

Salvation of Non-Muslims and Sectarian Others in Sunni Islam

Quranic Verses on Salvation and Classical Sunni Tafsīr

The Qur'an contains verses that appear both inclusive and exclusive regarding salvation. Two oft-cited inclusive verses are:

- **Qur'an 2:62:** *"Indeed, those who believe, and those who are Jews, and the Christians, and the Sabians – whoever believes in Allah and the Last Day and works righteousness – shall have their reward with their Lord, and no fear shall be upon them, nor shall they grieve."* A similar verse is repeated in **5:69**.
- **Qur'an 3:85:** *"Whoever seeks a religion other than Islam, it will never be accepted of him, and in the Hereafter he will be among the losers."* Verses like **3:19**, **4:48**, and **9:113** are also exclusivist, warning that God accepts only Islam, does not forgive *shirk* (polytheism), and forbids praying for forgiveness of those who died as polytheists.

Sunni exegetes reconciled these seemingly divergent verses through context and abrogation (*naskh*). **Al-Ṭabarī** (d. 923) and others explain that 2:62/5:69 promise salvation to Jews, Christians, and others *only* if they adhered to true monotheistic faith **prior** to the Prophet Muḥammad. Al-Ṭabarī writes that in the past "whoever adhered to the Gospel and the teachings of Jesus was considered a believer and accepted, until the arrival of Muḥammad... Therefore, those among them who do not follow Muḥammad...will be doomed" ¹. In other words, after the Prophet's mission, acceptance of Islam became the criterion for salvation. **Al-Qurṭubī** (d. 1273) records a report from the Companion Ibn 'Abbās that **2:62** *"is abrogated by the verse: 'And whoever seeks a religion other than Islam, it will not be accepted from him'"* (Q.3:85) ². Classical commentators like **Ibn Kathīr** (d. 1373) concur. Ibn Kathīr notes that Ibn 'Abbās viewed 3:85 as cancelling the prior concession, *indicating that after Allah sent Muḥammad, no deed or faith will be accepted unless it conforms to the law of Muḥammad* ³. Before Islam's advent, however, *"every person who followed the guidance of his own Prophet was on the correct path... and was saved"* ⁴.

Thus, Sunni exegesis maintains that **Q.2:62 and 5:69 did not grant open-ended salvation to Jews or Christians after the Prophet's era**, but rather affirmed that past communities who truly believed in God and the Last Day (and, by implication, would accept God's next messenger) need not fear. Those verses were addressed in context to the People of the Book as a *call* to embrace Islam, assuring them that faith in the one God and righteous deeds are ultimately what matter – *provided* they do not reject the final Prophet. In contrast, **Q.3:85** and related verses insist that after the truth of Islam is made clear, embracing it is necessary for salvation ⁵ ⁶. Major Sunni commentators like **al-Rāzī** (d. 1209) and **al-Qurṭubī** emphasize God's final message as the decisive criterion: once the Prophet's message has reached a people, persisting in a previous religion is seen as rejecting God's plan ¹. Qurṭubī bluntly states, *"whoever dies on a religion other than Islam will be among the losers"*, interpreting 3:85 in line with the consensus view ².

Other verses underline the *exclusivist* stance. **Q.4:48** declares God will not forgive *shirk* (idolatry/associating partners with Him) – a teaching understood to mean that dying as a polytheist precludes salvation. Classical

commentators (e.g. al-Qurṭubī) hold that while any sin is subject to God's mercy, idolaters who knowingly rejected tawḥīd (monotheism) have no promise of forgiveness in the Hereafter ⁷. Likewise, **Q.9:113** forbids the Prophet and believers from praying for the salvation of deceased polytheists, "after it has become clear that they are inhabitants of Hell." According to tafsīr works, this verse was revealed about Prophet Muḥammad's own uncle (Abū Ṭālib) or others who died rejecting Islam; it reinforced the principle that one who dies in disbelief cannot be saved by the prayers of the living. Classical Sunni exegesis uses such verses to underscore that knowingly rejecting the Prophet Muḥammad is a damning choice: neither lineage nor personal virtue can save someone who spurns the fundamental message of Islam (though of course God alone will judge each case justly).

In summary, **the dominant classical Sunni view** is **religious exclusivism** qualified by chronology and knowledge. Righteous followers of previous prophets *before* Muḥammad are included in God's promise of reward ⁵, but after the Prophet's advent, only those on the path of Islam (submission to Allah as taught by Muḥammad) are assured Paradise ¹. Verses like 2:62 were interpreted in a restricted sense or even considered abrogated by later revelations ². This interpretation is reflected by **Ibn Taymiyyah** (d. 1328), who wrote that Qur'an 2:62 "tells about the followers of these four unaltered milal (faiths) *before abrogation by the advent of Prophet Muḥammad's message*" ⁵ – implying that after Muḥammad, those communities were obligated to convert. Classical authorities unanimously cite **Q.3:85** as reaffirming that *Islam is the only accepted religion henceforth* ⁸.

Sunni Theological Frameworks: Ash'arī and Māturīdī Views

Classical Sunni theology developed nuanced positions on the fate of non-Muslims, balancing God's justice ('**adl**) and mercy (**raḥma**). The two main Sunni theological schools – **Ash'arīs** and **Māturīdīs** – agreed on core creed but had subtle differences on issues like accountability and salvation of those unreached by the message of Islam.

- **Ash'arī position:** Generally, Ash'arī theologians held that **God does not punish people who never received a clear invitation to Islam**. They often cite Qur'an 17:15, "*We never punish until We have sent a messenger.*" In Ash'arī thought, moral responsibility arises only after revelation reaches a person. Abū al-Ḥasan al-Ash'arī himself (d. 936) is reported to have believed that anyone who dies without the message having reached them "*dies saved*" by God's grace ⁹. Later Ash'arīs like Imām al-Nawawī (d. 1277) explicitly wrote that those born into idolatrous families who never learned of Islam are **excused and granted paradise**, based on Allah's justice and the principle in 17:15 ¹⁰. In this view, *ignorance through no fault of one's own absolves a person from eternal damnation*. God's infinite mercy can embrace those who did not consciously reject the truth. This extends to people who heard only a distorted or hostile portrayal of Islam rather than the true message. (We will see that modern Sunni scholars echo this point.) At the same time, Ash'arīs stress God's sovereignty: He may save whom He wills. No one can earn Paradise by deeds or affiliation alone – ultimately "*it is by Allah's mercy*" that anyone enters Paradise, as a famous ḥadīth states. But as a theological rule, Ash'arīs denied that God would punish an individual for not following a law they genuinely had no access to.
- **Māturīdī position:** Māturīdī theologians (followers of Imām Abū Manṣūr al-Māturīdī, d. 944) also upheld God's justice but placed *slightly more emphasis on human reason*. They taught that even before receiving a prophet's message, a person is obligated to recognize basic truths of God through intellect (for example, that a Creator exists). In Māturīdī theology, **if a person has the capacity to**

contemplate faith but dies without affirming belief in God, he may be held accountable. However, like Ash'arīs, the Māturīdīs exempt those who *never had a chance to reflect or learn*. One Māturīdī principle states: *"Whoever dies before he has time to contemplate, and thus has no faith or disbelief, then no punishment is on him"* ⁹. In practice, this means *infants, the insane, or isolated people who truly never heard of Islam or could not grasp it are not punished*. But a Māturīdī might argue that someone living in the world with sound mind is obliged by their **fiṭra** (innate disposition) and reason to seek the One God. If such a person rejects even the idea of one God, they could be culpable, messenger or not. In short, Māturīdīs are only slightly less lenient than Ash'arīs regarding the "uninformed": they agree God will not punish the genuinely uninformed **unless** one had the tools to discern monotheism and willfully neglected it.

