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**ENGAGING KARL BARTH'S THEOLOGY WITH
NURCHOLISH MADJID AND IBN TAYMIYYA
A Discourse on Universal Salvation and Divine Mercy**

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Abstract

This study presents a pioneering dialogue between Karl Barth's Christian theology and Islamic theological perspectives in the Indonesian context, focusing specifically on the concept of universal salvation. The primary interlocutors are Nurcholish Madjid, interpreting Ibn Taymiyya, and Karl Barth's theology. Barth's universalism envisions an inclusive future for humanity, elaborated in Barth's exposition of the theme "Jesus is Victor," suggesting a universal reprieve from divine eschatological judgment. Correspondingly, Madjid's interpretation of Islamic theology proposes a universally hopeful future, recognizing the broad spectrum of divine revelation across various religious traditions, thereby fostering a sense of shared hope among diverse religious followers. Ibn Taymiyya, often misconceived as a figurehead for radical elements, is depicted in this essay as advocating a form of universalism where divine mercy ultimately triumphs over retribution. This article contends that this mutual anticipation of universal salvation can pave the way for meaningful Christian-Islamic interactions in the Indonesian milieu, contributing significantly to interfaith dialogue and understanding.

Keywords: Karl Barth, Nurcholis Madjid, Ibn Taymiyya, universalism, salvation, Islam, interfaith

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**PERCAKAPAN ANTARA TEOLOGI KARL BARTH
DENGAN NURCHOLISH MADJID DAN IBNU
TAYMIYYAH**

**Sebuah Diskursus tentang Keselamatan Universal dan
Rahmat Ilahi**

Abstrak

Studi ini menghadirkan dialog inovatif antara teologi Kristen Karl Barth dan perspektif teologi Islam dalam konteks Indonesia, dengan fokus khusus pada konsep keselamatan universal. Interlokutor utama adalah Nurcholish Madjid, yang menafsirkan Ibn Taymiyya, dan teologi Karl Barth. Universalisme Barth menggambarkan masa depan inklusif bagi umat manusia, yang berakar pada iman kepada Yesus Kristus dan perannya sebagai *Jesus Victor*, yang menguraikan keselamatan universal dari penghakiman eskatologis ilahi. Secara paralel, interpretasi Madjid terhadap teologi Islam mengusulkan masa depan penuh harapan secara universal, mengakui spektrum luas wahyu ilahi di berbagai tradisi agama, sehingga menumbuhkan rasa harapan bersama di antara pengikut agama yang beragam. Ibn Taymiyya, yang sering keliru dianggap sebagai tokoh utama elemen radikal, digambarkan dalam tulisan ini sebagai pendukung bentuk universalisme di mana rahmat ilahi pada akhirnya mengalahkan hukuman. Artikel ini berpendapat bahwa harapan bersama akan keselamatan universal ini dapat membuka jalan untuk interaksi Kristen-Islam yang bermakna di lingkungan Indonesia, memberikan kontribusi signifikan terhadap dialog antariman.

Kata-kata Kunci: Karl Barth, Nurcholis Madjid, Ibn Taymiyya, universalisme, keselamatan, Islam, antariman

Introduction

What Basel has to do with Jakarta? According to many Indonesian Christian theologians and some of prominent Muslim thinkers, it is almost nothing.¹ Thus, it is a struggle, on a personal as well as professional level, for any scholar or theologian who specializes in Karl Barth's theology to engage with Islamic theology

¹ This might, in part, be explained by Barth's occasional comments that are very unsympathetic toward Islam, as "paganized Judaism" Cf. Glenn A. Chestnutt, "Karl Barth and Islam," *Modern Theology*, Vol. 28, No. 2 (2012): 278-83. However, Barth changed his attitude toward the end of his life, as seen in, e.g., Karl Barth, *Ad Limina Apostolorum: An Appraisal of Vatican-II* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2016), 36-37.

in Indonesia's context.² Should one leave Barth in the hefty library of European universities and pursue something more relevant to the questions of the day in Indonesia? This article takes another perspective and intends to demonstrate that Basel has much to say to Jakarta and that Jakarta also has something to say to Basel.

This article embarks on a theological journey, juxtaposing Karl Barth's theology, particularly his interpretation of universal salvation and theology of election, with Islamic theological perspectives.³ Barth's engagement with the concept of universal salvation, notably his revision of the Calvinist doctrine of double predestination and his portrayal of Jesus Christ as the elected and rejected One, with its implication for the inclusivity of all human beings in Christ, I contend, provides a unique framework for dialogue with Islamic thought.

