ChatGPT

Universal Salvation, Conflict, and Scriptural Emphasis in Islam, Christianity, and Judaism

Abstract

This report investigates the claim that "universal salvation is a luxury of peaceful times," focusing on how communities—especially Muslims, but also Christians and Jews—foreground different strands of their sacred canons depending on whether the surrounding environment rewards coexistence or intensifies rivalry. In Islamic scripture, verses such as 2:62 and 5:69 appear to promise divine reward to Jews, Christians, and others who believe in God, the Last Day, and live righteously, while other passages (often read as exclusivist) frame *islām* as the only acceptable *dīn* and associate salvation with recognizing the final revelation. Modern scholarship shows that these tensions are not merely "contradictions" to be resolved, but a durable repertoire from which interpreters select through methods like abrogation claims, semantic widening (e.g., *islām* as "submission"), and moral responsibility theories (e.g., accountability depends on receiving the message). Comparable debates exist in Christianity and Judaism, where universalist, inclusivist, and exclusivist impulses coexist in canon and tradition. Social science research suggests why conflict environments make "punitive" interpretations psychologically functional: they help consolidate the in-group, morally exclude enemies, and cognitively justify harm. Yet the evidence also complicates the thesis: inclusive interpretations can arise in politically tense contexts when cooperation, "superordinate goals," or moral leadership makes pluralism advantageous rather than naïve. [1]

The Qur'anic "two-sided coin" on salvation

A strong basis for *apparently inclusive* soteriology in the Qur'an [2] is the recurring formula: belief in God and the Last Day plus righteous action yields reward and freedom from fear and grief. The most cited statement is 2:62, which explicitly lists "believers" alongside Jews, Christians, and Sabians under those conditions. [3] A near-parallel appears in 5:69, repeating the same structure with essentially the same communities and criteria. [4] This repetition matters for interpretation: the inclusive-sounding promise is not a solitary line but a theme echoed across the text. [5]

The Qur'an also denies *other people's* exclusivist claims in a way that resembles a general principle: it reports Jews and Christians saying none will enter Paradise except their own, then challenges them to produce proof (2:111), and immediately counters that reward belongs to whoever "submits themselves to Allah and does good" (2:112). [6] This pairing is important because it frames "salvation talk" as a problem of boundary-making and then re-centers the criterion on devotion and moral conduct. [6] In the same spirit, 3:113–115 tells readers that the "People of the Book" are not all alike; among them is an upright group devoted to worship and good deeds, whose good will not be "denied." [7]

The *apparently exclusivist* side of the coin appears in verses widely invoked to argue that only Islam is acceptable to God. 3:19 states that the religion (*dīn*) with God is *islām*, and 3:85 adds that whoever seeks a *dīn* other than *islām* will not have it accepted and will be among the losers in the Hereafter. [8] 5:3 (often treated as programmatic) announces perfection/completion of religion and divine approval of Islam, while

48:28 describes the messenger being sent with guidance and the "religion of truth" to be made manifest over other ways. [9] Read straightforwardly, these verses support a "culmination" narrative: earlier paths are real but superseded by the final revelation. [10]

Finally, the Qur'an's own terminology complicates quick labels like "inclusive" vs "exclusive." In 3:67, Abraham is described as neither Jew nor Christian but a *muslim* (often glossed as "submitting" in upright devotion), and 3:83 portrays all creation as submitting to God's will willingly or unwillingly. [11] These verses make it textually plausible to argue that *islām* can mean a *universal posture of submission*, not merely membership in a later historical community—though many classical and modern exegetes restrict the term in salvation contexts to allegiance to the final prophet and message. [12]

