namely the people of Moses, the people of Jesus, and the people of Muhammad, for a simple reason that the three peoples have been mentioned in previous verses.⁴ Tabarī (d. 310/923), however, narrates a statement from Mujāhid that the verse is addressed to the people of Muhammad alone. In this way, the verse should be read to mean: “We have made the Book that We sent it upon Our Prophet for everyone of you, O people.” It means: God has made the Qur’an for everyone who embraces Islam as a law

³ Muqātil b. Sulaymān, *Tafsīr Muqātil bin Sulaymān*, (ed.) Dr. Abdullah Shahhatah, (Cairo: Dar al-Nahda, 1979), vol. 1, 381-2.

⁴ Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *al-Tafsīr al-Kabīr* (Beirut: Dar Ihya al-Turath, 1980), vol. 12, 12; Tabarsī, *Majma’ al-Bayan* (Cairo: Dar al-taqrib, 1960), vol. 3, 407.

and a way.⁵ Tabarī rejects this view by problematizing that the people of Muhammad are already a single people, how comes the Qur’an then says: “*If God had so willed, He would have made you a single people*”. The same argument put forth by Ibn Kathīr (d. 774/1373), though he has something else in mind, that is, that the validity of each people’s religious messages has been abrogated by the later one, until the time when Muhammad was sent to abrogate (*nasakha*) all previous religions.⁶ It seems that Ibn Kathīr is very much “obsessed” with this idea of abrogation, as will be discussed in more detail later. A reversal of all these exegeses is to be found in Zamakhsharī’s treatment of this verse. Rather than specifying the audience of this part, Zamakhsharī (d. 538/1144) simply says that it is generally addressed to the people (*al-nās*). This is consistent with his argument that it is for human interests that the *sharī‘a* varies from time to time and from one situation to another throughout the history of humanity.⁷

Major issues discussed by the classical exegetes are the meaning of “muḥaimin”, “shir‘a”, “umma wāhida”, and “al-khayrāt”, all of which will be discussed briefly in this study. On the meaning of “muḥaimin”, the classical exegeses can be classified into three groups. The first group, represented by Muqātil, Tabarī, and Tabarsī, are those who emphasize that the Qur’an testifies the fact that the Book revealed before it comes from God. They use different expressions, such as “*shāhid ‘alaiḥ*” (Muqātil and Tabarsī), “*mu’tamin ‘alaiḥ*”, “*amīn ‘alaiḥ*” (Tabarī), all of which refer to the point that the Qur’an affirms and verifies that all scriptures revealed before the Qur’an are from God. The second, represented by Zamakhsharī and Rāzī, are those who argue that the Qur’an does not only confirm the Books revealed before it as coming from God, but it also testifies for their soundness and correctness. As Zamakhsharī put it, the Qur’an is “guarding all

⁵ Tabarī, *Jāmi’ al-Bayān ‘an Ta’wīl Āy al-Qur’ān*, (ed.) Dr. Abdullah al-Muhsin al-Turkī, (Riyadh: Dar al-alam al-kutub, 2003), vol. 8, 494-5

⁶ Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr al-Qur’ān al-‘Azīm*, (ed.) Muhammad Husein Shams al-Din, (Beirut: Dar al-kutub, 1998), vol. 3, 118

⁷ Zamakhsharī, *al-Kashshāf*, (eds.) Adil Ahmad and Ali Muhammad, (Riyadh: Maktaba al-‘Ubayka, 1998), vol. 2, 246.

Books since it testifies for their soundness (*sihba*) and firmness (*thabāt*).⁸ Therefore, according to Rāzī, “the truth (*haqīqa*) of these Books is known forever (*ma'lūma abadan*).”⁹ The third, represented by Qurtubī (d. 671/1272) and Ibn Kathīr, are those who accentuate the Qur’anic judgment over the previous Books. Qurtubī conceives of “*muhaiminan ‘alaih*” to mean the superiority of the Qur’an over other scriptures (*‘aliyan ‘alaiha wa murtafi’an*).¹⁰ Ibn Kathīr has a similar view. After citing Ibn Abbās who is reported to have said “[*muhaiminan*] *ay hākiman ‘alā mā qablabū min al-ḳutub* (*muhaimin* means “judging over the Books that have been revealed before it),” he goes on to say: “God has made this great Book [the Qur’an] which He has revealed as the last of the Books (*ākhir al-ḳutub*), their seal (*ḳhātimahā*), and the most comprehensive (*ashmalahā*), greatest (*a‘zamahā*), and the most complete (*akmalahā*), therein contains all good things of what have been revealed before it. God added to the Qur’an the perfections (*ḳamālāt*) which are not in other Books.”¹¹ Ibn Kathīr wrongly attributes to Ibn Jarīr [Ṭabarī] the statement “the Qur’an is assuring the previous Books, and whatever of them complies with the Qur’an is truth and whatever contradicts it is fault.” In fact, this is not Ṭabarī’s view, but rather he quotes it from Ibn Jurajj.¹²

Most of the exegetes examined in this study spend a great deal in discussing the terms “*shir‘a*” and “*minhāj*”. Some exegetes begin with etymological analysis of the two terms. Ṭabarī, Rāzī, and Qurtubī come to the conclusion that “*shir‘a*” and “*sharī‘a*” have the same meaning (*ma’nā wāhid*). While Ṭabarī and Rāzī do not provide a terminological definition of “*shir‘a*”, Qurtubī defines it as “*shir‘a* and *sharī‘a* are the clear way through which they can lead to salvation (*najāh*).” He then gives the meaning of the verse: “that God has made the Torah for its people, the Gospel for its people and so the Qur’an for its people; and this is in terms of laws and rituals. The

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Rāzī, *al-Taḥsīn al-Kabīr*, 11.

