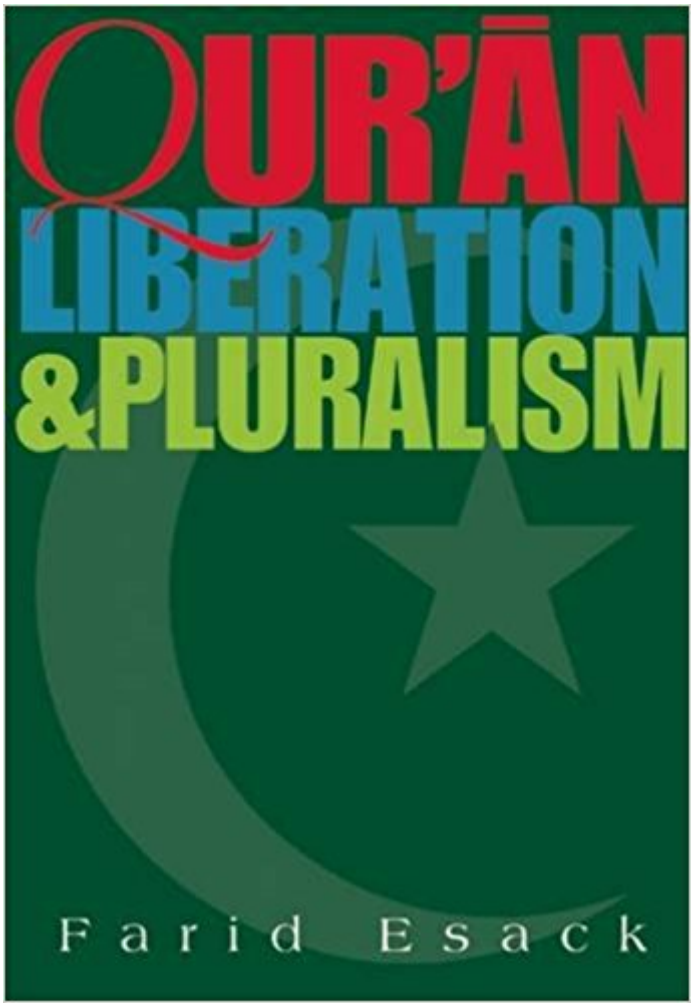
Qur'an, Liberation And Pluralism: An Islamic Perspective Of Interreligious Solidarity Against Oppression



Synopsis

This challenging and unusual work discusses the issues of liberation theology and inter-religious dialogue from the Islamic point of view, focusing on the experience of the multi-religious community of South Africa.

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Customer Reviews

"This book focuses on the imperative of real, engaged cooperation between groups of various religious backgrounds for the goals of establishing a just society that addresses the central needs of each community." -- Ayesha S. Chaudhry, Review & Expositor, Winter 2008`This book establishes Esack as one of the few liberation theologians in contemporary Islam.' -- Journal of the American Academy of Religion

The demise of apartheid in South Africa in the 1980s followed an unprecedented unity in struggle against oppression from members of different faith traditions. Determined as South African Muslims were to participate with the rest of the oppressed in solidarity against apartheid, this brought them into conflict with interpretations of the Qur'an that denied virtue outside Islam, and left them searching for a theology that would allow them to both co-operate against injustice and be true to their faith. In this challenging account, Farid Esack reflects on key qur'anic passages used in the context of oppression to rethink the role of Islam in a plural society. He exposes how traditional interpretations of the Qur'an were used to legitimize an unjust order, and demonstrates that those

very texts used to support religious intolerance, if interpreted within a contemporary socio-historical context, support active solidarity with the religious Other for change.

it’s like a new book and faster deliverance than I expected even though it comes from abroad. I love it.