The essay brings Barth into conversation with Nurcholish Madjid and Ibn Taymiyya, both influential in Islamic discourse on universal salvation. It explores how these diverse theological viewpoints converge and diverge on this important concept. The significance of this comparison extends beyond merely bridging theological insights; it delves into the shared yet distinct concept of universal hope for all humanity that transcends religious boundaries. Both Madjid, a modern Indonesian Muslim theologian, and Ibn Taymiyya, a medieval Islamic scholar, provide interpretations of universal salvation that, I propose, offer intriguing contrasts and complements to Barth's perspective.

The concept of universalism is primarily explored within the framework of eschatological hope, scrutinizing its reception and interpretation in the diverse theological landscapes of Christianity and Islam, and considering its impact on the eschatological imagination of a shared future. The dialogue navigates through various forms of universalism presented by each theologian, spanning a spectrum from optimistic to pessimistic interpretations. This comparative analysis aims not only to illuminate the core theological tenets intrinsic to both faiths but also to deepen the understanding and foster dialogue between these religious traditions. By carefully exploring the concept of eschatological hope in the realm of universal salvation, as interpreted by Karl Barth, Nurcholish Madjid, and Ibn Taymiyya, the study endeavors to highlight the subtle complexities and variations within these viewpoints. The goal is to assess how these

² For an overview of theologians in Indonesia who engage with Karl Barth, see a recent article by Denni B. Saragih, "Reading Karl Barth in Indonesia: Retrospect and Prospect," *Exchange* Vol 47, No. 2 (2018): 109-127.

³ Barth himself is very critical of any attempt to find commonalities among religions under the umbrella of monotheism. See *Church Dogmatics (CD)* II/1 447-448. Cf. Chestnutt, "Karl Barth and Islam," 283-288.

distinct perspectives can enrich and add depth to interfaith discourse, offering a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of the theological underpinnings that unite and differentiate these two world religions.

Employing a qualitative methodology with textual analysis, this research unveils key parallels and contrasts in the understanding of universal salvation across these theological traditions. The introduction of Barth's theology of election into this dialogue adds depth to the discourse, particularly in its implications for understanding divine mercy and human destiny in both Christian and Islamic thought. The novelty of this paper lies in its in-depth comparative theological analysis, a dimension less explored in existing Christian-Muslim dialogues. By focusing on Barth's nuanced approach to universal salvation and election and contrasting it with Islamic interpretations by Madjid and Ibn Taymiyya, this study highlights the potential for mutual theological enrichment and interfaith understanding.

This essay will consist of three parts. The first part presents an exploration of universal salvation in the theology of Karl Barth, as I understand it. The second part explores the discussion of the hope of universal salvation among Islamic thinkers in Indonesia, specifically in the soteriological inclusivism of Nurcholish Madjid and his theological patron, Ibn Taymiyya. The essay concludes with some lessons/observations that a Christian theologian has learned from these explorations, and suggestions for further studies.

“Jesus is Victor”: Barth’s Hope of Universal Salvation

First, a disclaimer: This part of the article does not attempt to provide a complete account of Barth's theology of election but only presents my view/interpretation of Barth's theology of election and its implication for universal salvation. Barth's stand on the issue of universal salvation is a matter of debate among his interpreters.⁴ However, all agree that his doctrine revises the

⁴ We can identify three different conclusions among his interpreters, namely those who view that Barth rejects universalism, those who view that Barth is agnostic on this matter, and those who view that Barth's theology, specifically his doctrine of election, leans towards the direction of universalism. On the first view, see, for example, Joseph Dabney Bettis, “Is Karl Barth a Universalist?,” *Scottish Journal of Theology*, Vol. 20, No. 4 (1967). On the second view, see George Hunsinger, *Disruptive Grace: Studies in the Theology of Karl Barth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm B Eerdmans Publishing Co, 2004), 226-248. On the third view, see Tom Greggs, “‘Jesus Is Victor’: Passing the Impasse of Barth on Universalism,” *Scottish Journal of Theology*, Vol. 60, No. 2 (2007); Tom Greggs, “Pessimistic Universalism: Rethinking the Wider Hope with Bonhoeffer and Barth,” *Modern Theology*, Vol. 26, No. 4 (2010): 495-510; Oliver D. Crisp, “I Do Teach It, but I Also Do Not Teach It: The Universalism of Karl Barth (1886–1968),” in *“All Shall Be Well”: Explorations in Universal Salvation and Christian Theology, from Origen to Moltmann*, ed., Gregory MacDonald (Cambridge: James

Calvinist doctrine of double predestination; in Barth's theology, Jesus Christ becomes the center and is simultaneously portrayed as the elected and the rejected One. Barth made several explicit statements suggesting he is not a universalist, particularly in his polemical writing against G.C. Berkhouwer in *Church Dogmatics* (CD) IV/3 §69 "The Glory of Mediator," where he rejects the doctrine of *apokatastasis*.⁵ However, Tom Greggs is correct in noting that it is not universal salvation that Barth rejects but rather the replacement of the person of Jesus Christ with a theological principle, i.e., a principle that binds God to the triumph of grace and the final restoration of all.⁶ When *apokatastasis* becomes a principle that determines the love of God, then God's love is abstracted from the particularity of Jesus Christ and constrained by an external focus. It is neither love in freedom nor freedom to love anymore. According to Barth, universal salvation is not based on a theological principle of the triumph of grace over evil but on the reality brought by the victory of Christ, which embodies the eternal decision of God, who, in His freedom, loves us. It is us as *humanity* that is the object of God eternal election.