¹⁰ Qurtubī, *al-Jāmi‘ li Ahkām al-Qur‘ān*, (ed.) Abd al-Razzaq al-Mahdi, (Beirut: Dar al-ḳitab al-‘Arabi, 1997), vol. 5, 198.

¹¹ Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr al-Qur‘ān*, 116

¹² Ṭabarī, *Jāmi‘ al-Bayān*, 487.

foundation is the *tawhīd* in which there is no difference.”¹³ It is worth mentioning that Muqātil, though he is the earliest one among the classical exegetes examined in this study, provides much more a detail account of the different *shari‘a* of the three “Abrahamic religions”, says:

The *shari‘a* of the people of the Torah on [the punishment for] unlawful killing is retribution (*qisās*) with no blood money (*diyya*), and stoning for married man and woman who committed an adultery. The *shari‘a* of the people of the Gospel on [the punishment for] unlawful killing is forgiveness, no *qisās* for them nor blood money, and their *shari‘a* on adultery is whipping (*jald*) without stoning. The *shari‘a* of the people of Muhammad, peace be upon him, on [the punishment for] unlawful killing is *qisās*, blood money, and forgiveness, and their *shari‘a* on the adultery is whipping for unmarried and stoning for married [men and women].¹⁴

All exegetes agree that as Muhammad and his people are not obliged to follow the *shari‘a* of the previous people, other peoples are also not obliged to follow Muhammad’s *shari‘a*. As Rāzī put it, the Qur’anic expression “*For each one of you We have appointed a law and a way*” is an indication that “every prophet is autonomous with a specific *shari‘a*, and that excludes the people of any Prophet from being accountable for the *shari‘a* of other Prophet.”¹⁵ For Tabarī, the question of the divergence of *shari‘as* is related to the next Qur’anic term “*umma wāhida*”, and therefore he explicates the Qur’anic expression “*wa law shā’a Allāh la ja’alakum ummatan wāhidah*” as follows: “Had God so willed, He would have made your *shari‘as* a single...; so that you would be a single people with no divergence in your *shari‘as* and ways. But God knows and He has made your *shari‘as* diverge so that He might test you whom of you obey and disobey.”¹⁶ Zamakhsharī offers more pluralistic vision by arguing that the test is whether or not the people carry it out believing that it is for human interest that the *shari‘a* diverges from time to time and acknowledging that God has not intended with the divergence of *shari‘as* except what necessitates wisdom (*hikmah*).¹⁷

¹³ Qurtubī, *al-Jāmi‘ li Ahkām al-Qur’ān*, 119.

¹⁴ Muqātil, *Tafsīr Muqātil*, 482.

¹⁵ Rāzī, *al-Tafsīr al-Kabīr*, 12.

¹⁶ Tabarī, *Jāmi‘ al-Bayān*, 498-9.

¹⁷ Zamakhsharī, *al-Kashshaf*, 247.

Latter exegetes revisit the seemingly pluralistic vision of Zamakhsharī. Qurtubī, for instance, argues that the divergence of *shari'as* insures no truth in each *shari'a*. He says that God intended with the divergence of *shari'as* to see those who believe and who disbelieve. It seems that by the time of Qurtubī, the idea of supersession of the previous scripture had been developed, at least, that Qurtubī makes a clear statement to that effect. Prior to him, Tabarsī has also talked about the issue of abrogation, but in a vague term. It is not clear whether he means that the *shari'a* of Muhammad abrogates the previous ones. Referring to the Qur'anic expression “*For each one of you We have appointed a law and a way*”, Tabarsī says: “In this verse there is an indication of the possibility of the abrogation (*al-nasakh*) and that our Prophet was but obliged to his own *shari'a* and so his people.”¹⁸ It is Qurtubī who narrates the statement of Mujāhid who said: “*shir'a* and *minhaj* is the religion of Muhammad, and all other religions have been abrogated by it.”¹⁹ Interestingly, the notion of abrogation or supersession that Qurtubī attributes to Mujāhid cannot be found in Tabarī's narration of several statements by Mujāhid. Similarly, Ibn Kathīr interprets this verse in relation with the notion of abrogation. For Ibn Kathīr, this part of the verse means that God is able to make all peoples on a single religion and *shari'a*, nothing abrogated from it, “but He prescribed for every Prophet a specific *shari'a*, then He abrogated it or part of it through the message of other [prophet] who came after him, until He abrogated all of the previous *shari'as* through His servant and messenger Muhammad, peace be upon him.”²⁰ Also Ibn Kathīr's consideration of the expression “*so compete with one another in good works*” differs markedly from those of other exegetes. While most exegetes interpret “*khayrāt*” as good works (*a'māl shāliha*), Ibn Kathīr interprets it as “obedience to God (*tā'at Allāh*).” For Ibn Kathīr, what constitutes or defines *khayrāt* is “obedience to God and following His *shari'a* that He has made it as an abrogator (*nāsikh*) of what

¹⁸ Tabarsī, *Majma' al-Bayān*, 407.