I appreciate Abdal-Hakim Murad’s erudite review, and I will in turn add another lengthy review to the board. I think we both respect Farid Esack for his struggle against apartheid in South Africa and also for his attempt to bridge Islamic and Judeo-Christian communities. It’s not an easy task for any one, scholar or activist, so any criticism should be understood with this caveat in mind. Indeed, I think the best part of his book is the introduction, in which he describes his personal experiences and how they shaped his values. I have no doubt that Esack put his whole heart into this project.I must part ways with the aforementioned reviewer. I have great respect for Ibn Arabi and other Sufis and Faylasufs (philosophers). For his time he was probably above most other Muslims in his thinking in terms of breadth of vision, though he did polemically attack Shiites and others. At any rate, I don’t know if his openness was necessarily due to the Qur’an, or his transcendence of it. Ibn Arabi was a mystic, but he was not really a social reformer. His concepts of "unity-of-being" and "universal man" were primarily esoteric and philosophical, and only indirectly political. Esack’s approach to pluralism is based first and foremost on pragmatic social action against injustice.Despite its overall virtues, I have three main objections to this book. My first objection is with his notion of religious rights. I got the impression from the middle chapters dealing with the historical context regarding Islamic denunciation of non-Muslims that Esack has narrowly confined the scope of what religious pluralism means. For example, he defines justice as the freedom to worship one God, which in-and-of itself is fine, but his implication is that, according to the Qur’an, a society that worships different gods is de facto tyrannical (the freedom to worship many gods is not a right but a rejection of the Truth, thus irrational). Of course there are inherent problems with the idea of a God-king, but I would say, on the whole, that allowing people the freedom to choose which gods they want to worship is actually a fairer. Monotheism is presented as a universal, which fits in with the traditional Muslim discourse that the first religion in the world was Islam. This means that polytheistic, or other non-monotheist, societies are inherently inferior. This is especially offensive to Hindus, Buddhists, and others in East Asia, Siberia/Central Asia, and indigenous North America who have been vilified by Christians (and, to a lesser extent, Muslims as well) as pagans who need to be saved.Second, he over-simplifies the Jewish notion of election. It is true that the ferocity of Hebrew assaults on the ancient Canaanites

thousands of years ago (which Moses, a respect prophet in Islam, also took part in) supports the idea that Yahweh Shaboath's partiality to the Jews was a justification for oppressing non-Jews in the Levant. But for most of their history, the opposite seems to be the case. Zionists have a more secular than theological bent, and have been at odds with some conservative and orthodox Jews who had a different idea of Israel. The exclusion implied in the doctrine of election, I would argue, actually prevented intolerance and subjugation. Election is more burden than privilege, calling Jews to follow much stricter laws than their neighbors, and being singled out for more severe punishment by God. The universality of their deity as the lord of all nations was a late development, as Jews were henotheists longer than exclusive monotheists (the first commandment acknowledges the existence of other deities). The Jews were not uniquely saved in a spiritual sense, as in Christianity, so much as given a unique responsibility to live righteously. Others are not forced to follow their religion; indeed, after the Bar Kokba revolt Jews became very hesitant to accept others into their faith. For the most part you have to be born into Judaism, which explains how they received a reputation in medieval Europe as being clannish and secretive (thus suspicious). Still, clannishness is better than imperialism in my view.Thirdly, I think Esack misreads post-modernism. He concludes the book by critiquing what he considers problematic in the western idea of tolerance. His mistake is to characterize post-modernism as a philosophy which "acknowledges no boundaries." Deconstructionism does indeed recognize boundaries - linguistic, political, cultural, etc. - before pointing their conceptual inadequacies. The thrust is not necessarily "anti-religious" but non-absolutism. Of course, without a notion of a transcendent absolute, and thus absolute certainty, I'm not sure how religion can stand. Still, as we've seen in the 20th century, absolutism can come in secular forms.It is true that pluralism is ideological, but to then make the leap that pluralism is a mere extension of the neo-colonial project of the West is to repeat Said's mistakes. Not all interests in the West are bent on hegemony, and not all Westerners who champion pluralism do so in the guise of neo-colonialism. To make that assumption is to absolutize the West as more unified that it really is, which is hypocritical if the critique of the West is that it over-generalizes about "the East." There were plenty of "oriental" societies that were genuinely pluralistic. Even Rome was pluralistic. The difference is that today, individuals rights are enshrined into law in a way that wasn't true of previous empires.Another point he makes that pluralism can undermine traditional relationship patterns, since, according to Esack, post-modernists believe that any defined relationship is too limiting. Tolerance in a modern or post-modern context does not mean people aren't allowed to define themselves. Individuals have that right. Existentially, we all have the freedom to choose our values and live by them. That is why extreme relativism is a contradiction - it makes an absolute out