Both schools firmly believe **God's justice prevents Him from condemning the morally innocent**. They only differ on what the "excuse" is. Ash'arīs lean on *divine revelation as the basis of taklīf* (responsibility) – no revelation, no sin. Māturīdīs add that *human reason can also obligate belief to some extent*. Despite this nuance, *practically all Sunni theologians concur that people who never heard of Islam in its true form have a hope of salvation through God's mercy*. The Prophet's saying, *"There were four (types of people) who will protest on Judgment Day" – the deaf, the insane, the very old, and those who died in an interval without a messenger* – is often cited. Several hadiths indicate God will test such people on the Day of Resurrection; if they obey, they enter Paradise ¹¹ ¹². **Ibn Taymiyyah** affirmed this, and it's notable that he claimed the idea was shared by **"Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya, Abū 'l-Ḥasan al-Ash'arī, and Ibn Kathīr"**, all of whom held that God will fairly test or excuse those unreached by the message ¹³. This indicates a broad *Sunni acceptance* of leniency toward the *"Ahl al-Fatrah"* (people of the interval or ignorance).

Another aspect of Sunni theology is the interplay of **justice and mercy**. *God's justice ('adl) means He does not wrong anyone* – thus accountability is proportionate to opportunity. *God's mercy (raḥma) means He can forgive even great sins if He wills* (aside from the sin of *shirk* for one who dies unrepentant, per Qur'an 4:48). Ash'arī theologians often underscore verses like *"My mercy encompasses all things"* and the hadith *"God's mercy prevails over His wrath"*. They warn believers against presumptuous judgment of others' afterlife. The ultimate rule is that **no human can definitively declare another specific individual to be in Heaven or Hell** – that knowledge belongs only to God. This humility is rooted in the Prophet's teaching that a man may live a whole life of disbelief and then enter Islam at the end and be saved, or vice versa. Thus, Sunni theology encourages hope that **God will deal gently with those who erred without knowing**, while still affirming that the safe and assured path is to embrace Islam once one knows it to be true.

In summary, classical Sunnism is *exclusivist* in terms of truth (Islam is the true path), but it is *cautious and compassionate* regarding individuals' fates. Both Ash'arīs and Māturīdīs assert that God's perfect justice will handle cases of ignorance mercifully. *No one is damned for not following a prophet they never knew of*. As one modern scholar put it, *"the peoples of Europe and America [who only know a grotesque misrepresentation of Islam] may be considered a modern ahl al-fatrah"* – meaning their culpability is mitigated ¹⁴. Sunnis see Allah as **"Arḥam al-Rāḥimīn"** (Most Merciful of the merciful), who will not punish unfairly. At the same time, when the truth **has** been conveyed clearly, God's justice means a person is responsible for accepting it.

Classical Scholars on the Fate of Non-Muslims and Misguided Muslims

Throughout history, Sunni scholars have grappled with the fate of non-Muslims, sometimes offering surprisingly nuanced or lenient opinions. We find a spectrum from strict exclusivism to cautious inclusivism, always within the framework that Islam is the final, complete religion. Here are insights from some major classical scholars and juristic rulings (fatwas):

- **Imām al-Ghazālī (d. 1111):** Al-Ghazālī's view is remarkably compassionate. In his treatise *Fayṣal al-Tafriqa* (The Decisive Criterion), he divides non-Muslims into **three categories** and argues that two of those groups will not be punished in the Hereafter. He says in summary:
- **Those who never heard of Islam or the Prophet at all.** This includes people in far-flung lands or times before information traveled. Ghazālī says such people *"have never heard of Islam or the Prophet... Their judgment is based on the verse, 'We were not going to punish until We sent a messenger'"* (Q.17:15) ¹⁵. In other words, they are *excused entirely* and will not be punished by God for ignorance. They may attain salvation through God's mercy, since they had no opportunity to accept the message.
- **Those who heard of Islam accurately and refused it knowingly.** These he calls "active disbelievers." If someone has truly received the *complete* message of Islam "presented as it should be" – meaning they understood its truth and proofs – yet still rejected it out of pride or denial, *"if they die in that state they'll end up in Hell"* according to Ghazālī ¹⁶. This corresponds to the Qur'anic warnings that whoever knowingly rejects the Prophet after truth is clear is doomed (cf. Q.3:85, Q. 4:115). Ghazālī affirms the standard doctrine for this group.
- **Those who have heard of Islam only in a distorted or negative way.** Ghazālī gives a vivid description of this category: people who were told nothing but grotesque lies about Islam – e.g. *"they were told there was a liar who preached a false religion in the desert, where Muslims worship a moon-god, pray to a black box, oppress women, kill unbelievers and enslave,"* etc. ¹⁷. In other words, they heard of Muhammad *not as a true prophet*, but as a imposter or something repugnant. Al-Ghazālī says such persons **"are the same as those who have never heard anything about Islam, because in reality, given the lies they've been exposed to, they really haven't (heard the true message)."** ¹⁸. Therefore, he extends the **excuse of ignorance** to them as well. They would fall under God's mercy on Judgment Day, not automatic damnation.

Al-Ghazālī's stance is significant: it acknowledges that *God's mercy and justice cannot condemn people who only rejected a caricature of Islam rather than Islam itself*. He even notes that many Christians only know their faith as truth just as a Muslim knows Islam as truth, and that *"the mercy of God cannot be so constrained as to only save Muslims"* ¹⁹. Ghazālī's optimistic view holds that in the vast expanse of humanity, only a deliberate, knowledgeable rejecter of Prophet Muhammad is truly without excuse. This aligns with his broader theology that *God's compassion vastly outweighs His wrath*, and that humans should not dare limit God's mercy. His approach foreshadows later reformist views that emphasize the role of **"\` ` ignorance"** (jahil) as a potential excuse.

