

## The Border of Salvation

The Salvation of Non-Muslims in Islam

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### Abstract

Islam is the religion of all the prophets since Adam, and the consensus of Islam—irrespective of sect and school—is that salvation extends beyond the “Umma of Muhammad” to all the “monotheists” in the world.

As regards the possibility of salvation beyond the Umma of Muhammad, since the time of Muhammad’s mission the theology of Sunni Islam’s “orthodox” Ashari school has accepted the salvation of people in regions where Islam has not been propagated.

The idea of salvation of non-Muslims is not just the product of compromise or of eclecticism, but one that is theoretically inherent and inevitable in the thought of this school. In my personal opinion, the theological basis for the future coexistence of Islam and other religions will be to successfully deepen and develop the tradition of the Ashari school’s theories on salvation.

The doctrine advocating the salvation of people who have not been exposed to Islam can be of great practical significance in the propagation of the religion in countries where people are strongly attached to ancestor service, and where there is not a long history of contact with Islam. This is because prohibition of ancestor service can ordinarily be a great obstacle to the propagation of monotheistic religion.

**Keywords:** Salvation, the Interval, monotheism, Umma of Muhammad, Ashari school

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### 1. Foreword

The purpose of this paper is to clarify that the possibility of salvation in Islam is open not only to Muslims but also to non-Muslims. The discussions in this paper are based on the Qur'an, Hadith, and the views of great scholars (*'ulamā'*) of Sunni Islam. In the concluding section, I show the practical significance of the idea that salvation is open to non-Muslims in Islam.

## 2. What is “Salvation”?

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The word for “salvation” in Arabic is *najāh*, derived from the series of consonants “n-j-w”. There are 84 derivatives of “n-j-w” in the Qur'an.<sup>1)</sup> Among them, the only noun with a definite article is *al-najāh* (the salvation), meaning “salvation from the fire” as seen in the contrapositive use of “salvation” and “the fire” in the following quotation: “And, O my people! How is it that I call you to salvation (*al-najāh*) and you call me to the fire?” Furthermore, “salvation from the fire” means nothing but entering the “garden,” as seen in the section preceding the above: “... whether male or female, and he is a believer, these shall enter the garden ...”

The chastisement of the fire in the hereafter is called “the greatest chastisement.”<sup>2)</sup> The chastisement in the hereafter is incomparably more severe than chastisement and trial in this world, and is everlasting. “Certainly the chastisement of the hereafter is severer and more lasting” (20:127).

The idea of overwhelmingly severe and everlasting chastisement in the hereafter carries out the function of nullifying the comparative chastisement in this world. Therefore, in Islam there is a great chasm between everlasting chastisement in the hereafter and the salvation, as seen in the Qur'an: “Not alike are the inmates of the fire and the dwellers of the garden.” This chasm (between everlasting chastisement in the hereafter and the salvation) is a decisive split which differs in nature from the differences of status and position of people in this world, or the internal differences both in the garden and in the fire,<sup>3)</sup> because while such internal differences are spread along the positive or the negative scale respectively, the difference between the garden and the fire is between the positive extreme and the negative extreme. As the difference between the severity of the agony of the chastisement of the fire and that of momentary agony in this world is the difference between the infinite and the finite, both are differences of an absolute nature.

“Salvation” has broad meanings, but in the context of religion they are often used to refer to “psychological phenomena” such as “elimination of psychological suffering,” “emancipation from worldly desires,” and “freedom from guilty conscience.” It is true that “salvation” of this sort is sometimes referred to in Islam: this is mainly the object of Sufism. This paper does not employ these meanings of “salvation,” but instead refers to “the salvation from the fire”—the “decisive” state of things describable in a dualistic mode, that is, the promised bliss in the heavenly “garden” of the hereafter.

## 3. Provider of Salvation

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Regarding the “garden” as the “salvation from the fire,” who is the provider of salvation? A previously quoted excerpt of the Qur'an states, “... whether male or female, and he is a believer, these shall enter the garden.” If we interpret this excerpt literally, it seems that believers are

actors, or agents who enter the garden by themselves. However, at another place the Qur'an says, "Surely Allah will cause those who believe and do good deeds to enter gardens beneath which rivers flow ...," clearly stating that Allah is the actor who brings salvation.

The theology of Sunni Islam views Allah, the creator of the world, as the only true existence (*fā'il*) causing all phenomena to occur in this world. Human actions are no exception, and as seen in the following citation, it is Allah that is the true cause of "human actions": "... and you did not smite when you smote (the enemy), but it was Allah Who smote" (8:17). Though human actions are generally "Allah's actions" in the true sense, they can be said to be "human actions" inasmuch as the results of the actions are legally ascribed to the humans.<sup>4)</sup>

The entry of believers into the garden, which is caused not by "human actions" but by Allah's actions, can be directly ascribed to Allah in a different sense from that in the statement that Allah is the true cause of all phenomena including "human actions." For "salvation" is, in any sense of the word, Allah's action, not human action. The following anecdote in the Hadith plainly shows this to be beyond misapprehension.