Islamic interpretive strategies that reconcile inclusion and exclusivity

Classical tafsīr demonstrates one common harmonization strategy: interpret the inclusive verses (e.g., 2:62) as describing salvation for earlier communities *before* the final message, while reading 3:85 as establishing a post-prophetic requirement (salvation demands conformity to the law of the final messenger). A representative example appears in a report attributed to Ibn Abbas [13] and cited in tafsīr associated with Ibn Kathir [14] : after quoting 2:62, it invokes 3:85 and concludes that, once the final prophet is sent, deeds are not accepted unless they conform to that law; before then, those who followed their prophet were "saved." [15] This approach does not always label the earlier verse "abrogated," but it often functions similarly: it confines inclusive promises to a prior dispensation. [16]

A second strategy relies on the Qur'an's own concept of supersession and replacement (2:106): revelation can be "superseded" and replaced with what is "better or similar." [17] This idea underwrites the general plausibility of abrogation claims in Qur'anic sciences even when scholars dispute which verses abrogate which. [17] In salvation debates, the contested question is not whether supersession exists at all (many accept 2:106) but whether 2:62/5:69 are superseded by 3:85, and—crucially—how to justify that claim given that 5:69 restates the inclusive promise in a later sūrah. [18]

A third strategy, prominent in modern scholarship, pivots on semantics: *islām* can be read broadly as "submission," and *muslim* as "one who submits," so that the exclusivist verses become claims about the only ultimately valid orientation to God rather than about one sociological label. Mohammad Hassan Khalil [19] summarizes this line of reasoning by explicitly noting that "al-islām" can be understood literally as submission rather than "reified Islam," and that Qur'anic uses of *muslim* for figures like Abraham and Joseph clearly do not mean membership in a later institutional religion. [20] This semantic move does not automatically yield pluralism, but it widens the interpretive space in which inclusive readings can be defended as Qur'an-faithful rather than merely modern concessions. [10]

A fourth strategy is moral-responsibility "inclusivism": salvation depends not only on formal affiliation, but on whether a person culpably rejected God's guidance after it reached them in a compelling, comprehensible way. [21] In contemporary English-language Muslim debates, the Yaqeen Institute for Islamic Research [22] paper by Jonathan A. C. Brown [23] lays out multiple Muslim answers regarding the fate of non-Muslims, including approaches that treat "reliable presentation" of the message as a key condition for accountability, and that distinguish moral theism and perennialist arguments from stricter exclusivism. [24] This approach aligns with a broader Qur'anic principle cited by Khalil—"We do not punish

until We have sent a messenger"—which many theologians leverage to widen hope for those outside the Muslim community in situations of ignorance, distortion, or coercive social location. [25]

Finally, even the identity of "Sabians" in the inclusive verses shows how interpretive uncertainty affects salvation conclusions: academic work notes that medieval exegetes disagreed on who the Sabians were, and that their placement alongside Jews and Christians in 2:62 and 5:69 repeatedly draws exegetes back into the "fate of others" question. [26] The upshot is that "universal salvation" in Islam is less a single doctrine than a spectrum of hermeneutical choices about semantics, chronology, supersession, and culpability. [21]

Peace, war, and the social life of Qur'anic interpretation

Some of the Qur'an's most "affectionate" interfaith language emerges in a concrete political-relational setting rather than in abstract theology. For example, the "closest in affection" motif associated with Christians (5:82–86) is linked in classical "occasions of revelation" literature (asbāb al-nuzūl) to an episode in which Muslims sought refuge under a just Christian ruler (the Negus of Abyssinia) and recited Qur'an in a setting of priests and monks who recognized truth and wept. [27] In this narrative, positive affect is not merely "peace-time luxury" but is tied to a specific experience of protection, hospitality, and moral recognition across religious lines—an intergroup relationship that materially rewarded the highlighting of inclusive themes. [28]

Conversely, the Qur'an also contains language that later readers associate with conflict and hierarchy—calls to struggle, critiques of rival claims, and assertions of Islam's supremacy—texts that become rhetorically salient when relations are experienced as zero-sum. [29] Khalil's overview makes this explicit by juxtaposing Qur'anic censure of certain Jewish and Christian beliefs and the prominence of 3:19 and 3:85 in "exclusivist discourse," alongside other passages that complicate rigid boundary claims through semantic breadth and moral responsibility. [25]