¹⁹ Qurtubī, *al-Jāmi' li Ahkām al-Qur'ān*, 199.

²⁰ Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān*, 118.

has been revealed before it, and belief in His Book, the Qur'an, which is the last Book He has revealed."²¹

From this brief exploration, it would be disingenuous to deny that the Qur'an and other Islamic sources offer possibilities for intolerant interpretation. In the tradition of the Qur'anic exegesis, even texts that obviously accept religious differences such as 5: 48 have been explained differently. I would agree with Dr. Abou el Fadl that "the meaning of the text is often only as moral as its reader. If the reader is intolerant, hateful, or oppressive, so will be the interpretation of the text."²² Alī b. Abī Tālib is reported to have said: "The Qur'an does not talk, but rather the people speak through it."²³ In what follows, we will discuss the interpretation of three Muslim scholars who have been known for their pluralist visions in understanding the Qur'an.

Nurcholish Madjid and Q. 5: 48

Madjid is one of the main proponents of religious pluralism in contemporary Indonesian Islam. He has not written any formal work on *tafsir*, however, he uses and interprets the Qur'an to discover appropriate responses to the challenges facing the Muslim community in Indonesia.²⁴ For Madjid, religious pluralism is rooted in the Qur'an's explicit acceptance of religious diversity: "*For each of you We have appointed a law and a way*". So Q. 5: 48 is a central to his argument that religious pluralism is God's design for humanity. He says, "the Qur'an acknowledges that plurality is a fact of life and part of the order of the world. This plurality manifests in, among other things, religious

²¹ Ibid.

²² Khaled Abou el Fadl, *The Place of Tolerance in Islam* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2002), 23.

²³ Cited by al-Tabarī in his *Tārīkh al-Rusul wa al-Mulūk*, (ed.) Muhammad Abu al-Fadl Ibrahim (Cairo: Dal al-Ma'arif, 1973), vol. 5, 66.

²⁴ For a brief, yet useful discussion on Madjid's approach to the Qur'an, see Anthony H. John and Abdullah Saeed, "Nurcholish Madjid and the Interpretation of the Qur'an: Religious Pluralism and Tolerance," in Suha Taji-Farouki (ed.), *Modern Muslim Intellectuals and the Qur'an*, (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2004): 67-96.

diversity.”²⁵ He particularly refers to Q. 5: 48 which in his view “God had given different revelations which led to the founding of different religions to see who is more obedient to Him.”²⁶

Madjid’s approach to the question of religious pluralism in Islam is theological in nature. While he acknowledges religious pluralism as a fact of social realities, he also admits that all religions of all prophets share what he calls the “universal way”, which is a path to God. He elaborates this by saying:

It is extremely important to understand that a (true) religion is ‘the way’, which is the basic idea of such terms as *shari’a*, *sira*, *sabil*, *tariqa*, *minhaj*, *mansak* in Islam, *tao* in Chinese religion, and *dharma* in Indic religions, both Hinduism and Buddhism. It is also the principle behind the famous sacred saying of Jesus Christ in the Gospel that he is ‘the way’, since he is the one to be followed in his exemplary activities of doing good to humanity in love and compassion, as is mentioned in the Qur’an.²⁷

This is to some extent a departure from the classical exegeses that emphasize “the *tawhid*” as the main shared element in all religions of all prophets. Besides the “universal way” shared by all religion, Madjid also mentions the “particular way” that varies from one religion to another. With these two elements, he argues, the followers of religions should share and maintain the universal way and, at the same time, benefit from the variations in practice, as all strive for the accomplishment of the principle of actualizing “*khayrat* (good works).” With reference to Q. 5: 48, Madjid argues that “it is God’s prerogative to know and explain in the next life, why people are so different from each other.”²⁸

Madjid is aware that his view might not be welcomed by all Indonesian Muslims, but he believes that “quite a number of them are at least aware of these discussions, especially those of the

²⁵ Nurcholish Madjid, “Interpreting the Qur’anic Principle of Religious Pluralism,” in Abdullah Saeed (ed.), *Approaches to the Qur’an in Contemporary Indonesia*, (London: Oxford University Press, 2005), 209.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid., 210.

²⁸ Nurcholish Madjid, “Islamic Roots of Modern Pluralism: Indonesian Experiences”, *Studia Islamika* 1 (April-June, 1994), 73.

younger generations with a background in modern Islamic education.”²⁹ In fact, Madjid has been accused of equating all religions and promoting relativism in Islam, an accusation that is simply out of touch with his main arguments. His discussion on “the universal” and “particular” elements in all religions clearly indicates that he is not considering all religions are the same, but rather each religious tradition, though incommensurable, encompasses a path to salvation of equal worth and benefit. Madjid distinguishes between “religion” and “human understanding of it”, the former is absolutely true while the latter is relative. He argues, therefore, that no one can claim the monopoly of the absolute truth since what he claims to be the truth is nothing more than his own understanding of it. To capsule his argument, the Qur’an presents the thesis of unity within the framework of religious and cultural pluralism.