of relativism. Individuals (as individuals) can make their own choices, which necessarily involves prioritization, and thus limitation. What individuals don't have the freedom to do is limit another individual's rights. Politically, the balance between majority versus minority needs, or communal consensus versus individual liberty, is debated amongst liberals, conservatives, libertarians, and communitarians in the West. But all agree on the importance of rights, responsibilities, and freedoms in a modern democracy.Islam has a different historical discourse altogether. There is no word for "democracy" in classical Arabic, the sacred language of Islam; this is a notion the West developed from the Hellenic Greeks. That doesn't mean there can't be democracy in Islam, but it does mean if it is in the process of occurring, there will continue to be controversy and heated debates that call into question many central tenets of Islam (and not just because democracy is a western import, or a discourse dominated by the realities of post-colonialism, though that does complicate matters). Remember, revolutions in the West were often very violent, even when they occurred from within, so to speak, so there is no reason to assume that a societal transition will be peaceful in Muslim-majority countries.The outcome of this inquiry, theological and political, is uncertain, but it is the primarily the task of Muslims, if they indeed decide that this inquiry is worth it. As it stands now, all sects of Islam, as far as I know, basically agree that the ultimate authority of all knowledge, morality, and legality is the Qur'an. For Sunnis, the next primary source is sunnah, recorded ahadith. When confronted with novel situations, there are the qiyas (analogies extending the prohibitions and injunctions of the Qur'an/Hadith) and lastly ijma (consensus) when the other methods fail. Shiites have a different take on ijma and matters of jurisprudence, but agree with Sunnis on the authority of the Qur'an.This is quite different from Western philosophy, which has as much non-theist sources as it does theist, whether a-biblical, pre-biblical, and even anti-biblical. Christendom always had both religious and secular law, starting with the Holy Roman Empire, which included pre-Christian Roman law. The difference between the Enlightenment age and what went before is that previously, religious leaders had complete authority and legal immunity, which is why reformists felt that religion and the state should be separated if there was to be justice. The Bible was never used to decide upon all major issues in the government to the extent that the Qur'an is in Islamic civilization. In Christianity, Jesus is the logos-made-flesh, thus He is the divine message. The Bible is secondary in that it is inspired by the God. In Islam, the Qur'an itself the message, whereas Muhammad is the messenger. The Qur'an is the actual speech of Allah, and it must be followed by Muslims the way Jesus is followed by Christians.How social liberation and pluralism will pan out in Muslim countries is, again, difficult to predict. But I'm glad there are scholars like Esack who at least open up a dialogue based on inclusion of different viewpoints rather than supremacy.

Unfortunately It is not often you are presented with a Muslim scholar who is as progressive, current and articulate as Dr. Farid Esack.Everyone who sincerely believes in the concept of "Progressive Islam" or even is curious about the concept, as well as the practice, should read this one.May feel a bit heavy at the begining, but Esack's intellect and his sense of humour will draw you in quickly. I highly recommend it.

Farid Esack'sQur'an, Liberation and PluralismFarid Esack. Qur'an, Liberation and Pluralism. Oxford: Oneworld, 1997. byDuring the late 1980s, Farid Esack was one of the most conspicuous Muslim campaigners against apartheid in his native South Africa. His sermons and broadsides diffused by the Call to Islam association of which he was National Co-Ordinator until 1990 were warmly received, particularly by anti-racist sections of the Christian churches. Among Muslims, however, he remained a provocative and sharply controversial figure. Most mosques and Islamic organisations saw him as a dangerous gadfly, either because they were nervous about his support for the ANC, which they believed might launch Ugandan-style expulsions of South Africa's Asians, or because they were disturbed by his apparent co-option by Selly Oak-type Christians. Deprived of a substantial base of Muslim support, in the tense, dying years of the apartheid regime he found himself in the sparsely-populated veld which separated two laagers: the accommodationist or non-political movements (such as the Tablighi Jamat, or Ahmad Deedat's Islamic Propagation Centre), and advocates of armed resistance to the taghut of apartheid (Qibla, the Murabitun, and a confusion of others).This rejection by South African Islam drove Esack further into the embrace of Christian activist movements, who paid for his studies and welcomed him on their platforms. But it is only with the publication of this book that the extent to which his views have reflected this Christian suhba has become clear. Esack is here proposing an iconoclastic revolution in Islamic methodology, the result being a set of Islamic ethics which dovetail precisely with liberal values. No unsightly survivals from the past are to be permitted: the Qur'anic ethic is, despite all appearances, a miraculous prefigurement of late twentieth-century Western ideals. Esack is here treading the path taken by earlier modernists, such as Ameer Ali, who a hundred years ago re-examined the Qur'an to discover in its pages the entire moral code of Victorian England.Esack recognises that to defuse or bypass the apparently non-liberal and traditionalist thrust of Muslim scripture requires an elaborate new hermeneutic. (To kill the unsightly old furu for good, the old usul must be uprooted.) Hence much of the book attempts a scholarly reappraisal of tafsir (Quranic exegesis) and usul al-fiqh (jurisprudence). One recognises traces of a postmodern strategy in the hyperbolically close