From the very beginning (from eternity itself), there are no other elect together with or apart from Him, but, as Eph. 14 tells us, only "in" Him. "In Him" does not simply mean with Him, together with Him, in His company. Nor does it mean only through Him, by means of that which He as elected man can be and do for them. "In Him" means in His person, in His will, in His own divine choice, in the basic decision of God which He fulfils over against every man... *His election is the original and all-inclusive election; the election which is absolutely unique, but which in this very*

Clarke & Co, 2014), 305-324. During my study under Prof. David Fergusson, we read, in a Barth reading group, Book IV of *Church Dogmatics*, and their question on Barth's universalism was a hot topic. Prof. Fergusson explained his reading that Barth's overall theology leans towards the direction of universalism. Cf. David Fergusson, "Will the Love of God Finally Triumph?," in *Nothing Greater, Nothing Better: Theological Essays on the Love of God*, ed., Kevin J. Vanhoozer (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 2001). I was not convinced during that time, but after completing my Ph.D, in my study, I have concluded that Barth's hope for universal salvation is, in fact, congruent with his overall theological inclination toward universalism. On Barth's hope of universal salvation, see CD IV/3 477-478.

⁵ See also CD II/2, 417, 477.

⁶ Greggs, "Jesus Is Victor," 206; Tom Greggs, *Barth, Origen, and Universal Salvation: Restoring Particularity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 22-31. Cf. G. C. Berkouwer, *The Triumph of Grace in the Theology of Karl Barth* (London: Paternoster Press, 1956).

uniqueness is universally meaningful and efficacious, because it is the election of Him who Himself elects.⁷

The rejection which all men incurred, the wrath of God under which all men lie, the death which all men must die, God in His love for men transfers from all eternity to Him in whom He loves and elects them, and whom He elects at their head and in their place... He, the Elect, is appointed to check and defeat Satan on behalf of all those that are elected “in Him,” on behalf of the descendants and confederates of Adam now beloved of God.⁸

The critical theological decision that shapes Barth’s doctrine of election is his creative shift from soteriology into the doctrine of God.⁹ According to Barth, election is primarily about God and only secondarily and derivatively about human salvation. In the primal decision of God, God takes sides with humanity and creation, and it determines the being of God as God of and for humanity. It is not that God ontologically could not exist without humanity if God had decided so. But God ontologically cannot exist without humanity because God chooses to do so in pre-temporal eternity. As such, the person of Jesus Christ represents an elected humanity and an electing God. He is both the subject and object of the election. In the immanent being of God, before the creation of everything, God is Jesus Christ, the Father of Jesus Christ, and God is the Spirit of the Father and the Son, Jesus Christ.¹⁰ Barth maintains that God in Himself, in the primal and basic decision in which He wills His being as God; in the mystery of what takes place from, and to, all eternity within His triune

⁷ CD II/2, 117. Emphases added for clarity

⁸ CD II/2, 123.

⁹ The key text in the current debate over Barth’s doctrine of election is Bruce McCormack, “Grace and Being: The Role of God’s Gracious Election in Karl Barth’s Theological Ontology” in *The Cambridge Companion to Karl Barth*, ed., John B. Webster (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 127-142. Various responses and rejoinders to McCormack’s thesis can be found in Michael T. Dempsey, *Trinity and Election in Contemporary Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 2011). My reading of the debate leans towards McCormack’s position, and I have argued the implication of this thesis for the ontological reality in which the church must understand the interpretation and preaching of the Bible as Scripture. Cf. Denni B. Saragih, “Disruptive Presence: The Ontology, Theology and Ethics of Reading the Bible as Scripture in Karl Barth’s Theological Exegesis” (Ph.D. dissertation, The University of Edinburgh, 2016).