From this theological point of view, Madjid moves on to discuss how the Qur’anic model of religious pluralism has been implemented in early Muslim societies. The *mithāq al-madīna* (the constitution of Medina) promulgated by the Prophet, according to Madjid, affirms this acceptance of pluralism to the extent that many Western scholars amazed by its being the first political document that established the principle of religious tolerance.³⁰ Among the Western scholars who he cites most is the famous American sociologist Robert Bellah, along with a Jewish scholar Max Dimont, who testifies that: “There is no question that under Muhammad, Arabian society made a remarkable leap forward in social complexity and political capacity.... It is modern in the high degree of commitment, involvement, and participation expected from the rank-and-file members of the community.... *It was too modern to succeed*” (emphasis from Madjid).³¹ Max Dimont is also cited by Madjid as having said, “the Islamic Empire became a tolerant haven for businessmen,

²⁹ Madjid, “Interpreting the Qur’anic Principle of Religious Pluralism,” p. 220; see also Madjid, “Islamic Roots of Modern Pluralism: Indonesian Experiences”, 75.

³⁰ Madjid, *Islam: Doktrin and Peradaban* (Jakarta: Paramadina, 1992), 195.

³¹ Madjid, *Islam: Doktrin and Peradaban*, 114; Cf. Robert N. Bellah, *Beyond Belief* (New York: Harper & Row, 1976): 150-51.

intellectuals, and artists of all faiths.”³² This scholarly acknowledgment, Madjid argues, should encourage Muslims to address the issue of religious pluralism in order to adapt to modernity.

Ashgar Ali Engineer and Q. 5: 48

Engineer is best described as a public intellectual or scholar-activist in contemporary India. Lacking a traditional Islamic education, his understanding of Islam grows out of his close involvement with movements struggling for social justice and reform and from his own study of the Islamic tradition. However, he is the most well-known Muslim proponent of religious pluralism in India today.³³ Like Madjid, his main contribution is in articulating a contextual hermeneutic of the Qur’an, one that, he believes, can help guide Muslims in dealing with the challenges of contemporary life. Of the three scholars examined in this study, he is the one who discusses Q. 5: 48 fully in one chapter of his book *Rational Approach to Islam* (2001).

Undoubtedly, Q. 5: 48 is a focal point for his argument. For him, this verse is “very seminal statement in favor of religious and legal pluralism which Muslims, specially the Muslim regimes, have not considered seriously.”³⁴ The most significant and operative part of the verse, according to Engineer, is “*For every one of you We have appointed a law and a way.*” Every community – obviously religious and religio-cultural community – has its own law (*shir‘a*) and its own way of life (*minhāj*) and it attains its spiritual growth in keeping with this law and way of life of its own. He goes on to say that it was not difficult for God to make the entire mankind one community, but He graced us with pluralism as it adds richness and variety to life. Reflecting on the phrase “*fa al-istabiqū al-khayrāt*”, he says:

The Qur’an does not take narrow sectarian view as many theologians tend to do. It possesses very broad humanitarian view and lays emphasis not on dogma, but on good

³² Max I. Dimont, *Indestructible Jews* (New York: New American Library, 1973), 183.

³³ For a brief discussion on Ashgar Ali Engineer’s approach to the Qur’an, see Yogindar Sikkand, *Muslims in India since 1947: Islamic Perspectives on Inter-Faith Relations* (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2004): 12-30.

³⁴ Ashgar Ali Engineer, *Rational Approach to Islam* (New Delhi: Gyan Publishing House, 2001), 148.

deeds. And it strongly condemns evil deeds which harms the society and humanity at large. In this respect also it makes no distinction between Muslims and non-Muslims.³⁵

In fashioning a theology of religious pluralism, Engineer addresses the central question of the nature of truth. Is the truth one or many? Is the truth absolute or relative? Can one religion claim to possess the whole truth? Responding to these questions, Engineer makes more explicit statement about the unity of religion than Madjid does. For Engineer, Q. 5: 48 leads to what some scholars like Shah Waliullah (d. 1762) and Maulana Abul Kalam Azad (d. 1958) from India have described as the concept of *wahdat-e-din*, i.e., unity of religion.³⁶ He says, “the *shari‘a*, the law, and the way of life may be different as we have discussed above, but the essence of all religions – *din*— is the same.”³⁷ Unfortunately, Engineer does not elaborate further what he meant by the notion of unity of religion. In his other book *On Developing Theology of Peace in Islam* (2005), Engineer attempts to contextualize the meaning of 5: 48 to more concrete issue facing India, that is, religious tension. He argues that God has created different religions and different communities for testing us, whether we human beings can live in peace and harmony. Had we concentrated in good works (*khayrat*), he contends, we would not have witnessed such intense religious conflict.³⁸

While Engineer’s argument of the unity of the religious essence (*tawhid*) is strictly Qur’anic, he does not pay sufficient attention to the Qur’anic account on how and why the historical religions differ from each other despite their common origins in the primal *din*. I think Engineer would agree that the differences between the different historical religions could not be denied. He does emphasize that humans should not fuss to prove the superiority of one’s religion over the others, but instead, “*compete with one another in good works.*” He says “it is not for human beings to decide for themselves who is right or wrong [since it] will lead to disturbances and breach of

³⁵ Ibid., 151.

