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ABSTRACT

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

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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.