IJoReSH : Indonesian Journal of Religion, Spirituality, and Humanity
Vol. 4, no.2 (2025), pp. 211–236

Modern grids, old sources: the viability of applying modern typologies of religious diversity to medieval Islamic thought

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Abstract

This article assesses the viability of applying modern typologies of religious diversity to medieval Islamic thought. Using Alan Race's threefold schema of exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism, as refined by Perry Schmidt-Leukel, it reconstructs these categories in epistemological and soteriological terms. It tests them through a qualitative, text-oriented analysis of key figures in classical Islamic theology (*kalam*) and Islamic mysticism (*taṣawwuf*). The study proceeds by clarifying the truth and salvation claims presupposed by each category and examining how medieval arguments about prophetic finality, moral responsibility, divine justice, and mercy align with, or fail to align with, the modern grid. Al-Māturīdī and al-Ghazālī represent 'moderate exclusivism', affirming the finality and superiority of Islam while allowing limited salvation for certain religious 'others' through appeals to reason and differentiated accountability. Ibn Taymiyya embodies an 'undecided exclusivism,' combining a sharp critique of non-Muslim traditions with post-mortem testing and a non-eternal view of hell. By contrast, Ibn ʿArabī and Rūmī exhibit inclusivist and pluralising tendencies, especially in their doctrines of *waḥdat al-wujūd* (unity of beings) and divine mercy, while simultaneously upholding hierarchical evaluations of religions shaped by doctrinal commitments and historical circumstances. This internal tension challenges their frequent reception as straightforward paradigms of Islamic pluralism. The article concludes that Race's grid is heuristically useful but historically fragile: exclusivism maps comparatively well onto medieval positions, whereas inclusivism and pluralism appear in mixed

and unsystematic configurations. Accordingly, contemporary typologies can illuminate patterns of reasoning, but their application to premodern sources requires sustained methodological caution.

Artikel ini menilai kelayakan penerapan tipologi modern tentang keragaman agama pada pemikiran Islam abad pertengahan. Dengan menggunakan skema tiga serangkai Alan Race—eksklusivisme, inklusivisme, dan pluralisme—sebagaimana disempurnakan oleh Perry Schmidt-Leukel, artikel ini merekonstruksi kategori-kategori tersebut dalam kerangka epistemologis dan soteriologis, lalu mengujinya melalui analisis kualitatif berbasis teks terhadap tokoh-tokoh kunci dalam *ḳalām* dan *taṣawwuf* klasik. Analisis difokuskan pada klaim-klaim kebenaran dan keselamatan yang diasumsikan oleh masing-masing kategori, serta pada bagaimana argumen-argumen klasik mengenai finalitas kenabian, tanggung jawab moral, keadilan ilahi, dan rahmat ilahi berkorespondensi—atau tidak berkorespondensi—dengan kerangka modern tersebut. Hasil kajian menunjukkan bahwa al-Māturīdī dan al-Ghazālī merepresentasikan eksklusivisme moderat: keduanya menegaskan superioritas dan finalitas Islam, namun tetap membuka kemungkinan keselamatan terbatas bagi sebagian "kelompok agama lain" melalui peran akal dan diferensiasi pertanggungjawaban. Ibn Taymiyya dapat dipahami sebagai "eksklusivisme tak-ditentukan," karena menggabungkan kritik tajam terhadap tradisi non-Muslim dengan gagasan pengujian pascakematian dan pandangan tentang ketidak-kekalan neraka. Sebaliknya, Ibn ʿArabī dan Rūmī menampilkan kecenderungan inklusivis dan pluralis, terutama melalui doktrin *waḥdat al-wujūd* dan keluasan rahmat ilahi, namun tetap mempertahankan evaluasi hierarkis terhadap agama-agama lain yang dibentuk oleh komitmen doktrinal dan konteks historis. Temuan ini menegaskan bahwa tipologi Race berguna secara heuristik, tetapi rapuh secara historis; karenanya, penerapannya pada sumber-sumber pramodern menuntut kehati-hatian metodologis yang berkelanjutan.

Keywords: *Religious typologies, Theology of religions. Medieval Islamic thought, Islamic theology, Islamic mysticism.*

How to cite this article:
Kocyigit, I. (2025). Modern grids, old sources: the viability of applying modern typologies of religious diversity to medieval Islamic thought. *Indonesian Journal of Religion, Spirituality, and Humanity*. 4 (2), pp 211-236.

Introduction

Modern typologies of religious diversity have become a common analytical language in the theology of religions; yet, their application in premodern intellectual settings remains methodologically precarious. Frameworks developed to address twentieth-century debates about religious truth and salvation often presuppose conceptual distinctions and problem horizons that did not function in the same way for medieval authors. This raises a recurrent question in contemporary scholarship: when modern categories are applied to classical sources, do they illuminate historical reasoning, or do they impose an anachronistic grid that overwrites the internal logic of the texts?