³⁶ See Engineer, “Maulana Abul Kalam Azad and His Concept of unity of Religion”, *Islam and Modern Age*, 1-12 (December, 1998).

³⁷ Engineer, *Rational Approach to Islam*, 149.

³⁸ Engineer, *On Developing Theology of Peace in Islam* (New Delhi: Sterling Publishers, 2005), 52.

peace.”³⁹ It is for God alone to judge where the religions differ and to decide which one is true or possesses a greater degree of truth.

Abdulaziz Sachedina and Q. 5: 48

Sachedina is a Tanzanian-born American Muslim scholar who argues vigorously that a careful reading of the Qur’an as a whole provides strong grounds for “democratic pluralism” in which Muslims and non-Muslims enjoy equal rights. Sachedina’s argument is premised on a disjunction between the original teaching of the Qur’an and the historical development of exegetical and juristic thought.⁴⁰ While the Qur’an, on his reading, is strongly supportive of religious pluralism, Muslim exegetes and jurists have attempted “to devise terminological as well as methodological stratagems for deemphasizing the ecumenical passages of the Qur’an that extend salvific authentic and adequacy to other monotheistic traditions.”⁴¹ Islam’s readiness to recognize the legitimacy of other religions’ path to salvation, Sachedina contends, has been obscured by the theological controversy over “supersession”: whether the Qur’anic revelation supersedes or abrogates all other revelations.⁴²

It is in this context that Q. 5: 48 is crucial for Sachedina’s main argument. Like Madjid and Engineer, Sachedina argues that religious pluralism is “a divinely ordained system.” Chapter 3 of his *The Islamic Roots of Democratic Pluralism* (2001) begins with this verse in which he calls “*fa istabiqū al-ḵbayrāt*” as “the Islamic paradigm of common morality.”⁴³ Sachedina is critical to the post-Qur’anic discriminatory regulations, and arguing that “most of the past juridical decisions treating

³⁹ Engineer, *Rational Approach to Islam*, 149.

⁴⁰ Muhammad Qasim Zaman, “Pluralism, Democracy, and the ‘*Ulama*,” in Robert Hefner (ed.), *Remaking Muslim Politics: Pluralism, Contestation, Democratization*, (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2005), 60.

⁴¹ Abdulaziz Sachedina, *The Islamic Roots of Democratic Pluralism* (London: Oxford University Press, 2001), 29.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 28.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 70.

non-Muslim minorities have become irrelevant in the context of contemporary religious pluralism.”⁴⁴ Reflecting on Q. 5: 48, he says:

Qur’anic pluralism was founded on the ethical principle of doing good works. Its conception of universal moral order was grounded on the recognition of a nature common to all humans. It views this common nature as endowed with ethical cognition and the capacity to reason morally in order to do good.⁴⁵

For Sachedina, to be a pluralist is not merely to be a tolerant. Religious pluralism calls for active engagement with the religious other not merely to tolerate, but to understand. He strongly believes that religious pluralism can function as a working paradigm for a democratic, social pluralism in which people of diverse religious backgrounds are willing to form a community of global citizens. Within this framework, he argues that the Qur’an presents its theology of the other in the form of an ethical model in developing a workable paradigm for an ideal society.⁴⁶ What is not clear in Sachedina’s framework, however, is whether this “ideal” Qur’anic model of pluralism has ever been materialized throughout Islamic history. Is the constitution of Medina, for instance, the real manifestation of the Qur’anic pluralism? Sachedina does not offer an answer to this question, other than criticizing Muslim jurists and rulers of Muslim majority states who typically privileged Muslims over non-Muslims.

Interestingly, instead of talking about some examples of tolerance in early Islam, as Madjid does, Sachedina mentions discriminatory regulations practiced in early Islam. He talks about the Pact of the second caliph Umar b. Khattāb (d. 24/644), known as *surut ‘Umarīyya*, for the people of Syria which contains some discriminatory provisions such as the prohibition against building new

⁴⁴ Ibid., 68.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 69. For a short version of his view on religious pluralism in the Qur’an, see Sachedina, *The Qur’an on Religious Pluralism*” (Washington, DC: Georgetown University, 1999).

⁴⁶ Sachedina, *The Islamic Roots of Democratic Pluralism*, 35.

churches or repairing old ones.⁴⁷ He also discusses the *millet* system under the Ottoman Empire which only allows a limited freedom for non-Muslim *dhimmis*. These policies of discrimination, he argues, were “because the *shari‘a* never accepted the equality of believers and non-believers.”⁴⁸ Contrary to the pluralistic spirit of the Qur’an, he further argues, Muslim jurists encouraged a state-sponsored institutionalization of the inferiority of non-Muslims as necessary for the well-being of the Muslim public order, which eventually led to the contemptuous attitude toward non-Muslim minorities. He gives the example of apostasy. While the Qur’an (2: 217) does not prescribe a worldly punishment for apostasy, Muslim jurists were busy in discussing the capital punishment for it. Sachedina acknowledges that there was a precedence of the wars of apostasy (*ridda*) in the aftermath of the Prophet which unfortunately served as a justification for the jurists to codify the criminalization of apostasy. Clearly, the problem is that while the Qur’an favored an overall tolerance of religious pluralism, the social ethics delineated by the Muslim jurists regarded pluralism as a source of instability in the Muslim public order.⁴⁹ This negative attitude, arising from the spirit of enforced uniformity and stability in the community, also extended to fellow believers who failed to meet the criteria of pure faith, which puts the cornerstone of Qur’anic pluralism at stake.

