"Polemics to Pluralism"

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In this paper, as an extension of our weekly class discussions this semester on similarities

and differences in theology between Islam and other faiths, I engage with selected historical and

contemporary Muslim scholars with regard to how they communicate, by means of theological

polemics at one end of the range, through pluralism and interfaith dialogue at the other. I focus

on communication by Islamic scholars in their interactions with two other Abrahamic faiths,

Christianity and Judaism. I find that some contemporary Muslim scholars value and promote

concepts of religious pluralism in the Quran, which may be a sign that Islam is moving away

from the polemical rhetoric of its most famous historical scholars.

The historical Muslim scholar whose work seems to be most influential is Ibn Taimiyah.

In this paper, I consider his *Sharh Al-Aqeedat-il-Wasitiyah: Text on the Fundamental Beliefs of

Islam and Rejection of False Concepts of its Opponents*.[1] Also considered is the historical

writing of Ibn Taimiyah's follower Ibn Abi Al-'Izz, in his *Commentary on the Creed of At-

Tahawi,*[2] and more contemporary views by Dr. Jerusha Tanner Lamptey (now Jerusha Tanner

Rhodes), Associate Professor of Islam & Interreligious Engagement, at Union Theological

Seminary, in her *Never Wholly Other: A Muslima Theology of Religious Pluralism,*[3] and Dr.

Nurcholish Madjid (1939-2005), Founder and Rector of Paramadina University in Jakarta, in

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[1] Ibn Taimiyah, *Sharh Al-Aqeedat-il-Wasitiyah: Text on the Fundamental Beliefs of Islam and Rejection of False Concepts of its Opponents,* commentary, Muhammad Khalil Harras, trans. Muhammad Rafiq Khan (Riyadh, Saudi Arabia: Dar-ur-Salam Publications, 1996).

[2] Ibn Abi Al-'Izz, *Commentary on the Creed of At-Tahawi,* trans. Muhammad 'Abdul-Haqq Ansari (Riyadh, Saudi Arabia: Al-Imam Muhammad ibn Sa'ud Islamic University, 2000).

[3] Jerusha Tanner Lamptey, *Never Wholly Other: A Muslima Theology of Religious Pluralism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

"Islamic Faith and Problems of Pluralism: Relations Among the Believers."[4] As a Christian, my knowledge of my own religion is based on a lifetime of study and reflection, whereas my comprehension of Islam and Judaism are far more limited. This paper represents one step on a journey toward deepening my understanding of other Abrahamic religions.

In this paper, I adopt Lamptey's definition that theological *pluralism*, "denotes the perspective that salvation or a correct relationship with God is possible in many, if not all, religions."[5] I extend Lamptey's concept with Alan Brill's on the Pluralist Model, "Pluralists acknowledge that both moral and intellectual truths exist, but they cannot be accessed due to the limitations of the human mind....The pluralist recognizes that the great world religions have equally valid religious claims, and addresses others in their own language."[6]

The influential early scholar Ibn Taimiyah (or Ibn Taymiyyah) lived 1263-1328 CE, in what is now Turkey. How Ibn Taimiyah views Christians and Jews may be seen in this passage in which he writes that Christians and Jews have put human leaders ahead of God and scripture in importance.

> This is forbidden that he invents such substitutes for Allah who lay down such ways of worship and conducting social affairs which have not been permitted by Allah. Such a thing was done by the Jews and the Christians that they made their priests and rabbis their lords in matters of legislating. This made them declare things forbidden by Allah as permissible and the things made permissible by Him as forbidden and they followed the priests and the rabbis in these matters.[7]

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[4] Madjid Nurcholish, in "Islamic Faith and Problems of Pluralism: Relations Among the Believers," *Oxford Islamic Studies Online*, 2003, http://www.oxfordislamicstudies.com/article/book/islam-9780195174304/islam-9780195174304-chapter-75.

[5] Lamptey, 6.

[6] Alan Brill, with Rori Picker Neiss, "Jewish Views of World Religions: Four Models," in *Jewish Theology and World Religions*, eds. Alon Goshen-Gottstein and Eugene Korn (Oxford: Littman Library of Jewish Civilization: 2021), 50.