This article examines the viability of applying Alan Race's tripartite typology—exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism—to medieval Islamic thought (Race 1983). Race's scheme emerged from a context shaped by renewed Christian reflection on the religious other after the Second Vatican Council, particularly the more positive evaluation of non-Christian traditions articulated in Lumen gentium and Nostra aetate (Second Vatican Council, 1964; Second Vatican Council, 1965). Within this broader shift, Karl Rahner's influential thesis of 'anonymous Christianity' argued that salvific grace may be operative beyond the visible boundaries of the church (Rahner, 1961a: 138–154), while John Hick's proposal of a 'Copernican revolution' in the theology of religions advanced a paradigmatic pluralist model (Hick 1989: 241-243.). Subsequent scholarship refined Race's threefold grid; notably, Schmidt-Leukel systematised the typology, extended it to include non-religious options such as atheism, and differentiated subtypes within each category (Schmidt-Leukel, 2005: 65).

To address the methodological tension between heuristic usefulness and historical anachronism, the present study reconstructs the three categories in a minimal operational form. Following Schmidt-Leukel's formalisation, the analysis treats a key religious property (P)—for example, privileged access to truth

or a decisive condition of salvation—as a criterion by which religions may be evaluated: P may be denied altogether; affirmed uniquely for one tradition; affirmed across multiple traditions with a hierarchical ordering; or affirmed across traditions without hierarchy (Schmidt-Leukel, 2005, p. 66). This formulation clarifies what is at stake in each category and supports comparison without assuming that medieval Muslim authors articulated their positions in modern terminological frameworks.

On this basis, the article conducts a qualitative, text-oriented analysis of selected medieval Muslim theologians and mystics, asking how far their arguments can be mapped onto Race's typology once its categories are specified in epistemological and soteriological terms (Race, 1983; Schmidt-Leukel, 2005). The corpus is limited but chosen to reflect influential trajectories within Sunni theology and Sufi metaphysics. Al-Māturīdī and al-Ghazālī are examined for the ways they affirm the finality and superiority of Islam while allowing limited salvific possibilities for certain forms of religious otherness (for example, through discussions of *Ahl al-fatra* (People of the Interval), natural disposition, and moral responsibility).

Ibn Taymiyya is analysed as a case in which the question of salvation for some non-Muslims remains open or deferred through post-mortem testing and arguments concerning responsibility and divine justice. In addition, Ibn ʿArabī (and, where relevant, Rūmī) is explored as a locus where language often interpreted as inclusivist or pluralist—particularly in relation to divine mercy and metaphysical unity—coexists with hierarchical and context-dependent exclusivist claims. Because medieval materials frequently combine these strands rather than presenting discrete, stable positions, the analysis does not treat inclusivism and pluralism as fully separable 'types' in the historical record; instead, it examines whether they appear as consistent patterns of reasoning or only as mixed tendencies.

Exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism as analytical categories

This section introduces exclusivism, inclusivism, and pluralism as the analytical categories used in this article. They serve as heuristic points of orientation for comparing claims about truth and salvation, rather than as fixed doctrines assumed to be native to medieval Islamic thought (Race 1982; Schmidt-Leukel, 2005). The following subsections provide brief definitions of each category before the model is applied to selected medieval Muslim thinkers.

Exclusivism

Exclusivism states that one's own religion is superior to all others. The model describes a position according to which there is only one true religion and all other religions are merely superstition, illusion, and false. A transcendent reality is only revealed within one religion (Race, 1982).

There are three categories of exclusivism: radical, undecided, and moderate exclusivism. The radical variant believes that people who do not belong to one's own religion have no possibility of salvation, even if they have never heard of this religion. In Christianity, for example, they had never heard of Jesus or the Gospels, or had no opportunity to be baptised. In Islam, it involves contact with the Islamic religion itself. This position categorically excludes the possibility of salvation for people of other faiths. In Islamic theology, such opinions are typically held only by marginalised groups. Moderate exclusivism recognises that some people of other faiths can attain salvation, but this is hindered by their faith. In this case, salvation is not achieved because of the religion, but despite its existence, because there is no contact with the "right" religion. Individual acts of conscience can lead to a salvific relationship with God (Schmidt-Leukel, 2005, p. 97). Undecided exclusivism, on the other hand, answers the question of the possibility of salvation for others ambiguously. It remains open whether there is salvation for them. This position recognises the limitations of the human

understanding of salvation and leaves room for different interpretations (Schmidt-Leukel, 2005, p. 98).

Inclusivism

The positions of inclusivism describe an attitude that recognises several religions as true, but regards one particular one as superior. Inclusivism differs from exclusivism in that it does not exclude the possibility of salvation outside one's own religion from the outset. Despite this openness, inclusivism claims that only it can fulfill the full claim to salvation, which inevitably ascribes a certain inferiority to other religions (Sejdini, 2021, p. 284). A distinction is made between three forms of inclusivism: restrictive inclusivism, interference inclusivism, and pluralising inclusivism.

Restrictive inclusivism is characterised by the conviction that one's own religion is the only true form of religious practice, is considered the complete source of salvation, and serves as a parameter for the correctness of other religions. Other religious expressions are largely excluded, but limited aspects of them can be recognised as long as they overlap with one's own religion. This approach draws clear boundaries between religions and emphasises the exclusivity of one's own beliefs (Schmidt-Leukel 2005, pp. 62-64, 128-137).