Encountering the Legacy of the Past

Clearly, the issue for Sachedina is how to encounter what we may call the “conservative legacy” of the past. By this I mean that while these scholars rightly draw plentiful resources of

⁴⁷ Ibid., 65-8. For a good discussion on *surut ‘Umariyyah*, see: Milka Ley-Rubin, “*Shurut ‘Umar* and Its Alternatives: the Legal Debate on the Status of *Dhimmis*”, *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam*, 30 (2005): 171-206.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 97.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 100. On his elaborated discussion on apostasy in Islam, see Sachedina, “Freedom of Conscience and Religion in the Qur’an,” in Sachedina, Little, and Kelsay (eds.), *Human Rights and the Conflict of Cultures: Western and Islamic Perspectives in Religious Liberty*, (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1988): 53-90.

religious pluralism in the Qur'an, yet the tradition of the Qur'anic exegesis strains to prove the opposite. As discussed earlier, Q. 5: 48 is so arresting in its breadth, clarity, and self-confidence that it would seem to leave little room for controversy, yet again, mainstream Qur'anic interpreters found ways to problematize it by suggesting that with the advent of the Muslim community, all other previously valid courses had been annulled by Islam. Sachedina's endeavor to encounter the conservative legacy is applaudable for the Qur'an still speaks to millions of the faithful through the voices of its classical commentators.

Sachedina's criticism of the classical exegesis revolves around the notion of supersession. He argues that the Qur'an is silent on the question of the supersession of the previous Abrahamic revelations through the emergence of Muhammad. On the contrary, he says, even when repudiating the distortion introduced in the divine message by the followers of Moses and Jesus, the Qur'an confirms the validity of these revelations and their central theme, namely, submission founded on sincere profession of belief in God. However, he contends, some classical Muslim scholars of the Qur'an attempted to separate the salvation history of the community from other Abrahamic faiths by attesting to the superseding validity of the Islamic revelation over Christianity and Judaism.⁵⁰ Since the idea of supersession is not Qur'anic, he suggests that it "must have entered Muslim circles through the ardent Christian debates about Christianity having superseded Judaism...."⁵¹ He particularly criticizes Tabarī and Ibn Kathīr who argued that Q. 3: 84 "*whoever seeks a religion other than Islam, it will not be accepted from him*" abrogates other verses (2: 62; 5: 69) that guarantee other religions ways to salvation, which leads to the exclusive salvific efficacy of Islam. Sachedina contends that this view is, to say the least, debatable.

⁵⁰ Sachedina, *The Qur'an on Religious Pluralism*, 16.

⁵¹ Sachedina, *The Islamic Roots of Democratic Pluralism*, 32.

Unlike Sachedina, Madjid proposes a different reading of the legacy of the past generation. Not only is the past generation a resourceful for Madjid, but also inspirational for promoting a genuine “Islamic” pluralism. For him, the Islam of earlier times seems to be more tolerant than that of the later times. He agrees with Bernard Lewis who says “in earlier times a good deal of easy social intercourse amongst Muslims, Christians, and Jews who, while professing differences, formed a single society...”⁵² He argues that it is possible that the classical Muslims fully internalized such a positive and optimistic conception of humanity that the Qur’an envisions, “a conception which then made them such a cosmopolitan and universalist community that they were ready to learn and adopt anything valuable from the experiences of other communities.”⁵³ According to Madjid, there are several instances of Islamic pluralism and tolerance in the past. In addition to the constitution of Medina, he also mentions a Pact of Umar b. Khattāb which contains the principle of religious freedom guaranteed for the people of Jerusalem.⁵⁴ Madjid picks up an interesting example. He never talks about the Pact of Umar that Sachedina uses as an example of “the discriminatory regulation in exchange for protection” which resulted in “outright persecution of those who professed other religion.”⁵⁵ Instead, Madjid provides a lengthy discussion of another Pact of the same Umar that guarantees religious freedom. According to Madjid, when Muslims took Jerusalem in 638, Umar sent the inhabitants of the city the following written message:

⁵² Bernard Lewis, *The Jews of Islam*, (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1987), 56.

⁵³ Madjid, “Islamic Roots of Modern Pluralism: Indonesian Experiences”, p. 68. I think Madjid’s observation is well taken. If we consider the seven exegetes examined in this study chronologically, Muqātil, Tabarī, Tabarsī, Zamakhsharī, Rāzī, Qurtubī, and Ibn Kathīr, we may say that to a certain extent Muqātil is the most tolerant among them, while Ibn Kathīr is the most intolerant. However, I don’t have conclusive evidences of this tendency, since I confine my study only on one particular verse, i.e. Q. 5: 48. A thoroughly and careful study is needed to conclude with more confident way.

⁵⁴ Madjid, *Islam: Doktrin and Peradaban*, p. 193-94. Cf. Muhammad Hamidullah, *Majmu’at al-Qatha’iq al-Siyasiyyah li al-‘Ahd al-Nabawi wa al-Khilafah al-Rashidah*, (Beirut: Dar al-Irshad, 1969), 379-80.