Jibril (Archangel Gabriel) said to Prophet Muhammad:

"There was a fakir who continued to be engaged in divine services day and night on the summit of an island for 500 years and continued kneeling down and worshipping Allah, asking for the calling to Allah's residence." Jibril said in succession, "We knew in the course of ascending to and descending from Heaven that the man will be raised on the day of resurrection and will be made to stand before the presence of ever-glorious Allah. Ever-glorious Allah spoke to him and ordered (to the angels), 'Have my servant enter the garden by my mercy.' However, he made a request to Allah three times, saying, 'My Lord, please make me enter the garden by my deeds.' Then, Allah ordered angels: 'Weigh my mercy on my servant and his deeds in a balance for him.' Then, Allah's blessing of his eyes alone amounted to the weight of the man's 500-year worship, and Allah's blessing of the rest of his body remained. Allah ordered (to the angels), 'Make my servant enter the fire,' and the man was taken to the fire. Then, the man asked Allah for mercy, saying, 'Please make me enter the garden by your mercy, please make me enter the garden by your mercy.' Allah, then, made the man enter the garden."

After Jibril finished telling the story, he said to Muhammad, "Muhammad, all the things are determined by Allah's mercy" (Hadith collected by Al-Hakim)<sup>5)</sup>

Another Hadith has the following: Allah's Messenger Muhammad said, "whoever he may be, it is not because of his good deeds that he can enter Paradise," and, being asked "Even you?" he answered, "Not even myself, unless Allah bestows his favor and mercy on me." This Hadith,

which says that even the infallible Messenger cannot enter Paradise because of his own deeds, clearly states that it is not by their self-dependent good deeds that humans are allowed to enter Paradise, but purely by the charitable grace of Allah.

#### 4. Intercession

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As seen in the preceding sections, the real actor who brings salvation is Allah, and the authority to do so is the prerogative and the exclusive right solely of Allah. Salvation is not brought by one's self-dependent good deeds, and whether an angel or a human, the one who exclusively possesses the authority to bring salvation to others is none other than Allah. However, within this ultimate monotheism of Islam there exists the concept of intercession to Allah for salvation.

Expressions on intercession in the Qur'an often appear in negative or interrogative forms, such as: "On that day shall no intercession avail except of him whom the Beneficent Allah allows and whose word He is pleased with." This shows that the validity of intercession depends upon Allah's determination, and the lack of Allah's authorization makes any kind of intercession invalid, that is, the independent intercessions of creatures are made invalid and the absoluteness of Allah's will in salvation is emphasized.

In Hadith, intercession is interpreted more approvingly. Ibn Mājah, for example, handed down the following Hadith of the Prophet Muhammad: "At the day of retribution, three kinds of people will execute intercession. They are prophets, scholars, and *shahids* [martyrs]." The range of people who are authorized for intercession is not clearly defined and so is open to devout believers, but the "greatest intercession" (*shafā'ah kubrā*) is said to be the Prophet Muhammad's intercession on the day of retribution. The patrimony of this "greatest intercession" holds many clues to interpreting the structure of "salvation" in Islam. Therefore, the aforementioned Hadith is cited as follows:

[...] I would fall in prostration and it would be said to me: O Muhammad, raise thy head, and speak and it would be listened to; ask and it would be granted; intercede and it would be accepted.

I shall say: My Lord, my people, my people. It would be said: Go, and bring forth from it (Hell) him who has in his heart faith equal to the weight of a wheat grain or barley seed.

I would go and do that; then I would return to my Lord and extol Him with those praises (taught to me by Allah), then I would fall in prostration. It would be said to me: O Muhammad, raise your head, and speak and it would be heard; ask and it would be granted; intercede and intercession would be accepted.

So I would say: My people. My people. It would be said to me: Go and take out from it (Hell) him who has in his heart faith equal to the weight of a mustard seed.

I would go and do that. I would again return to my Lord and extol Him with those praises. I would then fall in prostration. It would be said to me: O Muhammad, raise your head: speak and you would be listened to; ask and it would be granted; intercede and intercession would be accepted.

I would say: My Lord, my people, my people. It would be said to me: Go, and bring out of the Fire him who has in his heart as much faith as the smallest, smallest, smallest grain of mustard seed. I would go and do that.

[...] I would then return to my Lord for the fourth time and extol Him with these praises. I would then fall in prostration. It would be said to me: O Muhammad, raise your head: speak and it will be listened to; ask and it will be granted; intercede and intercession would be accepted. I would say: O my Lord, permit me regarding him who professed: There is no god but Allah. He (the Lord) would say: That is not for thee or that is not what lies with thee, but by My Honor, Glory, Greatness and Might, I would certainly take him out who professed it: There is no god but Allah. (*Sahih Muslim*, Book One: The Book of Faith (*Kitab Al-Iman*), trans. Abdul Hamid Siddiqui, slightly modified.<sup>6)</sup>)

## 5. Ummah of Muslims

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The Hadith cited above shows the form of salvation and the diversity of the category of people to whom salvation is extended. In Section 2 it was mentioned that there is an “absolute” chasm between the people of the fire and the people of the garden, described dualistically as “those who are saved and those who are not saved.” To put it more precisely, however, based on the above-cited Hadith, it follows that there is an absolute chasm between the “people who stay in the fire eternally” and the “people who are saved from the fire.”