Interference inclusivism recognises that different religious traditions can interfere with each other in the area of salvation and be of equal value. However, exclusive truth and authority lie with one's own religion. In contrast to other forms of inclusivism, an overlap of religious truths is not necessary to attain salvation. The exclusive aspect is based on the conviction that one's own religion is the sole source of truth. In this approach, the exclusive position regarding truth remains with one's own religious conviction, while interference with other traditions in the area of salvation is acknowledged (Schmidt-Leukel, 2005, pp. 62-

64, 128-137). Karl Rahner's model of anonymous Christianity can serve as an example of this (Rahner, 1961a, pp. 138-154).

Pluralising inclusivism assumes a mutual enrichment of religions; however, it sees these as different but unequal paths to salvation. It argues that God wants to maintain the diversity of religions until eschatology, and recognises the salvific potential of other religions despite their deficits. In "Towards a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism", Jacques Dupuis (2001) deals with the diversity within religions, which he sees as an enrichment. Not everything that is recognised as grace and truth in other religions is necessarily present in Christianity. His view of this diversity is reciprocal, but asymmetrical. However, it led to controversy because of its emphasis on the equality of religions and God's will. In particular, it was at odds with the inclusivist ideas of the Second Vatican Council.

Pluralism

Pluralistic religious theology presents an alternative perspective on religious diversity. It sees religious truth as existing in a multitude of forms and considers all religions to be of equal value despite their differences. In contrast to inclusivism, which recognises only a limited possibility of salvation outside one's own religion, pluralism rejects this restriction. Its fundamental concern is to view the perception of religious diversity as enrichment. It recognises the equality of every religion in the sense that each tradition is regarded by its followers as authentic and salvific. Religious-theological pluralism seeks meaningful interreligious dialogue and emphasises the need for a positive openness to ultimate reality, regardless of specific formulations of faith. It does not simply claim that all religions are equally true, but affirms the equal value of different religions about specific dimensions, for instance, their soteriological (salvific) aspects.

It is important to distinguish religious-theological pluralism from both tolerance and relativism. Unlike tolerance, which may imply a merely passive acceptance of difference, theological pluralism entails a positive evaluation of religious otherness. Unlike relativism, it does not render religions interchangeable or indifferent, but affirms their value while maintaining universal criteria of truth and salvation. A further distinction must be drawn between social pluralism, which concerns the legal and political coexistence of diverse worldviews, and theological pluralism, which addresses normative claims about religious truth and salvation. These dimensions may diverge, as communities can endorse social pluralism while maintaining exclusivist or inclusivist theological positions. This tension is central to contemporary debates, including Hans Küng's (2021) caution against pluralism that dissolves into indifference, and Schmidt-Leukel's (2005, pp. 162–182) observation that religious diversity can be both constructive and destructive. This article focuses on historical Islamic reflections within the broader field of social and theological pluralism.

Exclusive tendencies within Medieval Islamic Thought

The characteristics of exclusivist tendencies are discussed below. The selection of Muhammad al-Ghazālī (d. 1111) and Abū Manṣūr as-Samarqandī al-Māturīdī (d. 941) as moderate exclusivists is based on the following considerations: al-Māturīdī, the founder of a religious school, represents a large majority of the Muslim population in Turkic-speaking countries and in the Balkans. Al-Ghazālī, on the other hand, is associated with the Ashari school and also represents a significant following, including in Indonesia. Overall, the Maturidiyya, Ashariyya, and Salafiyya comprise around 90% of the followers of Sunni Islam (Yavuz, 1994, p. 530). Ibn Taymīyya, who belongs to the Salafiyya, is discussed in the context of undecided exclusivism.

Al-Māturīdī

Al- Māturīdī is considered the founder of the Maturidiyya, one of the two orthodox Sunni schools of faith based on the teachings of al-Māturīdī. It played an important role in the development of Islamic theological thought. An important work by al-Māturīdī on Kalām is Kitāb al-Tawhid, in which he deals primarily with questions of systematic theology (Özen 2003, p. 147).

According to al-Māturīdī, the true religion is based on the testimonies of the prophets. It never changes, which he calls din al- tauhīd, the religion of unity. The basic requirement that he calls Islam is belief in one God. A striking difference to other scholars of his time is that al-Māturīdī places faith (Din) above religion (Sharia). He points to the changeability of religion and emphasises that it develops differently in different environments and adapts to cultural circumstances (Özcan, 2014, p. 62f., 2011, p. 379; Önal, 2015, p. 62f.).

Hanifi Özcan's interpretation of al-Māturīdī's viewpoint as pluralistic appears questionable (Atay, 1999, p. 29), because al-Māturīdī clearly demonstrates the superiority of the Islamic religion. It had reached its peak with the last Prophet Muhammad. A new evolved religion should replace the previous one through the principle of abrogation (nasẖ). After the appearance of the last prophet, in this case Muhammad, there is an abrogation of all previous religious laws (Sharia). There is therefore, an obligation to join the latest manifestation of the revealed religion. With this latest religion, all further changes of a legal and cultural nature come to an end. Although Özcan is familiar with al-Māturīdī's theses (Māturīdī 2018, pp. 51, 145, 146, 646) and has studied the theories of John Hick, Wilfred Cantwell Smith and Paul Knitter (Özcan, 2014, p. 10), the question arises as to why he nevertheless regards al-Māturīdī as a pluralist. Özcan associates it with theism and strives to achieve a kind of pluralism between theistic and non-theistic religions. He proposes that Islam should be considered superior and perfect compared to other religions. Once people are informed

about this ultimate religion, they are obliged to join it. They therefore have no other way of attaining salvation than to believe in it. This aspect becomes particularly evident when examining al-Māturīdī's perspective on other religions.