⁵⁵ Sachedina, *The Islamic Roots of Democratic Pluralism*, 68.

In the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate. This is a written document from Umar b. Khattab to the inhabitants of the sacred house (*bayt al-maqdis*). You are guaranteed (*āminin*) your life, your goods, and your churches, which will be neither occupied nor destroyed, as long as you do not initiate anything [to endanger] the general security.⁵⁶

It is worth mentioning that some of Madjid's arguments are grounded on Ibn Kathīr's teacher, the famous Hanbali scholar Ibn Taymiyya (d. 728/1328).⁵⁷ It was Ibn Taymiyya, according to Madjid, who says that the previous holy books still contain divine wisdom, and that such teachings are still binding on the followers of those books as well as on Muslims. Ibn Taymiyya even insists that the view of the majority of the early Muslims, the *salaf* and the imams, was to hold that the *shara'* of the people before Islam is also the *shara'* of the Muslims – as long as the *shara'* of Islam does not supply new teachings that would abrogate the previous revelation.⁵⁸ When Madjid's interpretation of "islām" in Q. 3: 19 as "submission to God", rather than the institutionalized Islam, engenders a wide controversy in the country, Madjid responds to his critics by saying that Ibn Taymiyya had a similar view of Islam. He says "Ibn Taymiyya understood "islām" to mean *istislām* (submission) and *inqiyād* (obedience), all of which refer to self-surrender to the Almighty God."⁵⁹

What accounts for Sachedina and Madjid's different approaches to the legacy of the early generations? There are of course a number of possible explanations, however, one of which has something to do with the different intended audience of their respective works. Living in one of the most populous Muslim countries, Madjid faces different situations from that of Sachedina. First, Madjid is one of the most controversial figures in the Indonesian intellectual history since the late 60s when he introduced the idea of secularization of Islam. Second, he begins promoting the idea of religious pluralism after he came back from his studies at the University of Chicago, USA.

⁵⁶ Madjid, *Islam: Doktrin and Perdaban*, 193.

⁵⁷ Madjid wrote his PhD dissertation on "Ibn Taymiyya on *Kalām* and *Falsafa*: a Problem of Reason and Revelation in Islam", unpublished dissertation, Department of Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations, University of Chicago, 1984.

⁵⁸ Madjid, "Interpreting the Qur'anic Principle of Religious Pluralism," 120.

⁵⁹ Madjid, *Islam: Doktrin and Perdaban*, 182. Cf. Ibn Taymiyya, *Iqtidā' al-Sirāt al-Mustaqīm*, (Beirut: Dar al-Fikr, n.d.), 454-55.

So there are two labels attributed to him by his critics: secular and westernized! It is therefore understandable that Madjid feels the need to legitimize his thought by grounding it on the most acclaimed authorities in Islam. His reference to the *mīthāq al-madīna* and Ibn Taymiyya is appealing. Contrary to many of his critics, his ideas are not secular. His agenda is to restore a Medina-like Islamic community which, he believes, is tolerant, democratic, and pluralistic. Ibn Taymiyya is a very popular among Islamist conservatives. What Madjid tries to do is to demonstrate that there was a wellspring of pluralist values even in Ibn Taymiyya's work, particularly regarding relations with non-Muslims. In other words, Madjid feels that he needs to authenticate his progressive thinking by referring to the earlier Muslim generations.

Engineer's position is similar to that of Madjid. Having said that the Qur'anic affirmation of religious pluralism has not been recognized by many Muslims, he notes, "yet commentaries on this verse [5: 48], both by classical and modern scholars, abound."⁶⁰ He also calls *mīthāq al-madīna* as "a pluralist constitution."⁶¹ Engineer may have a limited access to the classical sources, however, he can find the authoritative sources within his own heritage. His reference to Shah Waliyullah and Abul Kalam Azad is also appealing. I believe that the socio-political context of India makes his reference to both Waliyullah and Azad significant.⁶² On the other hand, Sachedina does not face the same situation that Madjid and Engineer do. What concerns Sachedina is probably the absence of democratic pluralism in the Muslim world, which can be traced back to the early Muslim juridical and political literatures. In his eyes, Muslim political thinkers from al-Māwardī (d.

⁶⁰ Engineer, "Islam and Religious Pluralism", in Paul F. Knitter (ed.), *The Myth of Religious Superiority* (New York: Orbis Books, 2005), 212.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 216.

⁶² Engineer makes several references to both Waliyullah and Azad when dealing with the idea of the unity of religion. In his most recent book *Islam in Contemporary World* (2007), he says "Hazrat Shah Waliyullah, Maulana Azad, and other eminent Islamic thinkers have stressed *wahdat-e-din* (unity of all religions)." While Waliyullah is the earliest Muslim revivalist of the eighteen-century India subcontinent, Azad is one of those enigmatic Muslim figures in the twentieth-century India. An ardent Muslim, yet he vehemently opposed the partition of Pakistan, and instead he joined with, and became the president of, the National Indian Congress, which is predominantly Hindu in its organization. Engineer does not show any critical stance toward his predecessors, instead he admires them to give a sense of authenticity to his ideas within the Indian Islam context.