There are two kinds of “salvation from the fire”: entering the garden, exempt from the chastisement in the fire; and being saved from the chastisement in the fire. And Prophet Muhammad’s intercession extends to his community (Ummah), that is, to Muslims. However light one’s faith may be, as long as one is in Muhammad’s community, one is not to stay forever in the fire, thanks to Muhammad’s intercession. Islam, not asking us to face the alternative of belief or good deeds, regards belief and good deeds as a mutually complementary pair and so takes people in possession of belief and good deeds for the people of the garden. This is shown in the excerpt already cited above: “... whether male or female, and he is a believer, these shall enter the garden” (40:40). However, even if one did not perform good deeds before his death,

if one possesses even the smallest portion of belief, one shall be saved from the chastisement in the fire through Prophet Muhammad's intercession. And the profession of faith in Islam is, "There is no God but Allah and Muhammad is Allah's Messenger." As the Qur'an says, "... the Messenger may be a bearer of witness to you..." (2:143). This shows that Muhammad is the witness for Muslims, and if one attests that Muhammad is Allah's Messenger, the Messenger will be the witness of one's belief and will intercede for one's salvation before Allah, who will accept this intercession. However, the effect of Muhammad's intercession will not extend to those who only attest the oneness of Allah, and not the Messengership of Muhammad. Nevertheless, Allah, by his own dignity, will save from the chastisement in the fire those who attest his oneness.

Salvation thus extends beyond "Muhammad's Ummah." According to the Hadith related by Ibn Mas'ūd, Prophet Muhammad said to his friends, "I hope that you would constitute half of the inhabitants of Paradise" (*Sahih Muslim*, Book One, Chapter 92).

It follows that "Muhammad's Ummah" constitute just half of the inhabitants of Paradise.

## **6. Salvation of "People of the Interval"**

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Allah's messages are conveyed to people through his Messengers. In Islam, people who live in the period between the death of one Messenger and the raising of a new one are called "People of the Interval" (*ahl al-fatrah*).

Even among people in Sunni Islam, views on the salvation of "People of the Interval" differ. I argue that Sunni Islam's theology on the salvation of "People of the Interval" should be the basis for restructuring a relationship of coexistence between Islam and other religions. Therefore, in this section and in the following sections, discussions on the salvation of "People of the Interval" in the theology of Sunni Islam will be analyzed.

First, we will view the discussion of the late 'Abd Allāh al-Ghumari, from his short essay entitled "The People of the Interval will be saved" (*Ahl al-Fatrah Nājūn*), which is included in his published collection of theses entitled *Khawāṭir Dīniyah* (Religious Miscellanea). Al-Ghumari was born in Morocco into a family with a history of scholars of Islam, and was said to be the "Al-Bukhari of his era," one of the representative scholars of Hadith in the 20th century.

Al-Ghumari defines "People of the Interval" as "people who lived in times when Messengers raised for us did not exist."<sup>7)</sup> At the beginning of his essay, al-Ghumari says that Sunni Islam's prevailing idea is that even if "People of the Interval" are polytheists and idol worshippers, salvation will be brought to them. The grounds for this are obtained in the Qur'an: "... nor do We chastise until We raise a messenger" (17:15), and "This is because your Lord would not destroy towns [because a Messenger is not raised for them] unjustly while their people were negligent [that is, polytheists]" (6:131).<sup>8)</sup>

Interpreting Allah's words "We will not chastise them" to mean that Allah will not do so 'until a Messenger, who promulgates legal regulations on sins such as adultery and dishonesty, is raised,' some have made the following argument: As humans have already been given the obligation of *tawhid* (monotheism) since Adam was raised by Allah as a Messenger for their children, the "People of the Interval" deserve chastisement in the fire.<sup>9)</sup> To those espousing this view, al-Ghumari raised the following objection. The above-mentioned sentences in the Qur'an (6:131) are clearly and decisively authoritative and deservedly prove Allah's generosity (*karam*) and bounty (*fadl*). Hadith with contrary content do not seem authoritative as a patrimony, and are not enough to overturn the clear and definite conclusion of the Qur'an.<sup>10)</sup>

The following quotation of the Qur'an (7:138) provides collateral evidence of the salvation of "People of the Interval":

And we made the children of Israel to pass the sea; then they came upon a people who kept to the worship of their idols [that is, worshipped them]. They [the children of Israel] said: "O Musa! make for us a god as they have (their) gods." He said: "Surely you are a people acting ignorantly. (As to) these, surely that about which they are shall be brought to naught [destruction] and that which they do is vain."

To sum up regarding indigenous people in Palestine worshipping idols: though their idolatry is said to be "untrue," the reason why they are not said to deserve the chastisement in the fire is because it should be considered that, by contrast with the people of Israel, they have not had a Messenger raised for them. Therefore, they have no obligation to prohibit polytheism, and they are not to be given chastisement in the fire for practicing polytheism. Even if those indigenous people had heard of Musa and his mission, it does not mean that a Messenger had been raised for them.<sup>11)</sup>

In the same way, the Qur'an (5:19) provides collateral evidence of the salvation of "People of the Interval."