Al-Māturīdī divides people of other faiths into three categories, all of whom reject Islam: (a) the Ahl al-Kitāb, whom he describes as stubborn, (b) the Meccans and (c) the Sabiun (members of an astral religion). He divides the Ahl al-Kitāb into two groups. The first recognises Muhammad as a legitimate prophet, but retains their own scripture and continues to practice their religion. They do not believe in Islam and stubbornly and arrogantly oppose it. The positive Qur'anic verses about the Christian religion refer exclusively to the group mentioned under (i). However, it would be inappropriate for them to continue to speak of Christianity, as they recognise a prophet who does not exist in the Christian religion. This recognition would in fact make them Muslims, even though they only accept Muhammad as a prophet. This classification is not historically verifiable, but an opinion constructed by al-Māturīdī. Furthermore, he crirticises the Ahl al Kitāb and the members of all other religions, which confirms his exclusive stance (Özcan 2014, p. 105ff.; Atay, 1999, p. 32; Māturīdī 2018, p. 67ff.). Al-Māturīdī's doctrine of Ahl al Fatra develops a broader understanding of people of other faiths. It attaches great importance to the role of the intellect. The human being can distinguish between good and evil due to his intellectual abilities. Once a certain level of intellectual development has been reached, every person is expected to recognise the oneness of God (tauḥīd), as this is the basic prerequisite for attaining salvation. The role of the prophets is to confirm what can already be recognised. This would mean that, due to the superiority of the intellect, the knowledge of God is nevertheless obligatory for those people who do not have access to Islam. Thus, al-Māturīdī does not put forward a pluralistic thesis, but on the contrary, he counts as moderate exclusivism, since salvation without access to faith is only possible to a limited extent.

The concepts of al-Māturīdī, in particular his distinction between faith and religion, provide deep insights into Islamic theology, but were developed in a specific historical and social context, which makes a direct transfer to the present day problematic. The key challenge is to preserve the wisdom while transferring it to a contemporary context. Therefore, a reinterpretation and adaptation to the current reality is recommended for al-Māturīdī's ideas. In this way, one can learn from this inspirational approach without falling into historical or cultural relativism.

Al-Ghazālī

Al-Ghazālī, who headed the renowned Nizamiyah Madrasa in Baghdad, raises the question of the nature of belief and unbelief. In his autobiography "Deliverance from Error", he describes his observation that Jews, Christians and Muslims do not change their religion. According to a hadith of the Prophet, people act according to their natural disposition. All people are born as Muslims, but some later belong to a different religion due to a decision made by their parents (Khalil, 2007, p. 36). This natural disposition is explained by al-Ghazālī as the need to believe in God. For a perfect faith and the attainment of salvation, belief in the one God, the Prophet and the hereafter is mandatory. He accuses Christianity, Judaism and the Zoroastrians, who have a special status in the Koran as "People of the Scripture", as well as Hinduism and other non-theistic religions of misbelief. He recognises two versions of misbelief: the "correct" one and the one "veiled" by God.

Those who live in pure "darkness" are atheists, as they believe neither in God nor in the hereafter and thus obviously violate the commandments of the Qur'an (4:37) and live only for this world (Qur'an 14:3). The second category consists of three sub-categories. These are people who are in a mixture of darkness and light, some in a state of pure light. These people have understood

God's attributes and the messages of the prophets Abraham and Muhammad; however, the natural disposition must not be corrupted in any way in order to attain salvation. The second group, which is a mixture of darkness and light, includes al-Ghazālī idolaters, animists, polytheistic Turks, people who ascribe holiness to trees or animals, and followers of an astral religion. al-Ghazālī also assigns religious movements, such as the Karmatians or materialism, to this second group, as they fall into darkness due to their imagination. The third group includes anthropomorphism, which is in a state of complete intellectual darkness (Khalil 2007, p. 39f.).

Al-Ghazālī specifically mentions Byzantine Christians as well as Turks of other faiths as groups that God's mercy encompasses, although they are considered misbelievers according to his criteria. He divides the individuals into three groups: those who have never heard the Prophet's name, those who have heard of the Prophet's true character but do not believe in it, and those who have heard the Prophet's name but have regarded him as an arch-enemy and the greatest liar since childhood. Mercy will be shown to groups 1 and 3. People who are still searching for the truth are also liberated. However, he does not base these statements on Quranic verses or other traditions from the Sunnah that explicitly prove mercy towards non-Muslims. Philosophers are not treated in this category, as they deny the Prophet and accuse him of disinformation (Khalil, 2007, pp. 43-45). 43-45

Although belief in the only God, the afterlife and the Prophet is essential according to al-Ghazālī, he shows a broad understanding of salvation. In this sense, he relativizes hadiths (al-Buẖārī, ḥaǧ, 1, tawḥīd, 32; Muslim, Īmān, 379), since the interlocutors are not people with erroneous beliefs, but those who will go to hell, but will not remain there for eternity, but will serve their punishment, purify themselves, and then come out again. He bases his thesis on the verse "[...] and you will enter hell [...]" (Qur'an 19:71).