450/1058) through al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111) to Ibn Taymiyya tended to legitimate any political regime that would guarantee a modicum of protection to Muslim institutions⁶³ in the expense of discriminating others. What is the highest risk of critiquing Muslim jurists and rulers? He may be denied of entering into Iran or Pakistan. In 1998, Ayatollah Ali Sistani of Najaf, Iraq, issued a fatwa against Professor Sachedina, prohibiting him from presenting any lectures or teaching on the subject of Islam. But nothing is to worry about that. He lives in Virginia, USA, and enjoys the scholarly freedom that cannot be found even in a country like Indonesia or India.

Another way to look at their different approaches is to read them as a result of different methodologies they employ to deal with the question of religious pluralism in Islam. The three Muslim scholars are not exegetes, and that their treatment of the Qur'an does not derive directly from any one stream of the diverse traditions of Qur'anic exegesis. Rather, they combine Qur'anic-inspired commentary with practical political analysis and sophisticated social theory. Madjid, for instance, is very appreciative for the classical sources as he combines between traditionalism and modernism to form what has been called "neo-modernism", a term invented by his intellectual mentor Dr. Fazlur Rahman at the University of Chicago. Neo-modernism, according to Madjid, is a modernism that is deeply rooted in tradition, and serves as a corrective to the unbridled modernism which had emerged before.⁶⁴

Conclusion

My own approach to Q. 5: 48 and its exegesis is to assess the verse in the light of more recent theories about the relation of a text to its reader. The exegesis is the product of its own time and place. Even some of the Qur'anic verses reflect the circumstances of their time and place they

⁶³ Sachedina, *The Islamic Roots of Democratic Pluralism*, 80.

⁶⁴ For further discussion on neo-modernism in Indonesia, see Greg Barton, "Neo-Modernism: a Vital Synthesis of Traditionalist and Modernist Islamic Thought in Indonesia," *Studia Islamika*, 2-3 (1995): 1-75.

were revealed. While I agree with Abou El Fadl that the relation of text to the reader plays a critical role in determining its meaning, I also agree with Wilfred C. Smith that there is no fixed meaning of the Qur'an. Smith says "the real meaning of the Qur'an is not any one meaning but is a dynamic process of meanings, in variegated and unending flow."⁶⁵ For sure, the Qur'an is polemical towards Christianity and Judaism, but it was further interpreted by the classical commentators who lived in what John Wansbrough calls "sectarian milieu".⁶⁶ The result, as expected, is a bunch of Qur'anic exegeses that advocates a supremacist view of Islam over other religions. Even the most powerful commandment of religious pluralism and tolerance in Q. 5: 48 has been interpreted differently to mean the opposite. However, as Smith argues, this is not the one, last meaning of the Qur'an. The interpretation of the three modern Muslim thinkers examined in this study clearly shows a radical departure from the classical exegeses. Although they differ in terms of approaches, namely that Madjid is more theological, Engineer practical, while Sachedina political, all of them maintain that the Qur'an presents religious pluralism as a divine mystery that must be accepted as a given to allow for smooth inter-communal relations in the public life. For them, Q. 5: 48 is a virtual manifesto of religious pluralism.

Several questions can be raised. Does not the creative hermeneutics of the three Muslim scholars violate traditional religious discourses? Madjid's use of the exegetical traditions seems half-hearted since he selects not only whose interpretation he likes to use, but also which of the interpretation of a particular exegete is supportive to his main ideas. As we know that Ibn Taymiyya on whom Madjid often relies seems to be far from being a pluralist, yet Madjid sorts out some of Ibn Taymiyya's ideas that are suited to his own argument. The problem with Sachedina, I

⁶⁵ Wilfred Cantwell Smith, "The True Meaning of Scripture: an Empirical Historian's Nonreductionist Interpretation of the Qur'an", *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 11-4 (July 1980), 504.

⁶⁶ J. Wansbrough coined this term in his *The Sectarian Milieu: Content and Composition of Islamic Salvation History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978). It expresses the importance of both the religious diverse environment in which the Islamic tradition developed and the importance of inter-religious apologetics/polemics to that development.

would argue, is that while he is critical to the classical exegetes, he is not clear what privileges his reading over others? His sectarian stance between Sunni and Shi'i scholarship is problematic. While critiquing some classical Sunni commentators, he praises a Shi'i tradition. For instance, he says that "well-established Shi'ite opinion from the classical age rejected the notion of abrogation of the divine promise."⁶⁷ This is not true. As discussed earlier, a prominent classical Shi'i commentator, Tabarsī, has alluded to the possibility of abrogation (*jawāz al-naskh*).⁶⁸ In addition, more general question can also be asked, since most modern Muslim thinkers prefer to use the seemingly "pluralist" verses. I would argue that the modern Muslim scholars should go a step further by paying attention to the Qur'an's polemical texts which become the favorite verses of those who argue against pluralist Islam. The question is how to approach the Qur'an's polemical texts, rather than the already "pluralist" ones, to the extent that such a pluralist interpretation can influence the possibility of non-polemical interaction of religious communities in the future? To answer this question, a further careful study is needed.

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⁶⁷ Sachedina, *The Islamic Roots of Democratic Pluralism*, 34.

⁶⁸ Tabarsī, *Majma' al-Bayān*, 407.

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