O followers of the Book! Indeed Our Messenger [Muhammad (May peace be with him!)] has come to you explaining to you [the religion's basics and details] after a cessation of the (mission of the) messengers, lest you say [on the day of retribution]: "There came not to us a giver of good news or a warner." So indeed there has come to you a giver of good news and a warner, and Allah has power over all things. [Therefore, you shall have no more excuses after their arrival.]

Even if there are some distortions and alterations of the original texts, Jews and Christians, who hold with them the Torah (the Pentateuch) and "the Gospel" and who should know the obligation of monotheistic belief,<sup>12)</sup> shall still be exempt from chastisement because they did

not have Prophet Muhammad newly raised for them. If so, “People of the Interval,” who have not learned any of the Books, should deserve exemption even more.<sup>13)</sup>

Muhammad is the last Prophet, “the Seal of the Prophets” (33:40), ever raised for all human beings as “mercy for all creatures” (21:107), transcending ethnic differences. His messages and Sacred Law, “Shariah,” will hold true beyond time and place until the day of retribution. Therefore, since the calling of Muhammad, there have been no “People of the Interval.” However, even if Muhammad’s messages are ideally the universal and infinite, in reality it will take years for the mission of his messages to extend to every corner of the world, beyond the Arab world. It follows from this that, in the history of Islam since the raising of the Prophet Muhammad, the idea of “People of the Interval” has still been used to refer to the category of “people whom the Prophet Muhammad’s mission has not reached.”<sup>14)</sup>

Though al-Ghummari does not clearly state his theological position in this essay, his discussion is based on the tradition of the theology of the Ashari school. In the next section, through comparison with the Ashari school’s theology, we will clarify the definition of “People of the Interval” from the perspective of the Maturidi (Maturidi/Hanafi) school’s theology.

## **7. “People of the Interval” in the Maturidi School’s Theology**

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Ibn ‘Ābidin (d. 1252/1836) is said to have been the final authority in the late Hanafi school. He defines the concept of the “People of the Interval” in the Maturidi/Hanafi school in his voluminous notes on the Hanafi school’s theology, *Radd al-Mukhtār* (Selectors’ Answer), inserting the section “Prophets’ Parents and People of the Interval” (*Matlab Kalām ‘alā Abawai al-Nabi wa Ahl al-Fatrāh*) in the chapter entitled “Marriage with Disbelievers” in the *Kitāb al-Nikāḥ* (Book of Marriage). According to him, while the Ashari school takes the position that deceased people whom the mission has not reached will be saved, the prevailing idea of the Maturidi school is that people who are not engaged in monotheism will be subject to chastisement in the fire.<sup>15)</sup>

However, as regards the concept of “People of the Interval,” the Bukhara school within the Maturidi school agrees with the Ashari school’s idea of salvation, while al-Nawawī (d. 676/1277), and al-Fakhr al-Rāzī (d. 606/1210) of the Ashari school clearly state that “People of the Interval” are subject to chastisement in the fire. Thus, scholars in both schools of thought are divided in their opinions. Furthermore, as regards people who do not hold monotheistic beliefs, it is sometimes advocated that “passive” disbelievers who are indifferent to religion will be saved, while “positive” disbelievers who reject the deity will be subject to chastisement in the fire.<sup>16)</sup>

The following opinion of al-Nābulusī (d. 1308/1891) takes the Maturidi school’s position that, though the obligation to abide by the law on behavior is not placed upon “People of

the Interval,” their credo must make them adopt monotheism through their own reasonable powers, even if a Messenger’s mission is not extended to them.

As for the “People of the Interval” between any two prophets, they are innocent in their various conduct, since the mission has not reached them during the interval. The same can be said of persons who are away from groups of people and people who were born in the “house of war” (*dar al-harb*, the non-Islamic world) and did not move to the lands of Islam. However, all these things are said only about people’s physical actions. No one is exempt from his disbelief toward Supreme Allah. This is because it is nothing more than reason that can recognize His existence.<sup>17)</sup>

Ibn ‘Ābidīn and al-Nābulṣī were both latter-day scholars of Islam in the Ottoman Caliphate, which was in the process of “modernization.” In the next section we will look at the discussion of al-Suyuti, an Ashari school theologian of the “pre-modern” period.

## **8. Categories of “People of the Interval”**

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In an essay entitled “The Road of True Believers on the Parents of the Chosen (Muhammad)” (*Masālik al-Hunafā fi Wālidai al-Muṣṭafā*) in his collection of Fatwas (replies on the doctrine), al-Suyuti (d. 911/1505), who left behind immense volumes of writings on the Qur’an, Hadith, the law, theology, and so on, also categorized “People of the Interval.”

Al-Suyuti, citing the aforementioned passage of the Qur’an (“... nor do We chastise until We raise a messenger” [17:15]) and al-Fakhr al-Rāzī’s statement that “Differently from Mu’tazili school, gratitude toward the giver of mercy cannot become an obligation only by the judgment of reason,” confirms the Ashari school’s argument on salvation of “People of the Interval.” He says: “In our opinion, people whom the Prophetic Mission has not reached will die as the receivers of salvation.”<sup>18)</sup> He then takes the position of a Hadith interpretation in which some particular individual “People of the Interval” are appointed to receive chastisement in the fire.