- **Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 1209):** As a leading Ash'arī theologian and Quran commentator, al-Rāzī largely reiterates the mainstream: Islam is necessary for salvation once its truth is established. In his *Tafsīr al-Kabīr*, Rāzī discusses verses like 2:62 and 5:69 at length. He notes the apparent meaning that

righteous Jews, Christians, and others have nothing to fear, but he then cites the interpretation of abrogation by 3:85 and the need to reconcile this with God's justice. Rāzī was deeply concerned with God's attributes of justice and wisdom. While he does not deviate from the exclusivist creed, he does emphasize that *God will provide guidance to sincere seekers*. Implicit in Rāzī's kalām discussions is that a person who, despite searching for truth, remains non-Muslim due to no fault of his own might be shown mercy by God. Al-Rāzī's Ash'arī leanings mean he endorsed the idea that **those unreached by the prophetic message are not accountable** (he upholds 17:15). In one discussion (concerning God's guidance), Rāzī even entertained the question of why some non-Muslims lead virtuous lives if they were meant to go to Hell – his answer was that such virtue will benefit them either via eventual conversion or at least a lighter judgment. Thus, Rāzī stays within orthodoxy but with an intellectual openness to God's grace on a case-by-case basis. (It's worth noting Rāzī fiercely opposed the Mu'tazilī idea that all unbaptized infants of polytheists go to Hell; he, like other Sunnis, affirmed they are saved, again underscoring the principle of *no punishment without culpability*.)

- **Ibn Taymiyyah (d. 1328):** Ibn Taymiyyah, a Hanbali jurist and theologian, took a strict view of *truth* but a surprisingly merciful view of *people's fate*. He insisted that outwardly, **Christianity and Judaism after the Prophet are invalid paths**, and he wrote polemics against their doctrines. Yet in his legal verdicts (*Fatāwā*), he strongly argues that **not all non-Muslims will automatically be in Hell**, particularly those who never understood Islam. Ibn Taymiyyah upheld the doctrine that on the Day of Judgment **God will test certain individuals who died without a fair chance to accept Islam**. Citing hadiths, he enumerated categories of people: those who were deaf, insane, senile, or died in periods without prophets – *“these people who did not receive the message in this world will be tested in the afterlife (Barzakh)”* ¹³. The hadith describes God commanding them to enter a symbolic fire; those who trust God and enter will find it cool and safe, thereby demonstrating their willingness to obey, and they will enter Paradise ¹². Ibn Taymiyyah and his pupil **Ibn al-Qayyim** embraced this hadith as genuine and extended its logic: **any person who, for example, only heard of Islam as distorted or was prevented from understanding it, falls under the *ahl al-fatra* and will not be punished without a test or proof** ²⁰ ²¹. Ibn Taymiyyah even wrote that if people heard *only slanders* about the Prophet – essentially hating a false image of him – *“as far as I am concerned, such people are excused like those whom the call of Islam has not reached”*, since *“while they have heard the Prophet's name, they heard the opposite of his true qualities.”* ²² This statement (attributed to Ibn Taymiyyah) mirrors exactly al-Ghazālī's third category. It shows the convergence in Sunni thought: no one is condemned for *ignorance that is not their fault*.

Furthermore, Ibn Taymiyyah believed that **God's mercy might even encompass some who *did* knowingly reject Islam** – though this was an unusual view and he was cautious here. Generally, he said a *qāṭi'* (stubborn rejecter of known truth) has no excuse. But he also recognized the subjective element: only God knows who truly recognized Islam as true versus who rejected a caricature or had psychological barriers. Thus, he urged Muslims not to declare specific individuals in Hell, since *only God knows the hearts*. Ibn Taymiyyah also softened on the fate of ignorant **Muslim** sinners and deviants (we'll discuss sects below) by invoking God's promise to eventually forgive those with even a mustard-seed of faith. In essence, Ibn Taymiyyah combined a **sharī'a rigor** (outwardly, Islam is absolutely required) with a **theological humility** (inwardly, God will handle the countless permutations of human ignorance justly).

- **Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya (d. 1350):** As Ibn Taymiyyah's disciple, Ibn Qayyim expanded on these ideas in works like *Ahkām Ahl al-Dhimma* and *Tārīq al-Hijratayn*. He details the fate of *“excused people”*: he lists **four types who will test God's justice plea** – identical to the hadith Ibn Taymiyyah cited (the

deaf, insane, senile, and those who never heard the message) ¹¹. Ibn al-Qayyim passionately argues that **Allah's overarching grace (luṭf)** would not punish someone until the truth was made *manifest* to them. He also mused on the fate of morally good non-Muslims, suggesting that their goodness might lead them to eventually accept Islam in the Hereafter or at least earn God's pity. In **Hādī al-Arwāḥ** and other writings he maintained the orthodox line (no salvation *outside* Islam) but with frequent reminders that *Allah knows best the inner state and outer circumstances of each soul*. For example, he wrote that on Judgment Day some will argue they never understood Islam, and Allah will test them then. Ibn Qayyim's writings are often empathetic, stressing God's names "The Most Merciful, Most Compassionate" and how on Judgment Day **Allah will manifest such mercy that even Iblīs (Satan) will hope for it** – a hyperbolic expression found in his text. This hyperbole aside, he still holds that one who **knowingly** rejects *tawḥīd* and the Prophet has no claim to Heaven – but again, how many people truly have *knowledge* as opposed to assumption? That determination is God's alone.

- **Other Scholars:** Many other Sunni scholars echoed these themes. **Imam al-Nawawī** (a foremost 13th-century jurist) we noted said those who die without da'wah (invitation) "*are granted Paradise*" directly ¹⁰. **Imam Ibn Ḥajar al-'Asqalānī** (d. 1449) in commentary on Bukhārī recognized the testing of *ahl al-fatrah*. **Al-Qurṭubī** in his *Tadhkira* (on death and the afterlife) lists the textual proofs that children of polytheists and the insane will not be punished – extending that to any similar cases of incapacity. We also have legal *fatwas* from bodies like the **Fatwa committee of al-Azhar** in modern times reaffirming that non-Muslims who never truly heard of Islam are "*ma'dhūr*" (excused) before God.

Importantly, Sunni tradition also differentiates between *general rule* and *specific individuals*. The **general rule** is: "*Unbelief (kufr) leads to Hell, belief (īmān) leads to Paradise.*" But when it comes to **specific people**, the Sunni position is we cannot definitively judge the fate of a particular non-Muslim (or even a particular Muslim!). Classical scholars routinely said "**we leave their affair to Allah.**" This is rooted in prophetic reports and the uncertainty of someone's inner state at death. Sunni scholars only pronounce *in general terms*: e.g. "*Whoever died associating partners with Allah will not be forgiven (Q.4:48)*". But they stop short of pointing at *John or Zhang or Ram* and saying "that person is certainly in Hell," because they acknowledge only God knows what message that person received and what is in their heart at death ²³. This attitude is itself a mercy, discouraging a judgmental stance. We even find stories in ḥadīth of people who appeared to be disbelievers outwardly but had some kernel of faith that saved them by Allah's leave.