[7] Ibn Taimiyah, 99.

In this text, Ibn Taimiyah starts with Quran 9:29-31, then extends it into a polemic. In a later

passage, Ibn Taimiyah again accuses Christians of giving people importance over God, and

writes that the Jews have maligned and murdered God's prophets.

> There are many nations which committed exaggeration about the creatures and ascribed
> them the attributes and privileges of the Creator just as the Christians committed
> exaggeration about the Messiah and the monks. There are some in these communities
> who acted unjustly with the Prophets and Messengers and went to the extent of
> murdering them and rejected their mission such as the Jews who killed Prophet Zacharia
> and Yahya (John) and tried to crucify Jesus and levelled false charges against him. [8]

The influential contemporary theologian Dr. Yasir Qadhi, Dean of Academic Affairs at

the Al-Maghrib Institute, describes his fourteenth century intellectual mentor's approach in a

video lecture that has had 165 thousand views, "Ibn Taimiyah was a harsh polemicist in his

writing, unforgiving of any other group, because he truly believed there was only one Islam, the

correct Islam."[9] Qadhi goes on to summarize that Ibn Taimiyah believed Christians formulated

their theological doctrines (like the Trinity, redemption, and original sin) via councils like Nicaea

and then understood scripture in light of that doctrine.[10] Ibn Taimiyah's and Qadhi's

generalizations are historically inaccurate (for example, the Trinity is based on gospel verses like

Matthew 28:18-20, and the doctrine of original sin was formulated by Augustine of Hippo, rather

than in a church council), and reflect a superficial evaluation of Christian theology and how it

evolves. However, of more importance is the scholars's use of a polemic, or negative disputation

and denigration, as a style of engaging another religion and its theology.

Ibn Taimiyah's use of polemic seems to have been typical for his historical time when

this method of negative engagement was the norm. My understanding of the relationship

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[8] Ibn Taimiyah, 147.

[9] Yasir Qadhi, "Ibn Taymiyya: A Summary of Dr. Yasir Qadhi's dissertation at Yale University," *Yasir Qadhi,* 22 March 2013, 18.33, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hn0QbNUbh7I.

[10] Qadhi, 25.22.

between Islam and Christianity in the fourteenth century is that it was characterized by combative mutual ignorance,

> This general lack of interest on the part of medieval Muslims in the lands of western Christianity did not mean, however, that the Christian religion itself was not a matter of concern for many Islamic theologians and scholars. Along with the development of the schools of law and exegesis of the Quran there developed a body of literature dealing with Christian doctrine for reasons of polemic and refutation. As was true with Christian polemic against Islam, Muslims sought to support their refutation by looking to their own scripture.[11]

Rabbi Dr. Reuven Firestone, Professor of Medieval Judaism and Islam at the Hebrew Union-College Institute of Religion, writes about the historical use of polemics by Abrahamic religions against each other, "The canonization of contention in the early traditions of new religions can be found abundantly in Judaism, Christianity and Islam. New religions are regularly denigrated by established religions, which polemicize against them in order to prevent the emergence of religious competition."[12] Firestone later writes that the antipathy created by these early polemics can have lasting negative effects;[13]however, he notes, "there appears to be a surge in interest since 2001 in dialogue and learning among Muslims and Jews."[14]

Their use as a target of polemic by Ibn Taimiyah ignores that Christians and Jews are peoples who have been favored by God with their own messengers and revelation and are treated with respect in the Quran, notably in these verses,

> The [Muslim] believers, the Jews, the Christians, and the Sabians - all those who believe in God and the Last Day and do good - will have their rewards with the Lord. No fear for them, nor will they grieve. (Quran 2:62)[15]

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[11] Jane I. Smith, "Medieval Muslim Views of Europe, Christians, and Christianity," *Oxford Islamic Studies Online* - Islam and Christendom, accessed 30 November 2020, http://www.oxfordislamicstudies.com/article/book/islam-9780195107999/islam-9780195107999-div1-61.

[12] Reuven Firestone, "Jewish-Muslim Dialogue," in *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Inter-Religious Dialogue* (Chichester, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 224.

[13] Firestone, 236.

[14] Firestone, 238.