According to al-Suyuti, “People of the Interval” are divided into three categories. The first category consists of people who have adopted monotheism by their own discerning judgment. This category is further divided into the subcategories of: (1) people who did not possess their own laws, such as Qass bn Sā‘idah (d. approx. 23 B.H./600 A.D.) and Zayd bn ‘Amr bn Nufail (d. 17 B.H./606 A.D.), and (2) people who followed the remnants of the true Law, such as Tubba’ (one of the emperors of Yemen who believed in Judaism) and his people.

The second category consists of people such as Imru al-Qays (d. 212 B.H. /403 A.D.), the tyrannical Lakhmid king of Iraq called the “Emperor of fire and fagot,” who did not practice monotheism but instead established polytheism by distorting and altering monotheism and

setting up his own commandments and contraindications; and 'Amr bn Luḥayy al-Khuza'i (birth and death dates unknown), who was the first Arab to start idolatry by altering the religion of Isma'il.

The third category consists of people who have practiced neither monotheism nor polytheism, and have lived their whole lives indifferent to all religions, without following the law of any prophet or establishing a law or a religion by themselves.<sup>19)</sup>

The term "People of the Interval" refers, in its true sense, to the people who belong to the third category, and they are totally exempt from any chastisement. The people whom Hadith say will be subject to chastisement are those who belong to the second category. This is because there is no room for them to ask for indemnity.

Al-Ghumari, the 20th century scholar introduced in Section 6 above, did not refer to al-Suyuti, but advocated the same sort of trichotomy, citing the names of al-Nawawi, al-Ḥāfiẓ Ibn Ḥajar al-Asqalānī (d. 852/1449), scholars of Hadith in the Shafi'i school, and al-Ubbī (d. 827/1425), a scholar of Hadith in the Maliki school.<sup>20)</sup> Therefore, we should say that the concept of the salvation of the "People of the Interval" was established in the late Ashari school.<sup>21)</sup>

So far in this section we have taken a general view of what constitutes the problem of salvation of "People of the Interval" in the "pre-modern" era. In the next section, we will first look at the argument on salvation of the early Ashari school, and compare it with that of the later period.

## **9. Salvation According to the Early Ashari School**

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Al-Baghdādī (d. 429/1037), a representative theologian of the early Ashari school, discussed the matter in his work, *Uṣūl al-Dīn* (The Basics of Religion). The discussion takes place in the section "Judgment on people to whom the mission has not been extended" (*Mas'alah Bayān Hukm Man lam tablugh-hu Da'wah al-Islām*) within the chapter entitled "Various Principles of Belief" (*Aṣl Bayān Uṣūl al-Īmān*):

Our school (the Ashari school) insists that "All the obligations can be [first] known to be so by revelation" (*shar'*). The basic idea of our school is as follows:

As regards the people who are living in difficult-to-reach or far-removed places and to whom the mission of Islam is not extended, there is room for discussion. (However, as a conclusion,) as regards people who believe in the righteousness and oneness (of God) but are ignorant of the various provisions of Shari'ah and various messengers, it is judged that they belong to the category of Muslims and they are exempt from responsibility for their ignorance of the various provisions (of Shari'ah). This is because, for them, they are not proven.

Among them, disbelievers are those who regard atheism (*ilḥād*), disbelief (*kufr*), and denial of divinity (*ta’til*) as their way of life, though there still is some room for discussion about this.

Even if people are exposed to some portion of the Mission of Prophets—May peace be upon them!—and then do not believe in it, they deserve eternal warning (the chastisement in the fire). If the mission of Shari‘ah has not reached them at all, then they, as people on whom the obligation is not placed, will not be given rewards or retributions in the hereafter. They might be punished by Allah in the hereafter, but this would be done out of Allah’s justice and not as retribution, just as children and animals in this world suffer afflictions by Allah’s justice, not as retributions. They might be granted mercy in the hereafter, but this would be done not as reward for obedience but out of Allah’s good grace.<sup>22)</sup>

As already seen, the late Ashari school’s argument on the salvation of the “People of the Interval” also employs the concept of “people to whom the mission of Islam is not extended” and is constructed on the principle that there will be no chastisement as long as it is not urged by a Messenger’s revelations. However, while the theory on the salvation of the “People of the Interval” in the later period was developed against the background of the problem of whether the Prophet Muhammad’s parents (who died ignorant of his mission of Islam) would be saved or not, the central issue of concern for al-Baghdādī was the theoretical possibility of salvation of contemporary non-Muslims: people whom the mission had not reached in terms of “space,” as opposed to the generations of people whom the mission had not reached in terms of “time”—that is, the “People of the Interval.”