In summary, **classical Sunni scholars overwhelmingly upheld exclusivism as doctrine** – Islam is the only path that guarantees salvation – yet **many allowed for God's mercy to cover individuals outside formal Islam due to ignorance or circumstance**. Al-Ghazālī optimistically thought vast swathes of non-Muslims (those never truly reached or properly informed) will be saved ²⁴ ¹⁸. Ibn Taymiyyah and Ibn al-Qayyim introduced the concept of afterlife tests for the uninformed ¹¹ ¹². Across the board, they forbade judging *individuals'* destinies, emphasizing that *God alone knows each person's proof and inner state*. Theologically, this spectrum shows Sunnism's attempt to uphold the finality of Islam **without negating** God's fairness and compassion toward every human being.

Reformist and Modern Sunni Voices on Religious Others' Salvation

In the modern period, a number of Sunni scholars and reformers revisited these questions in light of global interfaith contact and contemporary values of tolerance. They often built on the leniencies found in earlier

thought and sometimes went further, arguing for a more inclusive understanding of salvation (*at least for sincere monotheists*). Let us consider a few prominent figures:

- **Muḥammad ‘Abduh (d. 1905) and Rashīd Riḍā (d. 1935):** ‘Abduh, a pioneer of Islamic modernism, and his disciple Riḍā (author of *Tafsīr al-Manār*) emphasized God’s justice and the ethical core of religion. In commenting on Qur’an 2:62, they rejected the narrow reading that it was “abrogated” by 3:85. Instead, *al-Manār* tafsīr suggests that 2:62 states a **“universal salvation principle”**: that any person – Muslim or non-Muslim – *“who truly believes in God and the Last Day and does good deeds shall have no fear or grief.”* They understood this verse as repudiating the *Jews’ and Christians’ monopoly on salvation* and also as an invitation to them to embrace Islam’s pure monotheism ²⁵ ²⁶. Rashīd Riḍā went a step further in differentiating between *nominal exposure* to Islam and *real understanding*. He argued that **people cannot be deemed to have “rejected” Islam unless the message reached them in an attractive, compelling manner** – meaning they saw Islam’s truths in a convincing light ¹⁴. If the only exposure someone has to Islam is through negative propaganda or bad examples, then in Riḍā’s view they have not truly *“heard”* the message. He wrote that such people will be judged by God “according to the standards of what they *did* know to be true and good” ¹⁴. Notably, Riḍā’s stance was later **seconded by Shaykh Yūsuf al-Qaradāwī** ¹⁴, creating a modern scholarly echo: both held that *ordinary non-Muslims today, especially in the West, who only encounter Islam through media misrepresentation or Muslims’ poor behavior, are akin to Ahl al-Fatrah*. They will not be automatically condemned; rather, *God will assess them based on their sincere beliefs and moral actions* in whatever framework they had.

Muḥammad ‘Abduh himself, in his writings, stressed that **God’s mercy and wisdom would not make mere labels (Muslim vs. non-Muslim) the sole criterion for Paradise**. What matters is belief in One God and righteousness. He was cautious not to encourage religious relativism – he upheld Islam as the truest expression of tawḥīd. But he opened the door to hope that a righteous Christian, for example, might find grace with God. This was a significant shift in tone from medieval polemics. Abduh’s Quran commentary on 5:69, for instance, suggests that *ahl al-kitāb* (People of the Book) who *truly* believe in God and do good have a reward – implying that if they don’t know about Islam’s Prophet through no fault of their own, they are not doomed. Such interpretations were part of a broader modernist trend to highlight the Qur’an’s **“anti-exclusivist ethos”**: the Qur’an often criticizes Jews or Christians for claiming they alone are saved (e.g. 2:111–112) and instead says *whoever submits to God and does right* will be rewarded ²⁵. Reformists latched onto these verses to argue against a rigid *“no salvation outside Islam”* dogma, presenting Islam as generous and universal.

- **Yūsuf al-Qaradāwī (d. 2022):** Qaradāwī, a prominent contemporary Sunni jurist, explicitly addressed the fate of non-Muslims in several fatwas and writings. He maintained a careful balance. On one hand, he reaffirmed that *“Islam is the sure path to salvation”* and that one who knowingly rejects it endangers his Hereafter. On the other hand, Qaradāwī strongly criticized the attitude of damning all non-Muslims wholesale. He noted that **the question of individuals’ salvation is ultimately in Allah’s hands**, and Muslims should not play God. Qaradāwī highlighted the many mitigating factors (the very ones we have discussed: ignorance, miscommunication, cultural barriers). In agreement with Riḍā, he wrote that *modern communications may spread as many misconceptions as facts about Islam*, so it’s very possible a decent non-Muslim never had a clear chance to understand it. He mocked the simplistic notion that *all* conflicts with non-Muslims are due to religious differences, pointing out that Islam demands justice and good conduct with others.

In a published fatwa, Qaradāwī stated that **righteous non-Muslims who** never truly comprehended Islam may be forgiven by Allah. **He even permitted prayers for guidance and mercy for non-Muslims (within certain limits), breaking with a more stringent interpretation of 9:113.** He often reminded audiences of the Prophetic tradition that *a man will be resurrected by the One he truly worshiped* – suggesting that if a person was honestly devoted to God as they knew Him (even via another religion), God will not wrong them. Qaradāwī’s nuanced position basically says: **We know Islam is the safest path to Paradise, but we do not know the fate of specific individuals who didn’t embrace it. That is for God to judge according to His perfect justice. One of Qaradāwī’s notable lines was that “there is a difference between the legal status of a kāfir in this world and the ultimate fate of that person in Allah’s sight”. Legally, a non-Muslim is not a Muslim (thus differing laws may apply in some aspects), but on the Day of Judgment, that person might not be a ‘kāfir’ in Allah’s eyes if his circumstances absolve him** ¹⁴. This distinction shows a sophisticated understanding that the term “kāfir” (unbeliever) in the Qur’an is primarily a theological term for one who knowingly rejects truth**, not a blanket label for everyone outside the Muslim fold regardless of context ²⁷ ²⁸. Qaradāwī’s views influenced many, as he was widely respected; he effectively popularized the idea that we hope for God’s mercy for well-meaning followers of other faiths.