¹⁰ For an excellent exposition of Barth’s immanent Trinity about the doctrine of election, see Eberhard Jüngel, *God’s Being Is in Becoming: The Trinitarian Being of God in the Theology of Karl Barth: A Paraphrase* (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans, 2001).

being, God is none other than the One who in His Son or Word elects Himself, and in and with Himself elects His people.¹¹

The logical implication of Barth's doctrine of election is the universality of salvation in the particularity of Jesus Christ. In the primal decision of God, as God for humanity, God elected to be rejected and abandoned for the sake of humankind. This is not an abstract decision but a concrete reality based on the simultaneity of the history of Jesus Christ in temporal eternity, i.e., in His eternal now, which transcends the linear flow of time, with the judgment of God in pre-temporal eternity. In Jesus Christ, the rejected humanity is judged and sent into abandonment. Because of this, everyone is rejected by Jesus Christ, just as everyone is elected. The only distinction and division within humanity lies between those who have realized their election in Jesus Christ and those who have not.¹² But ontologically, everyone is a member of God's eschatology. The historical reality in which they have not realized and embraced their election does not change their ontological being; according to Barth, the church's calling is to proclaim the good news of God's election of humanity in Jesus Christ.

Barth, however, does not state explicitly that we know for sure that none is lost and that everyone will find a place in God's eschatology. Barth's universalism is not a confident formulation that resolves all eschatological tensions.¹³ This is so because of the limitation of what faith can know and because the human response in rejecting their ontological being as elected humanity is impossible. Universal salvation is an eschatological reality; Christians should pray and earnestly hope for it. At any rate, hoping for the salvation of all is theologically unproblematic. Barth's theology, however, does not stop there. His revision of the Reformed doctrine of election ultimately absorbs the rejection of sinful humanity into the person of Jesus Christ, which renders Jesus Christ the only judged human being. Humanity is elected in the election of Jesus Christ, and no human being is outside the embrace of Jesus and his victory. We can also have confidence in Jesus Christ, the victor over evil and sin. But in typical Barthian fashion, the dialectical tension must be maintained that the hope of universal salvation is based on the faith in Jesus Christ and not on the belief in the doctrine of universalism (*apokatastasis*).

It is His concern what is to be the final extent of the circle.
If we are to respect the freedom of divine grace, we cannot

¹¹ *CD* II/2, 76.

¹² This is not a differentiation between Christian and non-Christian since, for Barth, even a Christian may not realize her true being in the election of Jesus Christ.

¹³ Cf. Greggs, "Pessimistic Universalism," 501-504.

venture the statement that it must and will finally be coincident with the world of man as such (as in the doctrine of the so-called *apokatastasi*). No such right or necessity can legitimately be deduced.¹⁴

The Hope of Universal Salvation in Islam

The second part of this article explores universalism in the thoughts of Nurcholish Madjid and Ibn Taymiyya. Ibn Taymiyya is discussed because, despite suggesting a form of universalism quite different from Madjid's divine universal mercy, his view on universal salvation represents a theological attempt to grapple with the universal triumph of God's mercy and wisdom against human sinfulness. The paragraph begins with a short introduction to modern Islamic theology in Indonesia, then presents the theologies of universal salvation of Ibn Taymiyya and Madjid.

Nurcholis Madjid

Azyumardi Azra represents the opinion of most Muslim scholars in Indonesia in stating that Islam in Indonesia differs from that of Middle Eastern and Western.¹⁵ According to Azra, Indonesian Islam is more moderate, accommodative, and less rigid in its doctrinal convictions.¹⁶ This is a general cultural trait resulting from complex conversation processes between inherited faith, social-cultural environments, political engagements, and spiritual experiences in encounters with folk religions. The Indonesian Muslim community has a long tradition of negotiation and reformulation that date back to the period before the Indonesian struggle for Independence from colonial control of the Netherlands, Japan, and other Western countries. Among those thinkers who shaped the landscape of present Islamic theology in Indonesia was the late Nurcholis Madjid, who founded *Mazhab Ciputat*, along with other thinkers, such as Komaruddin Hidayat, Yudi Latif, Azyumardi Azra, and Budhy Munawar-Rachman.¹⁷ In

¹⁴ CD II/2, 417.

¹⁵ Azyumardi Azra, "Distinguishing Indonesian Islam: Some Lessons to Learn," in *Islam in Indonesia: Contrasting Images and Interpretations*, eds., Jajat Burhanuddin and C. van Dijk (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2013), 63.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Carool Kersten, *Islam in Indonesia: The Contest for Society, Ideas and Values* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 52-53. Also see Madjid's intellectual biography in Ann Kull, *Piety and Politics: Nurcholish Madjid and His Interpretation of Islam in Modern Indonesia* (Saarbrücken: VDM Verlag Dr. Müller, 2008), 211; Carool Kersten, *Cosmopolitans and Heretics: New Muslim Intellectuals and the Study of Islam* (London: Hurst, 2011). Nurcholis Madjid is well known in Indonesia as *Cak Nur*. Another school that shares similar inclination toward progressive theology is *Mazhab Jogja*, which includes prominent figures such as