Al-Baghdādī argues that even if they are not exposed to the mission of Islam, people who believe in the oneness and righteousness of God are regarded as Muslims. It is the consensus of Islam that Islam is the teachings of the prophets and that people who respond to the mission and accept as true the oneness of God are all Muslims.<sup>23)</sup> However, in the period since the last Prophet, Muhammad, we cannot say there have been many arguments which acknowledge as “Muslims” those people who have come to realize the oneness and righteousness of God without recognizing (or knowing) that Messenger Muhammad is Allah’s Messenger, that is, without reliance on the Messenger’s mission.<sup>24)</sup> Here, al-Baghdādī’s argument can be evaluated as “inclusive” and “ecumenical” in that the concept of “Muslims” after the mission of Muhammad is expanded beyond “Muhammad’s Ummah” (religious community).

In spite of his “inclusive” approach toward the people who have realized the truth of monotheism by themselves, even in comparison with the late Ashari school’s theory on salvation al-Baghdādī was hard on people who have not come to enter into religious beliefs because of the unavailability of the mission. This is because he differentiates retribution (*iqāb*) from chastisement (*ta’dhīb*), and while he insists that the people not reached by the mission

are not under obligation and will thus not incur retribution, he also accepts as just the possibility that they will experience the sort of chastisement that is not meant to be retribution.<sup>25)</sup>

## 10. Conclusion

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Islam is the religion of all the prophets since Adam, and its salvation extends beyond the “Ummah of Muhammad” to all “monotheists” since Adam, namely, “Muslims in the broader sense of the term.” This is the definite consensus of Islam, irrespective sect or school. In principle there is no room in Islam for discussing questions such as whether salvation existed before Jesus Christ or not.

As regards the possibility of salvation for people beyond the Ummah of Muhammad since the time of his mission, the theology of the Ashari school agrees that salvation is applicable to three categories of people.

The first is the category of the people who, though not exposed to the mission of Islam, have adopted monotheism out of their own discerning judgment. The people who belong to this category are in some cases regarded as “Muslims in the broader sense of the term,” and there is no disagreement in the school with respect to their salvation.

The second is the category of people who have lived their whole lives indifferent to religion because the mission of Islam has not reached them. They can be the subjects of salvation in the prevailing theory of the late Ashari school.

The third is the category of people who have lived their whole lives as convinced “atheists,” definitely rejecting God, in circumstances where the mission of Islam has not reached them. Though the Ashari scholars are divided with regard to the salvation of these people, theories which acknowledge their right to salvation have substantial power as well.

As we have seen so far in brief, the idea that the possibility of salvation is open to non-Muslims is approved as an “orthodox doctrine” by the Ashari school, and can be the subject of free discussion within a range of “orthodox doctrines.” Furthermore, as is clearly shown in this paper, the theory of the Ashari school on the salvation of non-Muslims is not the product of compromise or of eclecticism derived from external factors which reflect calculations of self-interest of a political, social, or economic nature in trading and exchanging with non-Muslims, or in conquering them or being conquered by them. Rather, it is a product of the logical requirements intrinsic to the theology. Therefore, this theory is not the type of “thought” that is a passing fashion, nor is it a borrowed, myopic idea tied to a momentary situation and lacking consistency. In my personal opinion, further deepening and developing the Ashari school’s tradition of salvation theory will form the theological basis of the future coexistence of Islam and other religions.<sup>26)</sup> This paper thus aims to become a preparatory work toward this objective.

The doctrine advocating the salvation of people to whom the mission of Islam has not reached can be of great practical significance in the mission of Islam in countries such as Japan, which have not had a long history of contact with Islam and where people are strongly attached to ancestor service. This is because the Qur'an prohibits the asking of forgiveness for non-Muslims, stating: "It is not (fit) for the Prophet and those who believe that they should ask forgiveness for the polytheists, even though they should be near relatives, after it has become clear to them that they are inmates of the flaming fire" (9:113). The prohibition of ancestor service has thus far been a great obstacle to the mission of Islam in Japan.

## NOTES

- 1) Except for fourteen cases of this consonant group taking the third derivative form of a verb, meaning "secret talk," there are 70 examples of usage meaning "salvation." Most of these examples refer to either salvation from Allah's chastisement or from the trial. "And when Our decree came to pass, We delivered Hud and those who believed with him with mercy from Us, and We delivered them from a hard chastisement" (11:58) is an example of the former, and "And when We delivered you (the people of Israel) from Firon's people, who subjected you to severe torment, killing your sons and sparing your women, and in this there was a great trial from your Lord" (7:141) is an example of the latter.
- 2) "And most certainly We will make them taste of the nearer chastisement before the greater chastisement..." (32:21).

According to a standard classic Qur'an commentary entitled *Understandings of Revelation and Real meanings of Interpretation (Madārik al-Tanzil wa-Hāqā'iq al-Ta'wil)* by al-Nasafī, "the nearer chastisement" refers to "chastisements in this world such as Babylonian captivity and the seven-year-long drought that the people suffered," and "the greater chastisement" refers to the "chastisement in the hereafter" ('Abd Allāh bn Ahmad al-Nasafī, *Tafsīr al-Nasafī – Madārik al-Tanzil wa-Hāqā'iq al-Ta'wil*; vol. 3, Beirut, 1996, p. 421).