The "Crusades" example in the user prompt is sociologically plausible even beyond Islam: medieval Christian mobilization for war intertwined salvation with violence, penance, and the hope of spiritual benefit, illustrating how salvation language can become a weaponized motivator rather than a universalist hope. [30] A key analytic point is that conflict does not create "new scriptures," but it changes which parts of the canon become socially functional: boundary-policing texts help communities survive threat, while ecumenical texts help communities manage pluralism and legitimacy under coexistence. [31]

Yet the evidence also undermines a strict reading of "universal salvation is only for peaceful times." First, the Qur'an's inclusive formula is not confined to a single "early" moment; it appears in multiple places and is repeatedly re-engaged by Muslim scholars precisely because Muslims historically lived amid both coexistence and conflict. [5] Second, modern Muslim pluralist projects often arise *because* of social fracture: writings on democratic pluralism explicitly frame Qur'anic themes—dignity, freedom of conscience, reconciliation, mutual respect—as resources to close psychological gaps between communities in contexts of geopolitical tension. Abdulaziz Sachedina [32] is introduced in this way in a foreword sponsored by the Center for Strategic and International Studies [33], where Joseph V. Montville [34] explains the project's intent to highlight Qur'anic teachings supportive of "mutually respectful" pluralism and peacemaking. [35] This is not "peace-time luxury" so much as *peace-building under strain*. [36]

Christian and Jewish patterns of universalism, inclusivism, and boundary claims

In Christianity, the tension between exclusivism and broader hope parallels the Islamic pattern: the canon and tradition can support both "Christ as unique savior" and "God's mercy reaching beyond visible boundaries." In Roman Catholic teaching, the Catechism affirms the classic claim "outside the Church there is no salvation" while simultaneously clarifying that those who do not know the Gospel or the Church "through no fault of their own," yet sincerely seek God and do God's will as known through conscience, "may achieve eternal salvation." [37] At the same time, modern Vatican documents insist on the uniqueness of Christ and warn against relativizing claims that all religions are equally salvific (a tension conceptually similar to Islamic critiques of religious rivalry and the Qur'an's insistence on final guidance). [38]

Christian universalism is also not merely a modern "peace-time" invention. Scholarly and institutional discussions note that early Christian thinkers such as Origen [39] developed ideas of ultimate restoration (*apokatastasis*) in which God's final victory implies a more expansive salvation horizon—though these views remained controversial and were not uniformly received. [40] Likewise, debates about universal salvation in figures such as Gregory of Nyssa [41] show that expansive soteriology can emerge amid theological conflict, not merely social peace. [42] This complicates any deterministic claim that only tranquil societies can afford universalist hope; sometimes universalism appears as a solution to theodicy and divine goodness rather than as a social luxury. [40]

In Judaism, a parallel structure exists: Judaism often emphasizes covenantal particularity (a unique Torah and vocation) without necessarily turning that into a blanket denial of afterlife reward for non-Jews. A Jewish Theological Seminary essay explains the rabbinic concept of Noahide laws as a revealed minimum moral standard for humanity, and notes that Maimonides [43] affirms that gentiles are not expected to convert but to live by these laws; in his formulation, observing them *as divine command* is connected to the status of a righteous gentile and entry to the world-to-come. [44] A Sefaria anthology of sources ("Gentiles in the World to Come") quotes Maimonides directly in *Kings and Wars* 8:11: the one who accepts and carefully observes the seven Noahide commandments is among the pious of the nations and has a portion in the world to come, with an added condition about observing them on the basis of divine command rather than mere intellectual preference. [45] The same compilation also cites Meiri [46] in a similar inclusive register, treating faithful Noahides as righteous and entitled to a share in the world-to-come. [45]

This Jewish pattern is instructive for the report's main thesis: Judaism can maintain strong group-boundary theology (chosenness, Torah as unique revelation) while still sustaining a robust account of "righteous outsiders." [47] That is, boundary and inclusivity are not mutually exclusive; they can coexist as different layers of identity and ethics, activated differently depending on social pressures. [48]