[15] M.A.S. Abdel Haleem, trans., *The Qur'an* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), Excerpt from Quran 5:48, 8-9.

We have assigned a law and a path to each of you. If God had so willed, He would have made you one community, but He wanted to test you through that which He has given you, so race to do good: you will all return to God and He will make clear to you the matters you differed about. (excerpt, Quran 5:48)[16]

People, we have created you all from a single man and a single woman, and made you into races and tribes so that you should get to know one another. (excerpt, Quran 49:13)[17]

The Prophet Muhammad treated non-Muslim Jews and Christians and their beliefs with respect in his Medina Charter (622 CE), in which he wrote, "the believers and Muslims of Quraysh and Yathrib [Medina], and those who followed them and joined them and labored with them. They are one community (umma) to the exclusion of all men" and "The Jews of the B.'Auf are one community with the believers (the Jews have their religion and the Muslims have theirs)."[18] Lamptey notes that some contemporary Muslim scholars attempt to limit the groups to which this charter and Quranic these verses may apply, saying that they only pertain to a specific historical community, not to Jews and Christians today. She notes that scholars including W.C. Smith and Mahmut Aydin challenge this, arguing, "the term *islam* refers not to the 'concrete forms' of a particular religious community but to a more general notion of faith."[19]

Ibn Taimiyah seems to use Christians and Jews as placeholders for his more-passionate and detailed criticisms of rival Muslim sects and theologies that are not following what he believes is "the correct Islam." As Lamptey writes, the "intensely polemical and political" Ibn Taimiyah, "underscores the connection between the errors of other religions and the errors of heretical Muslim sects." She continues, "Ibn Taymiyya goes beyond mere comparison of similar indiscretions to contend that intra-Muslim corruption is actually *caused* by contact with other

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[16] Haleem, 71-72.
[17] Haleem, 339.
[18] Yetkin Yildirim, "The Medina Charter: A Historical Case of Conflict Resolution." *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations*, 20:4 (2009): 448-449.
[19] Lamptey, 155-156.

religions."[20] Ibn Taimiyah seems to consider as impure anyone who believes other than he does.

Mahmoud Ayoub writes of Ibn Taimiyah's influential championship of this "call to return to

pristine Islam, the Islam of the Prophet's society and the normative period of his rightly guided

successors."[21]

Ibn Abi Al-'Izz (1331-1390) was a disciple of Ibn Kathir (1300-1373), who was himself

a contemporary and student of Ibn Taimiyah. Al-'Izz follows Ibn Taimiyah in his use of the

polemic and judgmental style to make his points about heretics and non-believers, as in the

following examples.

> As for the Christians, who believe in the Trinity, they do not afford three separate lords
> for the world...this belief in the triune God is self-contradictory, and their belief in the
> incarnation is even worse…no one has been able to produce an intelligible view, and no
> two views agree with each other. Every human being knows in the light of his natural
> reason that this is false.[22]

> If anyone is determined to misinterpret a text and give it a meaning which does not fit
> into the context, it may not be difficult for him to find such a way. This approach has
> played havoc with religion and life. This is what the Jews and Christians did with the
> texts of the Torah and Gospel. Allah has warned us against doing the same.[23]

Lamptey uses her feminist theological understanding of historical polemics like those of Ibn

Taimiyah and Al-'Izz to present them as part of a process of Othering, "One of the most evident

genres of historical Islamic discourse on religious difference is the polemical refutation of

Christianity and Judaism."[24] In her view, Ibn Taimiyah's polemics are "not only about scriptural

or dogmatic sparring," but "also about practical and concrete action in response to the immediate

threat presented by the Other."[25]

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[20] Lamptey, 24-25.
[21] Mahmoud M. Ayoub, *Islam: Faith and History* (London: Oneworld Publications, 2004), 199.
[22] Al-'Izz, 4.
[23] Al-'Izz, 120.
[24] Lamptey, 18.
[25] Lamptey, 26.