Similarly, according to another standard classic commentary, *Commentary of al-Bayḍāwī*, "the nearer chastisement" refers to "chastisements in this world such as the seven-year-long drought that the people suffered, murders, and Babylonian captivity," and "the greater chastisement" refers to "chastisements in the hereafter" (*al-Bayḍāwī, Tafsīr al-Bayḍāwī*; vol. 2, Beirut, 1988, p. 236).

"Allah will chastise him with the greatest chastisement" (88:24). According to *Madārik al-Tanzil wa-Hāqā'iq al-Ta'wil*, the "greatest chastisement" refers to "chastisement in the fire" (al-Nasafī, op. cit., vol. 4, p. 516). According to the *Commentary of Baydawi*, it refers to the "chastisement in the hereafter" (*al-Bayḍāwī, op. cit.*, vol. 2 Beirut, 1988, p. 592).

- 3) As it is said, "The Hypocrites will be in the lowest depths of the Fire..." (4:145), there are stages among the people of the fire. The same conclusion is supported regarding the inhabitants of Paradise: "Those who believed and fled (their homes), and strove hard in Allah's way with their property and their souls, are much higher in rank with Allah; and those are they who are the achievers (of their objects). Their Lord gives them good news of mercy from Himself and (His) good pleasure and gardens, wherein lasting blessings shall be theirs" (9:20-21).

- 4) According to the acquisition (*kasb*) theory of Ashari school theology, a human is not called an “actor,” but an “acquirer of actions.”
- 5) Ibn Rajab, *Jāmi‘ al-Ulūm wa al-Hikam*, vol. 2, Makkah, 1993, pp. 7-8.
- 6) Chapter 83 (*Book 1, Number 0377*); Islamic Society of North America  
>[http://www.isna.net/library/hadith/muslim/001a\\_smt.html#083\\_b1<](http://www.isna.net/library/hadith/muslim/001a_smt.html#083_b1<)
- 7) ‘Abd Allāh bn Muḥammad bn al-Ṣiddiq al-Idrīsī, “Ahl al-Fatrah Nājūn,” *Khawāṭir Dīniyah*, Cairo, 1968, p. 116.
- 8) *ibid.*, p. 116.
- 9) *ibid.*, p. 116. That is, they differentiate between the creed (*‘aqīdah*) and the law (*shari‘ah*), and say it is the mission of a Messenger that brings about the obligation to abide by the law, while the obligation to adhere to the creed of monotheism is imposed on every person with the capability of performing obligations (*mukallaf*), irrespective of whether he has heard of the mission of a Messenger or not. As shown later, this is the standpoint of the Maturidi school.
- 10) “A Hadith which contradicts that has defects. Even a true Hadith (not being handed down by an uncountable number of people) leaves room for interpretation because it has come down along a single route” (*ibid.*, p. 117).  
“It is because those [Hadiths] have been passed on along the single route that they have no authority to disprove the Qur'an” (*ibid.*, p. 116).
- 11) “For Musa did not say to the people who worshipped idols, 'Allah will chastise you.' The reason for that was they were the 'people of the interval' to whom a messenger was not raised. They must have heard of Musa and the mission. Nevertheless, they would not suffer chastisement. This is because they did not know of any Sharia, nor had they any messenger raised for them” (*ibid.*, p. 117).
- 12) Al-Ghummari said, “polytheism such as Christianity,” regarding Christianity and Judaism not as forms of monotheism, but as polytheism (*ibid.*, p. 118).
- 13) “And, as you can tell from the passage, even the followers of Judaism and Christianity, who possess the Sharia which Messengers have brought, would, if our Prophet (Muhammad)—May Allah's blessing and peace be upon him and his people—had not come to them, have their excuse accepted in the presence of Allah; then what would you, readers, think of ignorant Arabs who have not known of Messengers nor read sacred books since the times of Isma'il—May peace be upon him? Who can doubt that their excuses should be accepted and that they deserve salvation?” (*ibid.*, pp. 117-118).
- 14) Since Muhammad, who covered all the basic areas of human beings, was raised as a Messenger, there have been no “People of the Interval” and there is no room for supposing their existence. However, it can be that there are some people whom the mission has not reached. For example, if there are uncivilized tribes who live deep in the mountains and jungle in an undeveloped area of Africa and have never heard of Islam or the Qur'an, and know nothing about the oneness of supreme Allah, then there is no doubt that even if they believe in polytheism, such as Christianity, they will be saved. This is because the precondition for the obligation is prevalence of the mission. Therefore, if the mission does not reach them and this is not through their own negligence, there is no way the obligation will be imposed on them. (*ibid.*, p. 118)
- 15) “The argument that both (Prophet Muhammad's parents) would be saved because they died

in the interval is based on the Ashari school's principle that 'if the people whom the mission had not reached died, they would be saved after death.' On the other hand, the Maturidi school's argument is as follows: One who died without living so long as to be able to think reflectively and who neither believed in a religion nor made atheism (*kufr*) their credo would not be reprimanded after death. However, one who made atheism their credo or did not believe in any religion after living a life long enough to think reflectively would be treated differently" (Muhammad Amīn al-Mashhūr bi-Ibn 'Ābidīn, *Hāshiyah Radd al-Mukhtār Sharḥ Tanwīr al-Abṣār*, Cairo, 1966, vol. 3, p. 185).