reading of the text, which then unravels, to be sewn back together with meanings 'read in' by the bold hermeneut.Unfortunately, this project is marred by a worrying crop of academic solecisms, some quite glaring. Just a sample few of these will indicate the nature, if not the scale, of the problem. On page 95 a hadith describing all humanity as 'the family of God' is weirdly justified by attributing it to the neo-Wahhabi writer Nasir al-Albani's book Silsilat al-Ahadith al-Da'ifa, whose explicit intention is to list only hadiths which are spuriously attributed to the Prophet. On p.112 the bila kayf (immodal) interpretation of the anthropomorphic passages in the Qur'an is imputed to Ibn Hanbal (it is in fact a quintessentially Ash'ari doctrine). On page 270 we are told that the Ash'aris 'opposed rationalism and were supportive of notions of predestination', whereas this is in reality a good definition of the Hanbalism which the Ash'aris opposed: rationalism is prominent in the standard Ash'ari texts, as is their doctrine of Acquisition (kasb), which as Majid Fakhry has shown is a radical denial of Hanbalite/Mujbira notions of predestination. On page 276 a tafsir work is attributed to Ibn Arabi, whereas scholarship has known for several decades that this text is in fact by Afif al-Din al-Tilmasani. The use of dates is at times inconsistent and confusing: for instance, at the top of page 177, Shahrastani's death date is given as 1153, while at the bottom of the same page it becomes 548: the Gregorian and Hijra dates respectively, although the distinction is not indicated or explained, here or elsewhere.The reader's confidence is further undermined when he learns of Esack's scepticism about the authenticity of the hadith literature. Ignoring the recent vindication of the hadith by Harald Motzki of Hamburg University, Esack plumps for a traditional scepticism a la Goldziher and Schacht, and announces that 'where I do cite a hadith in support of a particular opinion, it is not because I believe that it is authentically the word of Muhammad, although that may indeed be the case; I cite a hadith because it reflects the presence of, and support for, the idea among earlier Muslims.' By this manoeuvre, most scriptural material which obstructs Esack's theory of a liberal revelation is handily discarded. He does not, for instance, have to construct an exegesis to defuse such hadiths as 'Each Jew or Christian who hears of me, and then does not believe my message, shall be one of the inhabitants of the Fire.'Even Christian or secular readers of his text will note that this involves Esack in a contradiction when he turns to his leading task: the adumbration of a new Qur'anic hermeneutic. This is because his radical deconstruction of the Qur'an relies heavily on locating it within its original context. The Pakistani scholar Fazlur Rahman suggested that the sacred text acquired its temporal colouring from its passage through the mind of the Prophet, and that the traditional situational exegesis (asbab al-nuzul) active upon each verse has a confining effect. The rules of the Qur'an cannot regularly transcend the coordinates in time and space which they immediately addressed. A hukm, to use the language of the jurists, is not normative and cannot