Al-Ghazālī is characterised by a broad interpretation of the Islamic sources. In the hadith, which deals with the division of the Islamic community, it says

> "The Jews will be divided into 71 groups, one of which will be in paradise and 70 in hellfire. The Christians will be divided into 72 groups, 71 of which will be in Hellfire and one in Paradise. By the one in whose hand is the soul of Muhammad, my ummah will be divided into 73 groups, one of which will be in paradise and 72 in hellfire." He was asked: "O Messenger of God, who are they?" He said: "The community" (Ibn Māğa, Fitan, 17; at-Tirmidh, Īmān, 18).

Al-Ghazālī draws attention to less popular hadiths with comparable content, in which only one of these 73 groups will end up in hellfire and all the others will not. He interprets this to mean that although these groups will end up in hellfire, this will be a temporary matter and will not last for eternity (Khalil, 2007, pp. 54-56). 54-56

In response to the question of whether all people bear responsibility of their own accord due to revelation, al-Ghazālī answers that God did not intend all people for revelation from the outset and that they must act righteously due to their natural disposition (al-Ghazālī, 2019, p. 8).

Al-Ghazālī assesses the fate of the religious other within the framework of *Ahl al-Fatra* and approaches non-Muslim salvation in practical terms. He does not hold all who have merely heard of Islam, or the Prophet's name, morally responsible; those shaped from childhood by false reports or by a non-Muslim environment may be excused because their situation prevents them from recognising the Prophet's true identity. Responsibility is therefore context-dependent. He also maintains that those who sincerely seek the truth may be saved, and even an unresolved search at death can be excused. Because of this leniency toward people exposed to prejudiced portrayals of Islam, al-Ghazālī is sometimes labeled an inclusivist (Aslan, 2000, p. 19). Yet this classification is often overstated, since, in his view, non-Muslims who encounter Islam without prejudice and still reject it have no salvific prospect (Khalil, 2007; Aslan, 2000, p.

19; 2004a, p. 346ff.; Bozkale, 2014, p. 51). Even so, his reflections mark an important development in Muslim discussions of salvation and religious otherness.

Ibn Taymīyya

In undecided exclusivism, there is no clear consensus regarding the possibility of salvation for others. This position recognises the limitations of the human understanding of salvation and leaves room for different views. Ibn Taymīyya (d. 1328) is treated in this category, as he leaves open the possibility of salvation for the Ahl al Fatra, i.e. those people who have not yet come into contact with Islam. Before this is discussed, however, it is first necessary to explain what Ibn Taymīyya understood by responsibility. His ideas about people of other faiths and his thoughts on the afterlife are then presented.

Ibn Taymīyya emphasises the responsibility of every rational individual (Khalil, 2007, p. 110). In discussing the fate of those without revelation, he contrasts the Ashʿariyya and the Muʿtazila: the former deny moral accountability without divine revelation and ground right and wrong solely in God's unfettered will, a view that can be extended to Ahl al-Fatra; the latter affirm that reason can distinguish good and evil, thereby making accountability possible even without prophetic guidance. Ibn Taymīyya crirticises both for underestimating revelation and appeals to Qur'an 17:15 to stress that judgment hinges on the arrival of a messenger (Khalil, 2007, 111f.). He nonetheless allows that some moral knowledge may be accessible without revelation, citing Qur'an 79:17 (Pharaoh before Moses) to argue that culpability becomes decisive once prophetic warning clarifies the nature of wrongdoing (Khalil, 2007, 111f.). He also maintains the controversial position that the Prophet's parents are in hell, invoking Qur'an 9:113 to reject intercession for polytheists (Yurdagür, 1995, p. 478).

Thus, Ibn Taymīyya has a third option, as he does not consider it correct that the religious responsibility of people without access to revelation is based solely on reason. It is also not correct to assume that they will be saved without any examination. Although the mind may know some truths, there is also the option that it may not grasp the truths; therefore, not everyone should be held to the same standard. In fact, it runs contrary to divine justice that those who are not confronted with the Prophet's call find salvation without trial. Although the Hereafter is not a place of trial, for a few people it can be both a place of trial and a place of punishment and reward. Thus, Ibn Taymīyya regards the people of the *Ahl al-fatra* as those who will be tested again in the hereafter. He justifies this with God's justice. God has the power to do anything He pleases. He therefore always chooses the best option from all possible courses of action, which also manifests his willpower (Suleiman, 2019, p. 293).

For the attainment of salvation, Ibn Taymīyya (2019) states that jinn and humans must recognise the Prophet Muhammad. Those who do not behave accordingly are subject to punishment or even damnation. He crirticises the "possessors of scripture", especially Christians, for distorting their holy scripture (*tahrif al-kitab*). The idea of the distortion of religious texts was already present in Islamic theology long before Ibn Taymīyya. According to his argument, certain ideas about the afterlife do not correspond to the original revelations. One of his main accusations is that Christians concealed the future mission of Muhammad in the Bible. He bases these claims on verse 6 of Sura 61. In the course of a dialog between the second caliph Umar (r. 717-720) and the Byzantine emperor Leo III (r. 717-741), the thesis arose that the term "assistance" (in Old Syriac Munaḥḥamānā and in Greek Paraklet) in the Gospel of John 15:26 has a meaning that corresponds to the name Muhammad (Kocyigit, 2024, p. 9).