- **Javed Ahmad Ghamidi (b. 1951):** Ghamidi, a Pakistani scholar, is known for his Quran-centric and context-driven interpretations. He has spoken extensively on this topic. Ghamidi emphasizes the Qur’anic concept of *“Itmām al-Hujjah”* – the complete establishment of proof. He argues that the Quran’s severe warnings of Hell (for disbelief) primarily applied to the direct addressees of the Prophet Muhammad who witnessed the truth plainly (through miracles, the Prophet’s character, etc.) and still rejected it. Those people had no excuse. After the Prophet, Islam spread through preaching, but **not everyone who remains non-Muslim is in the same category as Abu Jahl** (the Prophet’s opponent who rejected despite knowing in his heart it was true). Ghamidi holds that if a person *honestly* cannot see Islam as true – perhaps due to upbringing or biases they aren’t even aware of – **God will judge them on their own terms.** He often says, *“We are not the judges; Allah did not give us the list of who goes to Heaven or Hell. Our job is to convey the message and live by it.”* In a public Q&A, when asked *“Will non-Muslims go to Heaven?”*, Ghamidi responded: *If they did not willingly deny a truth after recognizing it, then yes, it is possible for them to go to Heaven by God’s mercy.* He elaborated that *on the Day of Judgment, God might forgive those who were good and righteous but never understood Islam properly.* Ghamidi even permits **praying for the forgiveness** of deceased non-Muslims (contrary to the strict reading of 9:113), asserting that the Qur’anic prohibition was specific to the Prophet’s situation with known enemies of God. In his view, one may ask Allah to forgive a kind neighbor or friend who was of another faith, entrusting that person to Allah’s mercy (since ultimately, *Allah alone knows their inner state*). This indicates Ghamidi leans toward a very **inclusive outlook**: one that places the emphasis on *personal integrity and faith in God (in whatever form one knew Him)* over formal labels. Essentially, he argues that a *muwahhid* (monotheist) who lived righteously could attain salvation even if they never formally became Muslim. Like others, he upholds that *conscious rejection* of the Prophet is damning, but he questions how many people actually reject Islam with full knowledge that it is true. Ghamidi’s positions, while controversial to some conservatives, are rooted in classical ideas of God’s justice and the Prophet’s Sunnah of compassion.

- **Other Modern Voices:** The trend among many 20th-century scholars has been toward **greater hope for non-Muslims** without abandoning the uniqueness of Islam. For example, **Fazlur Rahman** (d. 1988), a modernist theologian, wrote that verses like 2:62 are *“obvious in meaning: that those –*

from any section of humankind – who believe in God and the Last Day and do good deeds are saved”, and he said this conclusion was “an inevitable result of God’s boundless mercy.” ²⁹ . **Farid Esack**, a South African Muslim thinker, advocates what he calls “*moral theism*” – that sincere faith in God and good works, even outside Islam, can be salvific. These views are sometimes termed “**covenantal pluralism**,” suggesting that prior covenants (like the Mosaic and Christian dispensations) might retain some salvific validity by God’s permission ³⁰ ²⁶ . While such ideas are debated, they show the broadening of Sunni discourse. Crucially, even those who argue for “salvation for all good people” acknowledge that this was not a dominant pre-modern view – rather, it’s a contemporary interpretation influenced by global interreligious awareness ³¹ .

It should be noted, however, that **not all modern Sunnis agree on this inclusivism**. Some, especially in more conservative or Salafī circles, maintain a stricter stance: *only Muslims enter Paradise (with the caveat of excusing the unreached)*. They worry that too much lenience undermines the urgency of da’wah and the distinctive truth of Islam. Scholars like **Muḥammad Sālīḥ al-‘Uthaymīn** and others have issued fatwas reaffirming that anyone who heard of Islam and did not accept it is destined for Hell – leaving the matter of ignorance to God but not venturing an expansive hope. They often quote the hadith, “*No one hears of me, whether Jew or Christian, then dies not having believed in my message, except that he will be among the inhabitants of Hellfire.*” To such scholars, the path of safety is very narrow. However, they still usually acknowledge that those who *truly never heard* or were incapable are exempted. The dividing line is how generously one defines “*never truly heard.*” Reformists define it broadly (including distorted hearing), conservatives define it narrowly.

In summary, **reformist Sunni voices like ‘Abduh, Riḍā, Qaradāwī, and Ghamidi have stretched the circle of potential salvation wider** – especially for *ahl al-kitāb* and other monotheists – by appealing to the Quran’s own words and the inexhaustible mercy of God. They encourage Muslims to view virtuous non-Muslims with hope, not damning judgment. This does not mean they regard other religions as equal paths in terms of theology (they still hold Islam correct and others mistaken on points), but it means in the *akhirah* (Hereafter) a person’s sincerity and effort to find the truth will not go unrewarded. The core ethical takeaway these scholars give is: **Muslims must convey Islam beautifully and stand for its truth, but they must leave judgment of souls to Allah**. As al-Qaradāwī put it, on the Day of Judgment “*Allah may surprise us by His mercy; the gates of His heaven are not ours to shut or open.*”

Intra-Sunni and Inter-Sectarian Perspectives on Salvation

Sunni Islam not only considered non-Muslim outsiders, but also debated the fate of various **intra-Muslim sects** and heterodox groups. A consistent theme in Sunni creed is a relative *inclusivity towards anyone who professes Islam*, coupled with condemnation of certain deviant beliefs. The Prophet’s famous prediction – “*My Ummah will split into 73 sects; all of them will be in Hellfire except one*” – was often cited. However, **Sunni scholars clarified that those “72 sects” in error are still part of the Ummah and “should not be called disbelievers, because they are Ahl al-Qibla”** (people who face the Ka’ba in prayer) ³² . In other words, **Sunni orthodoxy generally considered even deviant Muslim sects as Muslims**, albeit sinful or misguided ones, so long as they did not reject fundamental tenets of faith. This has direct implications for salvation:

- **People of the Qibla:** The broad Sunni creed (e.g. as articulated by Imam al-Tahāwī and others) states: “*We do not excommunicate anyone of the Muslims (Ahl al-Qibla) for a sin, nor do we say anyone who prays toward Mecca will definitely be in Paradise or Hell. We leave their fate to Allah.*” The term **Ahl al-Qibla** refers to anyone who professes Islam and prays – essentially all Muslim sects, unless they

negate the pillars of faith. Sunni authorities like al-Ghazālī and Ibn Taymiyyah stressed that **a Muslim erring in interpretation is not a kāfir unless he denies a core “known-by-necessity” element of Islam** (e.g. the oneness of God, the prophethood of Muhammad, the obligation of prayer, etc.). Thus, groups like the Khawārij, Shī’a, Qadarīya, Jahmīya, etc., though labeled “innovators” (ahl al-bid’ah), were still usually treated as *errant Muslims* rather than non-believers. The quote above from a traditional source encapsulates it: “*The 72 groups of bid’ah which will go to Hell should not be called disbelievers, because they are Ahl al-Qibla*” ³². Only those among them who explicitly deny an “indispensably required” article of faith would be considered outside Islam ³². This generous stance means that, **in Sunni belief, any person who dies as a Muslim (even a sinful or heretical Muslim) has a hope of eventual salvation**. They may face punishment for their wrongs – even being consigned to Hell temporarily – but ultimately, because they affirmed the One God and His Messenger, they are not eternally barred from Paradise ³³. Sunni hadith affirm that “*whoever has even a mustard-seed of faith will eventually be taken out of Hellfire*.” Imām al-Subki summed it up: “*God will take out of the Fire everyone who has said lā ilāha illā Allāh... all but the mushrikūn (idolaters) have the possibility of being saved*.” ³³. By **mushrikūn**, he means those who nullified their Islam by polytheism or equivalent – which none of the 72 sects claimed to be doing, however deviant their ideas.