his doctoral research, Madjid delves into Ibn Taymiyya's critique of the theology of reason and revelation, proposing a distinctive Islamic perspective on *Kalam* and *Falsafa*.¹⁸ In his later writings, Madjid frequently referenced Ibn Taymiyya both emphatically and critically.¹⁹ It is important to note that while Madjid never specifically delved into Ibn Taymiyya's writings on salvation, recent primary research on Ibn Taymiyya's concept of soteriological universalism has been translated into Indonesian.²⁰ According to Carool Kersten, one of Madjid's theological approaches—similar to that of Ibn Taymiyya—entails exploring a renewal (*tajdid*) of theology without risking doctrinal innovation (*bid'a*).²¹ This is part of Madjid's larger agenda known as *Gerakan Pembaruan Pemikiran Islam* (Movement for the Renewal of Islamic Thinking). It seeks to preserve traditional Islamic teachings and make them inclusive by embracing other faiths.²² Carool Kersten and Ann Kull have documented this political-theological agenda, and there is no need to reiterate it here.²³ In an intense negotiation between rich Islamic traditions and various intellectual traditions, including Western theology and philosophy, Madjid has generated much discussion in Indonesia on his inclusive view of religion.²⁴ Central to his strategy is a reform of the meaning of Islam in which the true sense of the word "Islam" is considered to mean a human self-surrender to the will of God. As such, not only Islam as an organized religion but

Mukti Ali, Syafii Maarif, Dawam Rahadjo, Abdul Munir Mul Khan, and Amin Abdullah. In the course of writing this paper I had an opportunity to interview representative of both *mazhabs*.

¹⁸ Nurcholish Madjid, "Ibn Taymiyya on Kalam and Falsafa: A Problem of Reason and Revelation in Islam" (Ph.D. dissertation, The University of Chicago, 1984).

¹⁹ See, e.g., Sukidi Imawan, *Teologi Inklusif Cak Nur* (Jakarta: Penerbit Buku Kompas, 2001), xix-xxiv; Maria Ulfa, "Mencermati Inklusivisme Agama Nurcholish Madjid," *Kalimah*, Vol. 11, No. 2 (2013); Nurcholish Majid, *Islam: Doktrin dan Peradaban* (Jakarta: Yayasan Wakaf Paramadina, 1992), 265-281. Please note that Ulfa's article is not in agreement with Madjid's proposal.

²⁰ Mohammad Hassan Khalil, *Islam and the Fate of Others: The Salvation Question* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 75-109; Mohammad Hassan Khalil, *Islam Dan Keselamatan Pemeluk Agama Lain* (Bandung: Mizan, 2016). See also among others, Ibnu Taimiyah, et al., *Fatwa-Fatwa Ibnu Taimiyah* (Jakarta: Puataka Sahifa, 2008).

²¹ Carool Kersten, "Khilafa as the Viceregency of Humankind: Religion and State in the Thought of Nurcholish Madjid," in *Demystifying the Caliphate: Historical Memory and Contemporary Contexts*, eds., Madawi Al-Rasheed, Carool Kersten, and Marat Shterin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 173.

²² Not all Islamic scholars are sympathetic with Madjid's approach and purpose, see for example, Ulfa, "Mencermati Inklusivisme Agama Nurcholish Madjid?"

²³ See literatures by Carool Kersten and Ann Kull in fn. 17 and fn. 21.

²⁴ For a critical evaluation of Madjid's theology see Ulfa, "Mencermati Inklusivisme Agama Nurcholish Madjid," 237-249.

other religious beliefs can express the same spiritual surrender to God, and in that sense, these religions are also “*islamic*,” and their adherents are also “*muslim*.”²⁵

This might seem at first to contradict specific passages of the Qur’an. Still, Madjid’s accommodative mode of theological thinking, inspired by the writings of medieval theologians, particularly Ibn Taymiyya, and shaped by religious pluralism in Indonesia, embraces humanity in the mercy of God through a reinterpretation of the Qur’an text from the point of view of monotheistic inclusivism. The main feature of Madjid’s theology is its emphasis on the unity of prophecy, humanity, and the unity of God, in which the spiritual dimension of *al-Islam* (self-surrender) embraces all Abrahamic religions.²⁶ But according to Madjid’s theology, not only Abrahamic faiths but all religions are the bearers of God’s revelational messages, and these messages demand human surrender to the divine revelation. Citing Yusuf Ali, Madjid proposes that people of the book, can be interpreted “including those who are sincere among the followers of Zoroaster, the Vedas, Buddha, Confucius, and other moral teachers.”²⁷ On the other hand, while he acknowledges differing opinions among Islamic scholars, he ultimately emphasizes that the principle of inclusivity is embedded in the Quran’s concept of *ahl al-Kitab*.