Ibn Taymīyya also strongly crirticises the doctrine of the Trinity, which he sees as a manifestation of polytheism in Christianity. He argues that the idea of

sons and daughters of a god was borrowed from polytheism. In henotheistic Arab culture, it was common to refer to angels as God's daughters, a practice that the Quran explicitly crirticises. In addition, Ibn Taymīyya accuses the Jews of adhering to a dualistic belief in God and of worshipping Ezra (Uzair) as the son of God (Kocyigit, 2024, p. 11). These statements clearly show his negative attitude towards people of other faiths (Khalil, 2007, p. 108).

His view of the eternity of hell is interesting. Although there is a consensus on this (Ijma), he considers hell to be transient. And yet it does not show wisdom to punish someone indefinitely in hell, which is why the punishment must be assumed to be temporary (Suleiman, 2019, p. 297).

> The evil and unjust souls [of deceased people], who—if they were brought back [from the afterlife] to this world before they had been punished—would turn back to forbidden things, are not fit to dwell in paradise, [because] this conflicts with [the nature of souls] to lie and to be unjust and evil. If they are punished in the fire to the extent that they are cleansed of evil, the wisdom [behind the punishment] is rationally recognisable. Therefore, there is [already] punishment in this world. The wisdom behind the creation of someone in whom there is evil that is eliminated through punishment is [therefore] rationally recognisable. However, the creation of souls who do evil in this world and in the hereafter and who are punished eternally [because of this] is a contradiction in which the absence of wisdom and mercy is as clear as in no other matter. (see: Suleiman 2019: 296).

According to Ibn Taymīyya, it is irrational and incompatible with the wisdom and mercy of God to punish people indefinitely in the hereafter for the wrongdoings they have committed. This would contradict the central attributes of God. Punishment should be appropriate and just, but should not last indefinitely. Ibn Taymīyya emphasises the importance of God's wisdom, which entails that God always chooses the best course of action, as well as God's mercy, which does not justify and makes it unreasonable to punish people indefinitely.

Inclusivist-pluralist tendencies

This section deals with the concepts of religious-theological inclusivism and pluralism together, since a strict threefold typology, as formulated by Race, does not appear to be applicable in the history of Islamic theology. According to Nasr, Ibn ʿArabī and Rūmī, for example, exhibit pluralistic tendencies, which they did not systematically elaborate, however, as this was of little relevance at their time (Nasr, 1993, pp. 10, 32, 87, 1996a, p. 60). In addition, such tendencies appear among these scholars in a mixture with inclusivist ideas.

In the eyes of many, the Quran itself offers evidence for an inclusive or pluralistic approach in Islam. For example, Sura 2:62 promises that not only Muslims, but also Jews, Christians, and Sabaeans who believe in one God and the Last Day and perform good deeds, will receive their reward from God and experience neither fear nor grief. Furthermore, Sura 5:48 articulates the permission to share the food of the People of the Book and to marry women from these communities. These verses emphasise Islam's openness towards other faith communities.

In the history of theology, the mystics Ibn ʿArabī and Rūmī are the most frequently cited figures (Hick, 1989; Soroush, 2015; Aydin, 2005; Chittick, 2012; Lamptey, 2016; Atay, 2018; Khalil, 2007; Yaran, 2001a). To draw a strict distinction between inclusivist and pluralist viewpoints in the works of Ibn ʿArabī and Rūmī would be misleading, as both thinkers expressed both positive and negative attitudes towards those with different beliefs. Instead, it seems appropriate to speak of a tendency towards inclusivism or pluralism, rather than interpreting these categories as rigid.

The following section examines Ibn ʿArabī's thoughts with regard to the religious other. By analysing his writings and interpretations of relationships with people of other faiths, it is possible to gain a deeper understanding of inclusivism and pluralism from the perspective of the history of Islamic theology.

Ibn ʿArabī

Ibn ʿArabī is considered an outstanding figure in Islamic mysticism. His complex thoughts and his particular approach have been widely discussed in the literature (Yaran 2001a, p. 311; Khalil 2007, p. 83; Winter 1999, p. 134). However, a clear assignment to inclusivism or pluralism would amount to a simplification of his ideas. In the following, an introduction to his person will be given, followed by a discussion of his understanding of salvation and the reasons why he is treated in different categories.

Muhyī d-Dīn Abū provided, followed by a discussion of his understanding of salvation and the reasons why he is categorised differently. ʿAbd Allāh Muhammad ibn ʿAlī Ibn ʿArabī al-Hātimī at-Tāʾī (Ibn al-ʿArabī), also known as Shaykh al-Akbar, was an outstanding mystic from Andalusia. He was born on August 7, 1165 in Murcia (now Spain) and died on November 16, 1240 in Damascus. After around 30 years in Andalusia, he traveled to Anatolia at the invitation of the Seljuk Sultan Kaykaus I (d. 1220). The reason for this was to escape the repressive politics and religious authorities of his time, as well as the harsh attitudes of the rulers towards free-thinking people. He also spent some time in Mecca, Mosul and Baghdad (Yaran, 2001a, p. 309).

Mysticism already occupied a central position for Ibn ʿArabī at a young age. In his writings, he recounts an incisive spiritual experience, a "maʿrifa", which led him on a path of knowledge and deeper understanding. This experience helped him to develop a comprehensive understanding of the three paths of knowledge (Khalil, 2007, p. 79). As a result of his insights and spiritual approach, he adopted an esoteric interpretation of Islamic texts. This is also reflected in his ideas about the afterlife and hell, which are presented below, along with his perspectives on religious otherness.