transcend the archetypal illa or the sabab. And with the ratio of so many moral events today radically altered, Rahman and Esack demand that the content of the Qur'anic message must in many places be subject to suspension or fundamental reevaluation. Hence Esack writes (p.12): 'it is impossible to speak of an interpretation of the qur'anic text applicable to the whole world.' This opinion is hardly post-modern or even novel: it informed the jurisprudence of Najm al-Din al-Tufi and many Shi'a Ghulat in the middle ages, and is a recurrent modernist theme in our century. Mustafa al-Siba'i, for instance, used it to enable his vision of the Qur'an as a kind of Marxist manifesto. But Esack, by querying the hadith literature, has in fact closed this option against himself. The contexts of Qur'anic revelation are mediated entirely by the hadith. Sira is merely a hadith genre - and not the least precarious one; and if there is no Sira, there are no asbab al-nuzul. Having allowed Schacht to bake his cake, Esack cannot then unbake it in order to do exegesis.Esack's tafsir, as he himself makes clear, is driven by praxis. It is not an abstract encounter with God and revelation that moves him to redefine the latter (and to some extent the former); it is his own turbulent experience of injustice in the world.He borrows from the liberation theology of Gutierrez and others to suggest that old-fashioned scriptural readings which acquiesce in establishment tyranny must be displaced by a liberative exegesis that emphasises God's justice. This is a curious proposal, particularly since Shabbir Akhtar and others have already seen liberation theology as amounting in effect to an Islamization of Christianity. The New Testament urges us to 'resist not him that is evil', and enjoins believers to postpone restitution until the imminent Second Coming. Islam, by contrast, appears as intrinsically liberative, taking its cue from the patterns of the Sira. Kenneth Cragg has famously criticised Islam's alleged optimism about 'political religion' and the chances of reforming the deeply sinful structures of the world. But Esack is here working with the contrary stereotypes: we must inject the allegedly Christian paradigm of liberation into a static and accommodationist Islam, so as to render religion capable of changing structures, not just individual souls.Esack's odd but interesting exercise in role reversal was inspired by his admirable willingness to cooperate with Christian opponents of apartheid. A prominent consequence of this has been his interrogation of what he takes to be traditional Sunni verdicts on the religious efficacy of the Religions of the Book. For him, the supersessory salvation history conceptualised in the kalam is not enough; he will only approve a doctrine which allows Christians and Jews, and others, to achieve salvation on their own terms. This obliges him to examine and attempt to defuse the numerous Qur'anic verses that appear to condemn pre-Muslim forms of religion, a task to which he brings to bear the theory developed in particular by Rashid Rida that iman and kufr do not denote what Cantwell Smith would describe as 'reified' faith and unbelief, but dispositions of the heart which can exist within any

religious denomination. Tackling the verses one by one, as though they were a series of bombs, he disposes of some quite elegantly, but their sheer number appears finally to overwhelm him. He declines, for instance, even to attempt any defusing of a verse such as 'They commit kufr who say, "God is Jesus, the son of Mary".'Esack's frankly exhausting (but not exhaustive) tour of the exclusivist verses of the Qur'an is generally oblivious to Muslim reflection on this celebrated issue. He notes briefly the contribution of Shah Wali Allah al-Dahlawi (in Arabic, ignoring Marcia Hermanson's English translation), but fails to cite from that author's principal work on the subject, al-Budur al-Bazigha, in which the Indian author develops a perfectly humane explication of how non-Muslims can be saved, even if they have been exposed to Islam and refused it. Neither is there any awareness of the dispute between Ash'ari theories of accountability being conditional upon receipt of revelation, and the Maturidi notion of universal access to fundamental metaphysical and moral truths irrespective of access to a scripture. Recent Western discussions of the theme, to the extent that they do not appear in Christian periodicals, are also ignored. Thus, for instance, Kevin Reinhart's important book Before Revelation merits no discussion whatsoever.Even more puzzling is Esack's neglect of Western Muslim reflection on the theme of religious plurality. William Chittick's monograph Imaginal Worlds: Ibn Arabi and the Problem of Religious Diversity outlines, albeit with regrettable brevity, the Andalusian theosophist's appreciation of non-Muslim faith. Ibn Arabi's perspective predates Esack by eight hundred years, and yet is incomparably more nuanced, and has the indispensable merit of being rooted not in the transient hurly-burly of 'praxis', but in metaphysics and the direct knowledge of God. Ibn Arabi is only somewhat less controversial a figure than Esack, but this should not have deterred the bold South African pioneer from mining his works to discover that Islam has, after all, nurtured an authentically pluralistic theology of the Other.Chittick himself stands in the tradition of Western Muslim theological writing that was launched by Rene Guenon (Abdal Wahid Yahya, d.1951), and which remains, in this reviewer's opinion, among the most fascinating pluralistic theologies in Islam or in any religion, despite its undoubted errors. It is surely an odd failing of Esack's book that he fails to mention the very existence of this prolifically-published school of thought, which could offer him a paradigm of toleration which spares him the labour and humiliation of weeding out unfashionable views from the Islamic scriptures to allow space for his own concept of 'what Allah must have meant'.Esack's exuberant manifesto goes on to tackle a further issue. Accepting without discussion the liberal axiom that racism and 'sexism' are analogous forms of oppression, he demands the abolition of gender-related dimensions of Qur'anic legislation which conflict with modern liberal values. In the early 1990s, Nelson Mandela had promised the mainstream Muslim organisations that Muslim