Why conflict makes "exclusive salvation" feel inevitable

Social psychology and conflict studies help explain why war and rivalry predictably intensify punitive salvation rhetoric across religious groups. Social identity theory (associated with Henri Tajfel [49] and John C. Turner [50]) argues that people derive self-concept from group memberships and seek positive distinctiveness, which can produce in-group favoritism and out-group derogation—especially under competitive or threatening conditions. [51] In realistic conflict frameworks, competition over scarce resources fuels hostility, while cooperation and "superordinate goals" can reduce conflict by shifting "us vs.

them" into a shared "we." [52] This maps cleanly onto religious pluralism: when social life makes coexistence beneficial (trade, diplomacy, shared civic projects), interpretive emphasis often shifts toward texts supporting cooperation; when social life makes survival feel zero-sum, boundary texts become more psychologically adaptive. [53]

War also recruits moral cognition. Susan Opotow [54] defines "moral exclusion" as perceiving certain people as outside the boundary where moral rules and fairness apply, making harm feel acceptable or justified. [55] Albert Bandura [56] describes "moral disengagement" mechanisms—moral justification, euphemistic labeling, diffusion of responsibility, and dehumanization—that allow ordinary people to participate in or tolerate cruelty without self-condemnation. [57] In this light, "hoping the enemy goes to hell" is not merely theologizing; it can be a psychologically efficient way to stabilize aggression and reduce empathy, especially when the enemy is framed as morally outside the community. [58]

Religious traditions are particularly powerful in conflict because they offer cosmic moral narratives that can justify both violence and reconciliation—what conflict scholarship calls religion's "ambivalence." [59] The crucial implication for the user's thesis is that conflict does not force a single theological conclusion, but it changes interpretive incentives: exclusivist readings can be mobilized to harden boundaries and motivate sacrifice, while inclusive readings require either a stable social environment or intentional moral leadership to resist the default drift toward moral exclusion. [60]

Thematic epilogue

Taken as a whole, the evidence supports a refined version of the thesis: universal salvation discourse is not simply "true in peace and false in war," but it is *easier to sustain publicly* when social life rewards pluralism, trust, and cooperative identity. The Islamic case makes this vivid: the Qur'an contains both inclusive-sounding promises (2:62; 5:69; 3:113–115) and exclusivist-sounding claims about *islām* and acceptable *dīn* (3:19; 3:85; 5:3; 48:28), and Muslim tradition has developed multiple reconciliation strategies—chronological limitation, supersession arguments (2:106), semantic widening ("submission"), and moral-responsibility inclusivism. [61]

What changes in "war time" is not the canon but the psychology of reading: threatened groups tend to select and absolutize the texts that most efficiently produce cohesion, moral clarity, and enemy-distance, processes well explained by social identity theory, moral exclusion, and moral disengagement research. [62] Yet it is not inevitable that war produces exclusivism; cooperation under threat is possible when superordinate goals and institutional support make pluralism functional, and religious resources for peacemaking can be intentionally foregrounded—as illustrated by interfaith refuge narratives in Islamic sources and by modern pluralist projects designed to close "psychological gaps" between communities. [63]

Finally, the comparative angle shows that Islam is not an outlier: Christianity and Judaism also contain layered accounts of "who is saved," combining strong boundary claims with wide mercy—Catholic teaching on salvation beyond visible church membership, early Christian universalist strands, and Jewish doctrines of righteous gentiles and Noahide law. [64] The most defensible conclusion, therefore, is that "universal salvation" is best understood not merely as a doctrine but as a *socially conditioned interpretive posture*: it becomes publicly plausible when communities feel secure enough—or morally compelled enough—to resist the psychological conveniences of demonization. [65]

1 2 3 15 16 22 61 https://quran.com/en/al-baqarah/62/tafsirs

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4 5 18 https://quran.com/en/al-maidah/69

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6 49 https://quran.com/en/al-baqarah/111

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