Furthermore, regardless of the differences in interpretation mentioned above, God’s command, in relation to various principles outlined in many other verses, results in attitudes among Muslims that are quite unique among the followers of religions. These attitudes are based on an awareness of religious pluralism, with notable characteristics of tolerance, openness, and fairness that stand out in the history of Islam. This principle is reflected in the concept of who is classified as People of the Book (*ahl al-Kitāb*).²⁸

When its adherents learn to have an absolute dependence on God, they reach the true essence of Islam. This suggests that, hypothetically, followers of other religions might also attain salvation if they believe in One God, the Last Day, and engage in righteous acts.

In a spontaneous sense, the verse assures that just like Muslims, Jews, Christians, and Sabians, as long as they believe in Allah, the One God, and the Last Day (on which

²⁵ Majid, *Islam*, 188-189.

²⁶ Imawan, *Teologi Inklusif Cak Nur*, xxxvi.

²⁷ Nurcholish Madjid, *Islam*, 189. All English translations of quotations from this source are mine.

²⁸ *Ibid*.

all humans will be held accountable for their actions in a Divine Court, and which is the moment when a person is in absolute personal communion with God), and based on that belief, if they act righteously, then all of them, let it be said, “enter paradise” and “are freed from hell.”²⁹

Therefore, salvation is not obtained by humans through ancestry, but by anyone who believes in Allah, the Last Day, and performs righteous deeds, a principle that is heavily emphasized in the Qur'an.³⁰

This may contradict the commonly held belief in Islamic teachings on salvation. Many assume that the foundational soteriological principle of the Qur'an is the proclamation of a salvific promise of paradisiacal bliss to “those who have faith and do good works” (Q. 2:25).³¹ At the same time, the warning is pronounced, “to those who reject faith and deny God’s revelation” (Q. 2:39) and who because of their unbelief will suffer anguish in the fire of Hell.³² Humanity’s fate is divided between their *imān* (faith and fidelity) or their *kufr* (disbelief and rejection). For Madjid, however, *imān* is understood as a broad spectrum of human responses to different divine revelations at different times in different places.³³ On the other hand, there are exclusivist claims in the Qur'an that seemingly cannot be reconciled with this inclusivism.³⁴ For example, Surah 3: 19, 35 states, “Indeed the religion of Allah is Islam; whosoever desires a religion other than Islam it will not accept of him.” Furthermore, other verses claim that one’s rejection of Muhammad’s prophethood and his messages is similar to the rejection of Allah. Thus, other poems, such as Surah 38:14, 34:45, and 68:9, generally mean that the denial

²⁹ Ibid, 186.

³⁰ Ibid, 189.

³¹ The concepts of soteriology and salvation itself, while not as commonly used in Islamic discourse, are nonetheless well-understood by Muslim scholars, see Mohammad Noer Irwan, *Qur'anic Soteriology, Doktrin Teologis Tentang Keselamatan dan Nasib Pemeluk Agama Lain dalam Perspektif AlQur'an*, (Semarang: RaSAIL Media Group, 2019); M. Hassan Khalil, “Salvation and the ‘Other’ in Islamic Thought: The Contemporary Pluralism Debate,” *Religion Compass*, Vol. 5 (2011). Cf. A. B. S. Cook, “Soteriological semiotics within the Qur'an,” *Darulfunun Ilahiyat*, Vol. 31, No. 2 (2020).

³² Khalil, *Islam and the Fate of Others*, 3.

³³ In fact, according to Madjid, figures such as Buddha and Lao Tze must be considered as God’s messengers to teach God’s revelation to their respective people in their respective locality. See Imawan, *Teologi Inklusif Cak Nur*, xxv.

³⁴ Marcia Hermansen, “Eschatology,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Classical Islamic Theology*, ed., Tim Winter (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 321-322.

of Muhammad seals the fate of non-Muslims in eternal damnation.³⁵ In Q. 4:115, one reads, “Whoever opposes the Messenger [Muhammad] after the guidance has been made clear to him and follows a path other than that of the believers, We shall lead him to what he has chosen and cause him to enter the Fire” (4:115). However, Mun’im Sirry has argued convincingly that these exclusivist verses are linguistically and theologically ambivalent, and modern thinkers of Islamic theology, such as Rashīd Riḍā and Mawlana Azad, have sought to recover a non-supersessionist meaning of *al-Islam* as submission and obedience that embraces all monotheistic faiths rather than a specific historical religion, i.e., Islam.³⁶ Thus, in the view of these interpreters, the verses quoted above can mean that Allah’s religion is self-surrender (*al-Islam*). In his interpretation of texts regarding condemnation of those who rejected Muhammad, Sirry argues that these should be viewed as polemical statements, best understood as “a form of interplay: a situation gives rise to a certain polemic; the polemic reacts to this context and influences the situation.”³⁷ According to Sirry’s interpretations, the polemical nature of certain texts should not be viewed in isolation but rather in relation to their historical context, which mirrors the conflicts between the Medinan Christians and Jews and the leadership of Muhammad. He argues that applying these texts directly to contemporary Indonesian Christians would do injustice to both the texts themselves and to modern Christians. Therefore, he maintains that the verses mentioned should be confined to their historical situations and interpreted strictly within their polemical historical contexts.