personal law would be introduced following the abolition of apartheid, allowing South Africa's Muslim community the right to be judged by Shari'a values in matters of inheritance and marriage law. Esack, however, led a determined protest against this move. In May 1995 he appeared before the relevant government sub-committee, and pleaded with the authorities to change their mind. Partially due to this, in October 1996, the final version of the country's constitution made it clear that there would be no room for Shari'a justice in the new South African state. Esack, predictably, was delighted.Esack's campaign against the Shari'a is a manifestation of his apparent conviction that in every case where the ethos of the Qur'an appears to conflict with that of modern liberalism, then it is the Qur'an which must give way. Liberals who demand the abolition of Qur'anic guidance on inheritance, marriage, divorce, custodianship of minors, and indeed any other social issue, must be set in authority over the ijma of the Umma, past and present.This approach has provoked huge controversy in South Africa, particularly in connection with Esack's advocacy of female imams in mosques. He cites with approval a remote Cape Province community where men and women take turns in leading the Friday prayers, and mocks the foolish 'conservatives' who have the temerity to reject this. At this stage of the book Esack does not even go through the motions of claiming a Qur'anic justification for his views. Neither can he be troubled to discuss the minority of classical scholars, such as Ibn Arabi (again), who have validated the imamship of women for male or mixed congregations, or their fiqh justifications. The medieval experience of, say, the Madrasa Saqlatuniya in Cairo, staffed entirely by women, and where women led other women in prayer, does not merit a mention, nor do bula preachers in Bosnia, or the Hausaland wan-taro. The recent discussion of the gender issue by Sachiko Murata, which is transforming the teaching of gender in Islamic studies departments in the United States, is passed over in silence. The sole and sufficient dalil is what he calls 'progressive' - the progress involved being not in the direction of the model exampled by the Companions, but towards the consensual values of the modern secular West.This feminist issue recalls once again Esack's responsiveness to his Christian tutors, who have been anxious to direct Muslims along the lines recently followed by those liberal churches which ordain priestesses. The age-old European concern with securing the Europeanization of the earth - imperialism, to use a more frank expression - today relies on reshaping the parameters accepted by the Other: accession to Western values can only be guaranteed when non-Westerners think in Western terms. Among secular thinkers this is today a common transformation, but in Esack's case, his tutors have successfully secured a more interesting paradigm shift of a theological order. His book is written entirely in Christian theological language. It completely lacks the style and reverent tenor of Muslim reflection, with its characteristic indigenous terminology, and with the deployment of scriptures as

sacred archetypes rather than as archaic problems. In fact, Esack is even less inclined to invoke God than are many Christian theologians, who at least manage to squeeze Him in parenthetically when they wish to make a poetic gesture, growing tired of their sterile intellectualizing. One wishes that his tutors had shared with him Anselm's distinction between soliloquy and allocution, between speaking about God and speaking with God. Muslim religious reflection traditionally attempts the latter; but Esack is more comfortable deriving affective resonance from sociological rhetoric ('liberation', 'tolerance', 'progress'), transposing 'God' to what becomes at best a minor and even dissonant key.Christian missiology has long recognised the need to secure such a paradigm shift in Musl