She discusses a theological problem faced by ancient polemicists in their ongoing advocacy for Muslim purity, "a group cannot corrupt something if they do not have that 'something' to begin with." That is, as the Qur'an states, Jews and Christians received their own messengers and true revelation from God. While acknowledging that Islamic historical discourse is neither monolithic nor homogenous, Lamptey writes that polemicists had to grapple with their assumption that the non-Muslim Other is heretical and is yet connected through revelation to God, what she describes as, "an Other-who-can-never be-wholly-other, an Other who is different yet somehow always connected."[26]

Lamptey also notes the conflict of interest of ancient scholars of Islam who were not only theologians but also political appointees, "appointed to establish a basis upon which religious difference would be assessed, and were frequently responsible for enforcing the assessment," men whose circumstances and writings represent political and faith circumstances very different from ours today. She writes, "the perspectives of historical scholars such as Ibn Taymiyya and Ibn Kathir are widely invoked in the contemporary context of the United States...without due consideration of the divergent political and power contexts."[27]

Lamptey is not the only contemporary Muslim scholar advocating pluralism. Nurcholish Madjid was an Indonesian Islamic scholar who called for "a return to the spirit or underlying universal principles of early Islam."[28] His was a respected voice from Indonesia, the country with the world's largest Muslim population. With regard to Quran 2:62, Nurcholish Madjid writes that

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[26] Lamptey, 47.
[27] Lamptey, 48.
[28] "Overview - Nurcholish Madjid," *Oxford Reference - The Oxford Dictionary of Islam*, accessed 2 December 2020, https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/oi/authority.20110810105514968.

salvation for Muslims, "is awarded not based on factors of descent, but based on faithfulness to God and the Day of Judgment, and the carrying out of good deeds."[29]

Madjid directly addresses Ibn Taimiyah's writing several times, particularly with regard to the concept of *islam* both in its generic meaning of *submission,* and as a "proper noun for the Prophet Muhammad's religion."[30] As part of his analysis, Madjid writes, "it can be argued that the Qur'ân essentially teaches the concept of religious plurality…the basic understanding that all religions are free to be practiced, yet the believers, individually or collectively, have to be responsible for their practices."[31] Madjid acknowledges that while actual practices of non-Muslim religions may have diverged from God's original revelation, many current Muslim religious practices are also incorrect. He expects all believers to uphold the principle of submission to the one God, regardless of religious practice.

In addition to describing the principles of religious and economic freedoms in the Medina Charter, Madjid also quotes at length Muhammad's agreement "that guarantees the freedom and safety of the Christians in at all times and in all places."[32] Some covenants between Muhammad and non-Muslim groups have a controversial history but the provenance of others goes back to classical Islamic sources. As Dr. John Andrew Morrow writes,

> It seems that the Messenger of Allah granted a set of standard rights, freedoms, and obligations to all the major Christian communities of his time. Consequently, if the authenticity of one of these documents can be confirmed, it can help authenticate the rest of them. The same applies to the Jewish, Samaritan, and Magian covenants.[33]

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[29] Madjid, 6.
[30] Madjid, 5.
[31] Madjid, 4.
[32] Madjid, 9.
[33] John Andrew Morrow, "The Covenants of the Prophet Muhammad Continue to Cause Controversy," *Maydan Islamic Thought*, 16 October 2019, https://themaydan.com/2019/10/the-covenants-of-the-prophet-muhammad-continue-to-cause-controversy.

Over 1,300 years later, the Roman Catholic Church followed Muhammad's example of broad social and theological welcome in Pope Paul VI's "*Nostra Aetate* - Declaration on the Relation of the Church with Non-Christian Religions" (1965),

> The Church regards with esteem also the Moslems. They adore the one God, living and subsisting in Himself; merciful and all-powerful, the Creator of heaven and earth, who has spoken to men; they take pains to submit wholeheartedly to even His inscrutable decrees...in the course of centuries not a few quarrels and hostilities have arisen between Christians and Moslems, this sacred synod urges all to forget the past and to work sincerely for mutual understanding and to preserve as well as to promote together for the benefit of all mankind social justice and moral welfare, as well as peace and freedom.[34]