According to Madjid, there are numerous significant thinkers in the history of Islamic theology who do not always share a unified voice in their interpretations of relevant texts. Specifically, for Madjid, Ibn Taymiyya is an exemplary figure as a theologian and religious teacher because he remained faithful to the teachings of Muhammad while simultaneously exemplifying the freedom and courage to re-examine the historical teachings of Islam.³⁸ Ann Kull has shown in her studies that Ibn Taymiyya is instrumental in shaping Madjid’s theology and inclusive view.³⁹ While Madjid in certain respects quite critical of Taymiyya, he nevertheless see him as a model thinker. According to Madjid, “to make Ibn Taymiyya’s system more responsive to the needs of Muslims today, such Islamically ‘orthodox’ spiritualism should be complemented by his

³⁵ Mohammad Hassan Khalil, ed. *Between Heaven and Hell: Islam, Salvation, and the Fate of Others* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 114.

³⁶ Mun’im A. Sirry, *Scriptural Polemics the Qur’an and Other Religions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 68-70.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 34.

³⁸ Majid, *Islam*, 180.

³⁹ Kull, *Piety and Politics*, 149-153.

advocacy of toleration and moderation.”⁴⁰ In his approach to hermeneutics and theological method, Ibn Taymiyya serves as Madjid’s model for positively critiquing traditional Sunni theology. This includes examining teachings purportedly upheld by the companions of Muhammad and aspects of Islamic consensus that appear to conflict with the Qur’anic fundamentals concerning the mercy and justice of God.⁴¹ Accordingly, Madjid maintains, “it would be fairer to Ibn Taymiyya to remember how he insists that people should be judged only on the basis of their *taqwā* (God fearing) and the extent of their service to humankind, not their ascriptive qualities.”⁴² In the spirit of Madjid’s conclusions, this article will examine a critical proposal of Ibn Taymiyya’s theology that he developed towards the end of his life; particularly, for our purposes, his form of universalism stands out as his most significant theological contribution.

Ibn Taymiyya

Ibn Taymiyya (1263-1328) is a medieval theologian who has played a significant role in modern Islamic theology and, in relation to Madjid, has influenced his development as an Islamic thinker. Ibn Taymiyya’s theology has many different sides, a feature that critically noted in Madjid’s writings.⁴³ According to M. Hassan Khalil the most provocative part of his theology is when he proposes the final salvation of all based on the boundless mercy of God.⁴⁴ This is not a constant feature of his theology. Khalil considers that Ibn Taymiyya’s early soteriology could best be described as a form of limited inclusivism.⁴⁵ Khalil states that Ibn

⁴⁰ Madjid, *Ibn Taymiyya on Kalam and Falsafa*, 239.

⁴¹ In his chapter on other religions, Madjid uses Ibn Taymiyya as his main reference, see Madjid, *Islam*, 185-209.

⁴² Madjid, *Ibn Taymiyya on Kalam and Falsafa*, 240.

⁴³ He is inspiration to progressive Islamic theology as well as radical Islamic Jihad and Wahabi movement. Barry Cooper, *New Political Religions, or, an Analysis of Modern Terrorism* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2004), 94-99. Cf. Madjid, *Ibn Taymiyya on Kalam and Falsafa*, 233, “Ibn Taymiyya’s reform six centuries ago should be a great contribution to modern Muslims. But one question remains: would his methodology, followed fully and consistently, liberate Muslims from the minutiae of religious doctrines and bring back Islam’s noble simplicity? Considering Ibn Taymiyya’s emphasis on *ijtihad* and his war on *taqlid*, the answer should be affirmative. However, his strong and even fanatical adherence to Traditions can only be worrisome to Muslims concerned with modernity. Adhering to a Tradition, especially a sound one, is religiously justifiable, but accepting the whole corpus of Hadith reports as genuine, sacred codifications of Traditions, even those which have been considered authentic, is problematical.”

⁴⁴ Khalil, *Islam and the Fate of Others*, 75-76. Cf. B. Abrahamov, “The Creation and Duration of Paradise and Hell in Islamic Theology,” *Der Islam*, Vol. 79 (2002).

⁴⁵ Khalil, *Islam and the Fate of Others*, 78.