Characterisation of hell

Ibn ʿArabī integrates the concept of hell into his understanding of God's mercy. Mercy is a central point of his theory, as it will ultimately prevail (Khalil 2007, p. 88). This view is supported by the Qur'anic verse 39:53, according to which God forgives all sins, which emphasises his mercy. Ibn ʿArabī claims that both those who repent and those who do not can experience God's mercy. This is in contrast to the widespread assumption that God does not grant forgiveness for idolatry (shirk), which is explicitly mentioned in Qur'anic verses 4:48 and 4:116.

As a solution to this discrepancy, Ibn ʿArabī presents hell as a habitable place. Since God's mercy encompasses everything (Qur'an 7:156), it also extends to the "walls of Hell", which become a source of pleasure after a certain time. Although hellfire is eternal in its doctrine, its nature undergoes a transformation. It changes from a punishment to a pleasure because the mercy of God surpasses everything else (Qur'an 28:29). Another logical justification of Ibn al-ʿArabī is the concept of an eternal punishment for sins, which by their nature are temporal. He considers it necessary to assign an appropriate weight to every action and, with Qur'anic verses 11:106-108, argues for the finite nature of hell (Khalil, 2007: 93).

While Ibn ʿArabī recognises hell and divides its inhabitants into four groups - those characterised by arrogance, those with polytheistic beliefs, atheists, and those characterised by hypocrisy - he nevertheless considers hell to be transient, as an eternal hell is, in his opinion, in contrast to the all-encompassing mercy of God.

Ibn ʿArabī's exclusivist views

As an Arab born in Andalusia, Anatolia played an important role in Ibn ʿArabī's intellectual work. He became a close friend of Sultan Kaykaus I and educated many people, including Sadreddin Konevi (d. 1274), one of the greatest

proponents of the wahdat al-wujūd theory in the succession of Ibn ʿArabīs (Demirli, 2008, p. 420). His ideas were further developed in the Ottoman Empire and represented by famous personalities. Alongside his pluralist and inclusivist views, some exclusivist ones also emerged.

A significant sign of Ibn ʿArabī's exclusivist orientation is revealed in his attitude towards the Christian population during his stays in Anatolia, especially in light of the impact of the Crusades on the Muslim population. Yaran aptly emphasises that Sufism in Anatolia, compared to the Near East, had a less peaceful character due to historical circumstances - especially the Crusades and the violent confrontations between Muslims and Christians. These events led to increased tensions and conflicts, which also had an impact on the Sufi movements in Anatolia. In contrast, Sufism in the Near East seems to have taken a more peaceful course, possibly due to less intense religious conflicts or other factors that could contribute to the harmonious development of Sufism (Yaran, 2001a: 314).

The letter that Ibn ʿArabī wrote to the Seljuk Sultan Kaykaus I in 1212, in which he gave advice and recommended ideas, shows these circumstances precisely:

> Christians should not be allowed to build churches and monasteries, even if they are destroyed and need to be repaired, as they can house spies in them. Christians who wish to convert to Islam should have free access. Christians should show respect to Muslims by standing up when they appear in an assembly, not dressing like Muslims, not taking Muslim names, not using their titles, not riding horses or carrying swords, not having Arabic inscriptions on their seals, not doing business with Arabs, not wear religious symbols, not display crosses or other sacred objects in the streets, not bury their dead near Muslim graves, not ring loud bells, and hold their services quietly in churches. If they do not fulfill these conditions, they should be treated in the same way as non-Muslims who are hostile to Muslims. (Yaran 2001a:. 343*).*

This excerpt indicates that Ibn ʿArabī was strongly influenced by the circumstances of the time and place and did not make his decisions independently of them. However, this argument is not only related to Christianity, but is rather conditioned by the particular situation. It would be inadmissible to label Ibn ʿArabī as an exclusivist on the basis of this letter alone, as this does not do justice to his broader body of thought.

Ibn ʿArabī's inclusivistic views

There is a quote that illustrates that Ibn ʿArabī addresses the diversity of revealed religions and establishes a hierarchy of religious teachings.

> "All revealed religions are light. Among these religions, the religion brought by Muhammad is like the sun next to the stars. When the sun rises, the stars disappear and they are the brilliance of the sun. Similarly, with the advent of Islam, other religions have lost their validity. But just as the stars do not disappear when the sun rises, these religions continue to exist. That is why we believe in all prophets and divine religions. Contrary to the view of ignorant people, they are not considered false." (Yaran 2001a: 315).

He compares Islam, as the religion brought by Muhammad, to the radiant light of the sun, while the other religions are like stars that fade as soon as the sun rises. This metaphor illustrates his view that Islam represents a comprehensive and complete revelation that outshines older religions. Nevertheless, for Ibn ʿArabī, the existence of other religions is not lost, as they continue to hold a certain value and validity, although they no longer possess the same importance as Islam. He avoids labeling the other religions as false, but views them as part of a larger divine plan. This view can be interpreted as inclusivist, as it recognises that all prophets and religions represent one divine truth. The emphasis on the unity of being and transcendence of religions reflects Sufi ideology, which promotes a holistic view of the various religious traditions. However, a closer look at the text as a whole reveals that the emphasis is on

inclusivity rather than pluralism. Although Ibn ʿArabī recognises the value of other religions, he also emphasises the comprehensive superiority of Islam. This interpretation enables a deeper understanding of his thought and his idea of religious diversity.