In a similar interfaith outreach project in 2007, one hundred and thirty-eight Muslim scholars, clerics, and intellectuals, sponsored by Jordan's Royal Aal al-Bayt Institute for Islamic Thought and others, declared the common ground between Christianity and Islam in a message of peace called, "A Common Word Between Us and You." In the Introduction, they write, "...the signatories to this message come from every denomination and school of thought in Islam. Rather than engage in polemic, the signatories have adopted the traditional and mainstream Islamic position of respecting the Christian scripture and calling Christians to be more, not less, faithful to it."[35] Rabbi Dr. Jonathan Sacks, Chief Rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations of the Commonwealth, seems to echo the themes of Quran 5:48 and 49:13, of "A Common Word," and of *Nostra Aetate*,

> It seems as if humanity is constantly threatened by the pendulum swing between the unique and the universal, neither of which, in and of itself, does justice to the human condition. We are constituted by both our commonalities and our differences. To put it simply: *If we were completely different, we could not communicate, and if we were completely the same, we would have nothing to say*...The otherness of God is the ultimate expression of the otherness of the other, and the love of God is, or should be, the ultimate

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[34] Paul VI, "Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions, Nostra Aetate," *The Holy See*, 28 October 1965, http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decl_19651028_nostra-aetate_en.html.

[35] "A Common Word" (home page), *A Common Word*, accessed 4 December 2020, https://www.acommonword.com/.

grounding of the love of the other.[36]

Regrettably, Lamptey writes that in many cases of contemporary appropriation of historical Muslim ideas, "the tangible existence of religious diversity seems to have done little to promote appreciation for such diversity."[37] That is, the fourteenth century use of polemical rhetoric by Ibn Taimiyah and his followers, however conventional and acceptable it was in the far past, has today for some become an excuse for the continued use negative argumentation, even though such polemics create antipathy and a negative response toward Islam. Norman Daniel, historian of the Middle Ages and intercultural relations writes of polemics in the modern period, "The *jamāʿāt* (fundamentalist groups) already hark back to Ibn Taymīyah. On the Christian side, some fanatics remain, but the tendency among Western Christians...is to shake free of inherited bias."[38] Dr. Jon Hoover, Associate Professor of Islamic Studies at the University of Nottingham, writes of the polemics of Ibn Taimiyah's student Ibn Qayyim,

> In today's context Ibn Qayyim's preference for argument over the sword is welcome, and apologetics and polemics can offer a measure of support for vulnerable and unknowledgeable members of a community who might otherwise turn to violence. Yet, one must question the highly polemical model that Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya provides. Polemics, especially of the meaner kind, distort and obscure truth and ultimately ruin relations with people of other persuasions. A faith identity worth nurturing and sustaining is one that can live in truth and in relation with those who differ.[39]

Despite the continued popularity of polemics echoing those of Ibn Taimiyah and his followers, this paper has demonstrated that some contemporary Muslim scholars value and

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[36] Jonathan Sack, "The Other: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam," in *Future Tense: Jews, Judaism, and Israel in the Twenty-first Century* (New York: Schocken Books, 2009), 86-87.

[37] Lamptey, 48.

[38] Norman Daniel, "Polemics: Christian-Muslim Polemics," *Encyclopedia.com,* Dated both 1987 and 18 December 2020, https://www.encyclopedia.com/environment/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/polemics-christian-muslim-polemics.

[39] Jon Hoover, "The Apologetic and Pastoral Intentions of Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya's Polemic against Jews and Christians," *The Muslim World - Hartford Seminary* 100: 4, October 2010, https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/j.1478-1913.2010.01333.x.

promote concepts of religious pluralism and interfaith dialogue, which may be a sign that Islam is moving away from polemical rhetoric. This hopeful trend is supported by Dr. Yehezkel Landau of Merrimack College's Center for the Study of Jewish-Christian-Muslim Relations, and lecturer at the Graduate Theological Union, who writes, "Islam, after all, contains those qualities necessary for peacemaking - humility before God and an acute awareness of mortality. Some day, Jews, Muslims, and Christians will be able to share wisdom, if not doctrine."[40]

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[40] Yehezkel Landau, "Jewish-Muslim Relations in the 21st Century," *Journal of Inter-Religious Studies*, 5 March 2012, https://stateofformation.org/2012/03/jewish-muslim-relations-in-the-21st-century-by-yehezkel-landau/.

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