- **Sunni vs. Shī’a:** Sunnis historically viewed the mainstream Shī’a (e.g. Ithnā ‘Asharī/Twelve Shī’ism and Zaydīs) as *Islamic sects*, not outside the fold. There were periods of takfīr (excommunication) polemics on both sides, especially over extreme views. But influential Sunni scholars like *Al-Ghazālī* argued that **Twelver Shī’ites are Muslims** – he refuted their doctrines but did not consider them non-Muslim. The Shī’a pray, fast, and declare *lā ilāha illā Allāh muḥammad rasūl Allāh*. So by the criterion of *ahl al-qibla*, they qualify as believers. Sunnis did condemn certain Shī’ī sub-sects as heretical (e.g. the Ismā’īlī or “Seveners” at times, or Nusayrī/Alawites who deified Imam ‘Alī – effectively committing shirk). Those extreme groups were often regarded as **non-Muslim** due to clear violations of tawḥīd or the finality of prophethood. But the **majority of Shī’a** who simply have different views on the succession of leadership, but worship Allah alone and revere the Prophet, are not cut off from salvation in Sunni eyes. A Sunni might believe a Shī’ī committed bid’ah (innovation) by, say, cursing some Companions or believing in the Imams’ near-infallibility, etc., and that *because of these sins or errors they might enter Hell temporarily*. Yet, ultimately, as long as that Shī’ī did not deny something like the Quran or the prophethood of Muhammad, Sunnis would say *their fate is with God and we hope He forgives them as fellow Muslims*. Indeed, in recent times many Sunni and Shī’a scholars have emphasized common belief in God and His Messenger and the Qur’an, stating that our differences do not negate our shared faith in Islam’s fundamentals. The Amman Declaration (2005), for instance, recognized the Ja’farī Shī’a school as part of Islam.

- **Sufis and Other Sub-traditions:** Sufism is not a sect but a spiritual orientation within Sunni (and Shī’a) Islam. Sunnis traditionally included Sufism as an integral part of the faith (e.g. Imām al-Ghazālī was a Sufi). Occasional tensions arose when some Sufis espoused pantheistic-sounding ideas (e.g. Ibn ‘Arabī’s *wahdat al-wujūd*, unity of being). Conservative ‘ulamā’ sometimes accused such ideas of heresy, even kufr. Yet, by and large, those Sufis were charitable in their interpretations (saying Ibn ‘Arabī meant unity in a mystical sense, not actual identity with God, etc.). Consequently, **the vast majority of Sufis were considered Ahl al-Qibla**. Sunnis did not question their salvation; in fact, many Sunni scholars themselves were Sufis who stressed God’s love and mercy. Only if a particular Sufi practitioner fell into *literal* worship of graves or saints (seen as *shirk*) would puritanical Sunnis claim they endangered their soul. But again, they would try to explain it away or correct it rather

than declare them non-Muslim. It's telling that even Ibn Taymiyyah, a critic of certain Sufi excesses, still praised the sincere Sufis and did not deny their Islam. The inclusive principle stands: *If someone declares the shahāda (testimony of faith) and doesn't openly renounce Islam's essentials, we count them among the believers.* Their deviance might earn punishment, but not permanent damnation.

- **Khawārij and other early sects:** The Khawārij (Kharijites) of early Islam took an extremely harsh view, declaring major sinners among Muslims to be disbelievers. Sunnis opposed this theology and deliberately took a more merciful stance. Classic Sunni position (articulated by scholars like Ibn 'Abbās and later Imām al-Tahāwī) was: *"A Muslim does not exit the faith due to committing sins, even major ones, as long as he does not declare the sin lawful."* This principle was a direct refutation of Khārijite exclusivism. Ironically, regarding the Khawārij themselves, Sunnis considered *them* a deviant sect but still (generally) within Islam. The Caliph 'Alī fought the militant Khawārij, but when asked if they were unbelievers, he said, *"No, they are our brothers who have rebelled against us."* That nuanced answer set a tone: rebellious, extremist Muslims might be fought or punished in this life for their terror, but if they truly thought they were serving God, their status in the Hereafter is up to God. Sunnis often cited the hadith about the 72 misguided groups to remind that *even the misguided are not totally cut off.* So, a Kharijite might "go to Hell" according to one hadith – but Sunni commentators like al-Bayhaqī clarify this means **they are deserving of punishment**, not that they are *kuffār* forever ³⁴. They can be forgiven after purgation because they still affirmed Islam. The same logic extended to groups like the Mu'tazila (rationalist theologians) or others: Sunnis opposed their doctrines, sometimes called them *ahl al-bid'ah*, but usually did **not** pronounce takfir on them outright.

- **Ahl al-Kitāb (People of the Book):** Within Sunni discussions of salvation, Jews and Christians (and by extension Sabians or others with scriptures) hold a unique place. While not *within* the Islamic fold, they are given a higher status than pagans in the Qur'an. Sunnis believe that *before* the Prophet Muhammad, righteous Jews and Christians **were** on a valid path to God – those who followed Moses or Jesus in their original teachings were true believers. After Islam's coming, Sunnis hold that those communities should acknowledge the Prophet Muhammad (as he is foretold in their scriptures). Many Sunnis, however, felt uncomfortable consigning all Jews and Christians to Hell, especially given Qur'an 2:62 and 5:69. The reconciliation was typically: **Jews and Christians who died after hearing of Islam "in a convincing way" and still rejected it are accountable (and likely not saved), whereas those who never truly understood have an excuse.** Sunnis also often express hope for *Ahl al-Kitāb* who, while not Muslim, lived piously according to whatever remnants of pure monotheism they had. Some even argue that these faithful might attain a lesser degree of Paradise (without necessarily the same rank as Muslims). This opinion is not universal, but it exists in the literature. An example sometimes given is **ḥadīth** reports of the Prophet saying his mother (who died before his mission) will be tested or perhaps saved – illustrating that even someone who died apparently a non-Muslim might not be punished if they hadn't knowingly rejected the truth. Sunni scholars, when addressing common folk, often say: *"We don't say all Christians are definitely in Hell. We say whoever dies attributing partners to God after knowing the truth will not be saved – and God knows who has knowledge."* This nuance is important. It allows Sunnis to maintain that *theologically*, for instance, believing Jesus is God's son is *shirk* (which is unforgivable if not repented ⁷), but *psychologically*, the Christian who grew up with that belief might not have culpability if they never understood tawḥīd properly. It's a fine line but one that classical and modern Sunnis walk in order to be fair.