Pluralistic characteristics in Ibn ʿArabī

A central aspect of Ibn ʿArabī's teaching is his expansive understanding of tawḥīd through *waḥdat al-wujūd*, which emphasises God's boundlessness and treats all existence—including idols—as manifestations of the divine (Khalil, 2007, p. 80; Chittick, 2012, p. 153). On this basis, he interprets Qur'an 17:23 ("your Lord has decreed that nothing but Him shall be worshipped") to mean that even worship directed toward created objects ultimately reaches God, since nothing exists apart from Him. Ibn Taymīyya sharply rejects this reading as *taḥrīf* and *bāṭinī* exegesis, arguing that the verse prescribes what should be worshipped rather than describing what cannot be worshipped (Suleiman, 2019, pp. 139–140). He further contends that Ibn ʿArabī's approach risks weakening Islam's exclusive truth-claim and, citing *Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam*, crirticises him for portraying prophetic admonition—such as Noah's—as addressing divine transcendence without adequately affirming divine immanence (Suleiman, 2019, p. 140).

The following quote underlines Ibn ʿArabī's understanding of waḥdat al-wuǧūd (the unity of existence) and its possible pluralistic interpretation.

> "I believe in all the beliefs of the Jews and Christians, in the truth of their religions, and in every part of their revealed books, just as I believe in my own revealed book. In fact, my book contains their books, and my religion contains their religion. Therefore, their religion and their book are completely contained in my book and my religion." (Yaran 1999: 315).

In this quote, Ibn ʿArabī affirms his belief in the beliefs of the Jews and Christians and in the truth to be found in their religions and revealed books. He

also believes in the truth of his own revealed book, probably referring to the Qur'an. For him, the Jewish and Christian religions and their books are integral parts of his own religion and his own book. Whether he is referring to the original version of these religions or the version of the time is an open question. He sees the different religions as interconnected and complementary. He recognises that each religion has its own value and its own truth, and that all these truths are contained in his religion and in the book. This view highlights his understanding of the unity of all religions and the shared quest for spiritual truth. It is a perspective that emphasises connection and cooperation across religious boundaries, promoting dialogue between different religious traditions.

Ibn ʿArabī's religious views are complex and multifaceted, encompassing both inclusive and exclusionary aspects. Although he emphasised inclusivism and the unity of all religions, he also expressed negative opinions about Christians as well as Jews in some of his writings; however, his specific view of them is ambivalent and context-dependent. His pluralistic interpretations focused primarily on the diversity of religious traditions and divine revelations. It is crucial to consider various factors such as the historical context and his diverse writings when examining Ibn ʿArabī's attitude towards these religious groups.

His view in the context of *waḥdat al-wujūd*, that idol worship is ultimately worship of God, can be seen as a pluralistic tendency. Nevertheless, his argument suggests that this form of worship is imperfect and does not reach the ideal state of devotion and worship to God. Although prophets like Noah were not able to fully explain God, their form of worship is considered the best in contrast to the deficient worship of the idolaters. This view implies a hierarchy of worship in which certain forms of expression are considered superior while others are considered imperfect. Therefore, Ibn ʿArabī's position in this regard cannot be interpreted as completely pluralistic in the sense of giving equal value to different forms of religious expression.

Conclusion

This article has examined how far a modern theological grid of religious diversity can be applied to classical Islamic thought. Using Race's tripartite schema as refined by Schmidt-Leukel, it has shown that the model is heuristically useful but historically fragile when used to classify premodern authors whose conceptual horizons differ from those presupposed by twentieth-century theology of religions.

The analyses of al-Māturīdī, al-Ghazālī, and Ibn Taymiyya suggest that exclusivist configurations can, with due nuance, be mapped onto medieval Islamic theology. All three affirm the superiority and finality of Islam while allowing limited pathways of salvation for certain non-Muslim groups, whether through *ʿaql* (reason), *Ahl al-fatra* (People of the Interval), post-mortem testing, or a non-eternal understanding of hell. By contrast, the examination of Ibn ʿArabī and Rūmī indicates that what contemporary discourse would label inclusivist or pluralist perspectives appears largely in mixed and context-dependent forms, frequently intertwined with hierarchical claims for Islam.

On this basis, the article argues that Race's categories cannot simply be read back into the medieval material. Inclusivism and pluralism, as modern theological positions, often rely on distinctions (e.g., between social and theological pluralism) that do not operate in the same way in classical Islamic discourse. The risk of back-projection is especially evident in the reception of Ibn ʿArabī, whose language of divine mercy is often cited as evidence for a modern pluralist agenda, while asymmetrical strands of his thought receive less attention. Methodologically, the study recommends speaking of exclusivist, inclusivist, and pluralist tendencies rather than tidy, fully developed positions. Modern typologies can serve as diagnostic lenses, but they should not become rigid templates that overwrite historical texts. Future research may expand the corpus, compare regional and doctrinal constellations, and further investigate how historically

informed readings of classical sources can inform more responsible contemporary engagements with religious diversity.

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