- 16) Evidently, the Bukhara school within the Maturidi school agrees with the Ashari school, interpreting the words of Imam (the founder of the Hanafi school, Abu Hanifa), "Nobody is allowed to be ignorant of his own creator," as referring to the times after the mission (of Muhammad); therefore, the "People of the Interval" before that would not be held responsible. Al Muhaqiq Ibn al-Humām (d. approx. 861/1457), following this view, says in his book, *al-Tahrīr*: "However, [salvation] applies to people other than those who died accepting atheism (*kufr*) as their own credo." Al-Nawawī and Al-Fakhr al-Rāzī clearly say that, "Those who died as disbelievers before the mission of Muhammad would fall into the fire." Some members of the Maliki school interpret an authentic Hadith on the chastisement of "People of the Interval" as referring not to those among them who neither fell into polytheism nor reached monotheism and were indifferent to either of them, but to established atheists. So even the people of the same school are divided. (ibid., p. 185)
- 17) 'Abd al-Ghanī bn Ismā'il al-Nābulṣī, *Asrār al-Shrī'ah au al-Fāthī al-Rabbāni wa al-Fāid al-Rahmānī*, Beirut, 1985, p. 78.
- 18) Al-Suyūtī, *al-Hāwi li-al-Fatāwā*, 1983, Beirut, vol. 2, p. 206.
- 19) ibid., p. 209.
- 20) However, with respect to the people who reached monotheism by their own private speculations, al-Ghumārī, by contrast with al-Suyuti, did not differentiate between those who complied with the law and those who did not, saying that they were following one of the laws which had not been superceded by the laws that later prophets brought in (*lam tunsakh*) and which were thus still effective (*shari'ah min al-sharā'i' al-ṣaḥīyah*). So he said that Zaid ibn Amr too entered Christianity (*tanaṣṣara*). (al-Idrīsī, *op. cit.*, p. 116.)
- 21) Though there is no clear point of reference to determine when the late Ashari school started, the author would like to regard the period from the time of al-Fakhr Al-Rāzī (d. 606/1210) onwards, during which religion and philosophy became clearly united, as such a point of reference.
- 22) Abū Manṣūr al-Baghdādī, *Uṣūl al-Dīn*, Beirut, 1981, p. 262.
- 23) In Section 5, the Hadith that discusses how the inhabitants of the garden are not limited to Muhammad's Ummah was introduced. It is thought that the inhabitants of the garden other than Muhammad's Ummah are usually "Muslims" in the broad sense of the term, that is, believers in messengers before Muhammad. In this sense, the inhabitants of the garden are not limited to "Muhammad's Ummah" but to "Muslims," which is a common-sense view.
- 24) The common view of the Hanafi school is that if atheists and polytheists acknowledge the oneness of God, they become Muslims. al-Ḥaṣkafī (d. 1088/1677) says, "There are five kinds of disbelievers: (1) People who deny the Creator, like atheists; (2) Followers of ditheism (of a good God and a bad God) who deny the oneness of God; ... To these two categories of people

the words “There is no God but Allah” would be enough [to judge them converted to Islam].” (Muhammad Amin al-Mashhūr bi-Ibn ‘Ābidin, op. cit., vol. 4, pp. 226-227; cf., al-Mawṣili al-Hanafī, *al-Ikhtiyār*, vol. 2, Beirut, 1998, p. 424)

However, though there also are such arguments in the Shafi‘i school, they are not commonly held views (cf., al-Nawawī, *Rauḍah al-Talibin*, vol. 10, n.p., n.d., pp. 83-85). Besides, it seems that these arguments generally take a practical interest in “judgment in this world”: how to treat such people in a social context in terms of the law. They do not seem to concern their salvation in the hereafter.

- 25) Regarding “justice,” al-Baghdādī says that the justice among humans is not applicable to Allah, as He, the Lord of all the creatures, has the authority to freely dispose of all of them. al-Baghdādī thus shows his affinity to the deontology of the Ashari school, which stresses the omnipotence of Allah. The reason why the late Ashari school, not differentiating between retribution and chastisement, clearly states that the “People of the Interval” will be saved may be because of the theoretical requirement for salvation of the parents of Prophets.
- 26) However, al-Ghumari, who argued theoretically that non-Muslims whom the mission did not reach would be saved, in actuality harbored bitter hostility toward Judaists and Christians, and made the following remark. Seeing this, we have to remember that it would be quite difficult to sublimate the Ashari school’s idea of salvation into a theory applicable to religious coexistence today, and we cannot be overly optimistic about its success. Al-Ghumari says:

It is unquestionable that children born to Jewish or Christian parents are disbelievers. This is because they harbor bitter hatred against Islam after having heard the Qur'an and having known of Muslims. Their hatred is so bitter that they would choose to die, if they were asked to choose between conversion to Islam or death. Many Christians confess that they are moved by the Qur'an's amazing rhetoric, the beauty of its recitation, and its scientific truths. Nevertheless, they adhere to their own Christianity. Disbelief out of such adherence and stubbornness is the most odious disbelief. (al-Idrisī, *op.cit.*, p. 118)