In practical terms, **Sunni Islam's approach to sects and other faiths is marked by a reluctance to declare anyone hopelessly damned except those clearly outside tawḥīd.** There is a well-known maxim: *"We judge according to the outward, and Allah judges the inward."* Outwardly, Sunnis considered *mushrikūn* (idolaters) to be on a path to Hell – but inwardly, there might be individuals among them who knew no better, whom Allah will pardon. Outwardly, Sunnis considered heterodox Muslim sectarians to be sinful or astray – but inwardly, they may have been sincere albeit mistaken, and Allah can forgive. In **no case do Sunnis ever presume to limit God's forgiveness**, except where He Himself has delineated (as in the case of dying upon shirk, and even that *could* be excused by lack of knowledge as we saw).

One of the **Prophet's hadith** often invoked in this context is: *"Whoever says lā ilāha illā Allāh (there is no God but Allah) and has even a mustard seed of faith in his heart will eventually enter Jannah."* Sunnis interpreted this to mean **any Muslim, even a terribly sinful or heretical one, will not remain in Hell forever.** This is a key difference between Sunni theology and the Kharijite/Mu'tazilite positions historically – Sunnis championed the idea that *faith will save in the long run.* So for a Sunnī, a Shī'ī Muslim – despite disagreements – is a believer whose *testimony of faith* will, by Allah's grace, not be in vain. The same logic does not automatically extend to a Christian or Hindu, because they lack the Islamic shahāda – but as we have seen, modern Sunnis have found ways to be hopeful for them too by invoking God's mercy and the possibility of hidden belief (e.g. maybe a given Christian was actually worshipping one God sincerely and only erring in terminology, etc.).

To crystallize **comparative views:** Sunnis traditionally draw the widest circle around *"Muslims"* – virtually all who profess Islam are given the benefit of the doubt and considered eligible for salvation (though perhaps after punishment). For *"People of the Book,"* Sunnis show respect and a guarded hope (especially if they were morally upright and monotheistic), but assert that rejecting the Prophet is a grave matter. For *polytheists or atheists,* Sunnis have the least optimism, since both shirk and outright disbelief in God contradict the very heart of salvation in Islam. Yet even there, they introduce the caveat of ignorance. In effect:

- **Sunni vs Shi'i vs Kharijite vs Sufi, etc (Intra-Muslim):** "We're all part of the Ummah if we worship Allah alone and accept His Prophet; some will be saved outright, others may be punished for errors but ultimately saved. *'Allāh will not deny any who have even an atom of faith their eventual reward.'*" ³³
- **Sunni vs People of Book (Jews/Christians):** "They are closest to us. If they sincerely followed their prophets and didn't understand about Muhammad, we hope Allah rewards their good and forgives them by virtue of their monotheism and virtue. If they knowingly rejected Islam, then we leave their matter to Allah – He has told us that's a great sin, but He also said *He is most merciful.* We certainly know righteous People of the Book *are not equal* to willful disbelievers in God ²⁷ ³⁵ ; the Qur'an itself praises some of them (Q.3:113). So perhaps those are the ones meant in 2:62 who *'shall have no fear.'*"
- **Sunni vs others (polytheists, etc.):** "We affirm the Quran's judgment that idol-worship is a heinous error. Those who heard the call to pure monotheism and still worship idols have no excuse on Judgment Day. However, if someone was never invited to tawḥīd properly, Allah may excuse them. Our duty is to convey tawḥīd, not to pass final verdict on individuals. Many polytheists in history embraced Islam when they finally learned it; who knows if someone died before getting that chance? So we consign them to Allah's judgment."

Throughout these, **the theological and ethical stance of Sunnis is one of hopeful caution.** They **do not endorse a blanket "all religions are equal"** (that would contradict the Qur'an's insistence on Islam's truth), but they also **reject a blanket "all non-Sunnis burn in Hell."** The saved/damned binary is ultimately seen as **Allah's decision, made with perfect justice and mercy, which humans cannot fully predict.**

To end this section, consider a direct quote from a traditional text that exemplifies Sunni moderation: *“The 72 groups of bid’ah...will go to Hell (for their wrongdoing), but they should not be called disbelievers, for they are people of the Qibla”* ³² . This encapsulates how Sunnis can simultaneously warn of Hell as a consequence of grave errors, yet stop short of denying the errant the label of *believer*. And because they remain believers, *“no one who said lā ilāha illā Allāh will remain in Hell eternally”* according to Sunni creed ³³ .

Conclusion: The Sunni Spectrum on Salvation and Its Implications

Sunni Islam, in its classical and contemporary interpretations, offers a **spectrum of views on salvation** – from a strict exclusivism that centers Islam as the only path, to a more inclusive hope that God’s mercy can embrace righteous souls beyond the visible fold of Islam. This spectrum is not a chaotic contradiction, but rather a nuanced continuum grounded in the Qur’an’s own multi-layered pronouncements and the Prophetic teachings.

On one end, **the dominant classical stance** is clear: *“Truly, the religion in the sight of Allah is Islam”* (Q.3:19). Salvation is guaranteed only through accepting the message of Muhammad – those who knowingly reject it have been warned of eternal loss ⁸ ³⁶ . Sunni theologians reinforced this by interpreting verses like 2:62 in a time-bound way (for prior nations) or as conditional (for those who would also accept Muhammad if alive then) ¹ ³ . The **ethical impulse** behind this view is loyalty to the finality of the Prophet’s message and an impetus for mission: if indeed only Muslims are saved, it compels Muslims to spread Islam and it cautions Muslims against religious complacency or relativism. It also upholds **God’s truthfulness** – that He sent Islam as a mercy and guidance to all humanity, not as one option among many equal truths.

On the other end, Sunni thought also contains **notes of inclusivity and mercy** that prevent exclusivism from becoming harsh or unjust. The Qur’an repeatedly describes God as *“Raḥmān Raḥīm”* (Most Gracious, Most Merciful) and declares *“My mercy encompasses all things”*. It acknowledges the goodness of some People of the Book (Q.3:113-115) and forbids blanket condemnation in worldly matters (Q.49:11-12). Classical scholars like al-Ghazālī and Ibn Taymiyyah tapped into these themes, carving out space for the ignorant and the misinformed to be saved ²⁴ ¹³ . Modern scholars like Qaradāwī and Ghamidi have built upon that, urging today’s Muslims to remember that *guidance ultimately comes from Allah* and that He judges each soul individually, not by our sectarian labels ¹⁴ .

Thus, the **“Sunni interpretive spectrum”** ranges from **hard exclusivism** (only conscious Muslims are saved) to a form of **soft inclusivism** (others can be saved by God’s grace, especially if they hadn’t truly understood Islam). What unites this spectrum is a common theology: **tawḥīd (true belief in one God) and acceptance of God’s guidance are necessary for salvation**, but **God’s justice and mercy guarantee that no one will be punished for ignorance or incapacity**. All Sunni views revolve around these poles – God’s oneness and guidance on one hand, His justice and mercy on the other.

The **theological implications** are profound. Sunni Islam holds that while truth is objective (Islam), access to truth is subjective. Therefore, accountability is proportionate to access. This prevents what could otherwise be a morally troubling scenario of good, kind people being damned for accidents of birth. It also provides a rationalization for the fate of billions who lived before Islam or beyond its reach – a question every universal religion must address. Sunnis answer it by entrusting those people to God’s justice, often imagining a test in the Hereafter or a merciful exemption ²⁰ ¹² . At the same time, Sunnis avoid the extreme of saying “all good people automatically go to Heaven regardless of faith,” because that would nullify the Qur’anic

urgency about accepting God's revelation. Instead, they maintain a tension: **outwardly, Islam is the path to salvation; inwardly, Allah may save whom He wills, and He wills not to punish any unfairly** ⁹ ¹⁴ .

The **ethical implications** for Sunni Muslims are equally significant. First, it engenders *humility*. A Sunni believer is taught not to play God in judging others' afterlife. One should neither declare a specific non-Muslim to be in Hell (since they might have an excuse or even died upon secret faith), nor declare a specific Muslim definitely in Paradise (since they might have hidden sins or hypocrisy). As the Qur'an says, "*Do not claim yourselves to be pure; He knows best who is truly righteous*" (Q.53:32) ³⁷ . This humility tends to produce a cautious optimism: *we hope the best for others and fear for ourselves*.

Second, it reinforces *responsibility in da'wah*: knowing that Islam is the clearest path to salvation, Sunnis feel duty-bound to convey it. However, knowing that God can save the unreached also means Muslims should not coerce or panic; Allah guides whom He wills. Our job is to communicate the message "in the most beautiful manner" (Q.16:125) and leave hearts to God.

Third, it promotes *tolerance and coexistence*. If a Sunni Muslim believes that their Christian neighbor or Hindu coworker **might** be saved by God's mercy (especially if that person is kind and upright), it can foster genuine respect and friendship. Historically, this theological stance translated into relatively harmonious living: Muslims could acknowledge the good in their non-Muslim compatriots and trust final judgment to God, rather than seeing them purely as "infidels" destined for Hell. This does not mean theological agreement – Sunnis still believe those people hold errors in creed – but it tempers how Muslims view the person behind the creed. In medieval Islamic civilization, for instance, the concept of "*Ahl al-Kitāb*" allowed Muslims to see Jews and Christians as part of a common Abrahamic community under God, even as they debated theology.

Finally, the Sunni discourse on salvation highlights a core Islamic ethical principle: **God is absolutely just, and God is absolutely merciful**. Any view of salvation must honor both. Sunnis consistently rejected the idea (attributed to some extreme sects) that a person could be thrown into Hell *without* having had a chance to know the truth – that would violate God's justice. They also rejected the idea that God's mercy would contradict His promises – so they didn't, for example, say "God will save everyone regardless of faith," because that would make meaningless His warnings to unbelievers. Instead, they charted a middle course that takes all scriptural indications into account.

In conclusion, **Sunni Islam's view on the salvation of others is neither black-and-white damnation nor a blanket free pass**. It is a thoughtful, multi-faceted approach that asserts Islam's unique role in salvation history while leaving the door of Allah's mercy open a crack for others. As one hadith states, on the Day of Resurrection a banner will be raised for each community and **the banner of mercy will be the largest of all**. Sunnis live in hope that many will be gathered under that banner by Allah's grace – Muslims first and foremost, but also those "others" whom Allah, in His infinite wisdom and mercy, knows were "*almost Muslim*" in spirit if not in name.

In the end, the Sunni Muslim rests on this prayer from the Qur'an: "*Our Lord, You encompass all things in mercy and knowledge, so forgive those who repented and followed Your path*" (Q.40:7). Who ultimately *followed His path* is for Him alone to decide. Our role is to follow the path ourselves, invite others with wisdom and compassion, and entrust the rest to "**Malik Yawm al-Dīn**" – the Master of the Day of Judgment – Who will judge **with absolute justice and unbounded mercy**.

Sources:

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- Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr al-Qurʾān al-ʿAzīm*, on 2:62 and 3:85 – quoting Ibn ʿAbbās on abrogation ³ ⁴ .
- Ibn Taymiyyah, *Majmūʿ al-Fatāwā*, vol.35 p.227-228 – on the interpretation of 2:62 before abrogation ⁵ . Also his view (reported in *Sharḥ Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim* by al-Nawawī) that those who never received the message are “excused” and will be tested ¹⁰ ¹³ .
- *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, hadith on the categories to be tested in the Hereafter, and commentary by al-Nawawī ¹³ ¹¹ .
- Al-Ghazālī, *Fayṣal al-Tafrīqa bayna l-Islām wa-l-Zandaqa* – classification of non-Muslims into three groups and salvation for two of them ¹⁵ ¹⁷ .
- Mohamed Ghilan, “Where’s the Mercy?” (2013) – summarizing al-Ghazālī’s stance in modern terms ²⁴ ¹⁸ .
- Yūsuf al-Qaradāwī, *Ghayr al-Muslimīn fī l-Mujtamaʿ al-Islāmī* and various fatwas – advocating that those who haven’t heard Islam attractively are like *ahl al-fatrah* ¹⁴ .
- Rashīd Riḍā, *Tafsīr al-Manār* (vol.1) – commentary on 2:62 and argument that true belief and goodness are what count, with the message needing to be heard compellingly ¹⁴ .
- Jonathan Brown, “The Fate of Non-Muslims” (Yaqeen Institute, 2018) – overview of classical and modern perspectives, including quotes of Riḍā and Qaradāwī ¹⁴ ²⁵ .
- Walī Allāh al-Dihlawī, *Hujjatullāh al-Bāligha* – discusses hadith of salvation and the expansiveness of divine mercy for believers of all kinds.
- Public statements by Javed Ahmad Ghamidi (various lectures and Q&A sessions) – arguing for permissibility of praying for non-Muslims and leaving their judgment to God (paraphrased in text, reflecting his approach in sources like ²⁷ ²⁸).
- *Al-Fiqh al-Akbar* (attributed to Abū Ḥanīfa) and *Aqīdah al-Taḥāwīyya* – creed texts affirming not to excommunicate Ahl al-Qibla for sins and that all believers will eventually enter Paradise.
- Masʿūd Co. UK Fatwa, “Who are Ahl al-Sunnah?” – quoting scholars on not labeling heretical Muslims as disbelievers ³² .
- *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* and *Muslim*, Kitāb al-Īmān – numerous hadith about even the least faith eventually meriting salvation (e.g. the famous intercession hadith where Allah says “remove from Hell whoever has even a dinar’s weight of faith... half a dinar... a mustard seed,” etc.). ³³ .
- The Qurʾān, as translated in context: 2:62, 3:85, 4:48, 9:113, 5:69, 3:113-115, 17:15 among others ⁶ ²⁰ ²⁵ ³³ .

¹ ² ⁸ ²⁷ ²⁸ ³⁵ Quran contradicting statements about non Muslims : r/DebateReligion
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