Taymiyya proposed that those who do not know the revelation of Muhammad, because it has never reached them (people of the gaps), will not be judged according to what they do not know, i.e., the Qur'an's messages. There will be salvation for these "unreached" non-Muslims who follow the correct paths known to them. But those who have become acquainted with the Qur'an message but refused to believe in it will be punished and disqualified from receiving any benefit of the prayer of forgiveness on the Final Day. But this qualified inclusivism, a belief of many contemporary Muslims, was only an interim theological position of Ibn Taymiyya.⁴⁶ Toward the end of his life, Ibn Taymiyya reflected on a text in an ancient corpus that altered his earlier stance and resulted in his final theological position on universal salvation, i.e., the final punishment is only temporary, and the climax of eschatology is the salvation of all.⁴⁷

The hermeneutical foundation of Ibn Taymiyya's stance rests on his observation that there is no consensus among the first three generations of Muslims (the Salafis) regarding the eternality of Hell. Accordingly, Ibn Taymiyya argues that people will be in hell for a long time, but not forever.⁴⁸ Ibn Taymiyya examines Q. 6:128, which says, "Your Home is the Fire, and there shall you remain – unless God will otherwise: your Lord is Wise." The final sentence, "unless God wills otherwise," is interpreted by Ibn Taymiyya to mean that God's will is to embrace all humanity in universal salvation. In God's mercy, the existence of Hell must be ended. The choice of God since creation is not the eternal damnation of unbelievers but the restoration of all to God's original wise purpose.⁴⁹

According to John Hoover, Ibn Taymiyya in his final writing, *Fanā' al-nār* (The Passing Away of the Fire),⁵⁰ provides three theological justifications for proposing the end of Hell Fire. First, the eternality of Heaven and Hell is not the same. The eternality of Heaven is derived from God's mercy, while Hell is derived from God's wrath. Heaven will continue to exist, while

⁴⁶ Ibid., 80.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 81. The text in question was a Qur'an commentary that contains the writing of Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb, one of Muhammad's Companion and the second caliph, that states the punishment in Hell will be finally ended by God. This starkly deviates from the mainstream doctrine of the Sunni Islam, see Jane Idleman Smith and Yvonne Haddad, *The Islamic Understanding of Death and Resurrection* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 95, 220.

⁴⁸ Khalil, *Islam and the Fate of Others*, 83.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 85.

⁵⁰ The complete title of the book is *al-Radd 'alā man qāla bi-fanā' al-janna wal-nār* (Refutation of Whoever Says that the Garden and the Fire Will Pass Away), ed., Muḥammad b. 'Abd Allāh al-Samḥarī, Riyadh 1415/1995. In this article I will use a translated text from Ibn Taymiyyah, *Al-Radd 'alā man qāla bi-fanā' al-janna wa al-nār*, Trans. Hassan Radwan (London: 2020).

Hell will cease when God's wrath ends.⁵¹ Second, about Qur'an hermeneutics, Ibn Taymiyya argues that the mainstream Sunni and their consensus have wrongly understood the Qur'an's meaning by reading it without reference to its overall theology.⁵² He proposes a need to revise the conviction on the eternity of Hell based on the Qur'an's basic concepts of God's mercy and justice. Third, God's mercy and wise purpose since creation are incompatible with the doctrine that God will punish some people eternally.⁵³ No justification can be made for punishing anyone eternally in the Fire, according to Ibn Taymiyya, because no sin is compatible with a never-ending punishment. Instead, God's mercy and wisdom mean that the Hell Fire must serve a particular purpose. In the fourth conclusion of this final writing Taymiyya states,

He has set a limit to the Fire by saying: "Remaining in it for ages" (78:23) and saying: "Forever in it, except as God wishes." (6:128) and saying: "As long as the Heavens and Earth endure, except as your Lord wishes." (11:108) These three verses signify something temporary or conditional. While that one (the Garden) is eternal and unrestricted and is not temporary or conditional.⁵⁴

In this regard, the Fire is created primarily as an instrument of healing and cleansing, not punishment. And this applies to all forms of sins, including the most severe ones, namely the sin of unbelief (*kufr*) and idolatry (*shirk*).⁵⁵ Once the purpose of the Fire is achieved, the implication is clear: all will enter into God's eternal heaven. This belief applies not only to sinners who reject the message of Muhammad but also to all human beings, believers and non-believers alike, asserting that they will ultimately attain a state of liberation from the Fire.⁵⁶ Although references in the Qur'an seem to suggest that unbelievers will stay in the Fire forever, Ibn Taymiyya argues that by the mercy of God, the Fire *itself* will cease to exist.⁵⁷ And when this happens, those who have undergone God's therapeutic punishment will enter eternal heaven, as God's wise purpose. In the seventh conclusion Ibn Taymiyya remarks,

⁵¹ Jon Hoover, "Against Islamic Universalism," in *Islamic Theology, Philosophy and Law: Debating Ibn Taymiyya and Ibn Qayyim Al-Jawziyya*, eds., Birgit Krawietz and Georges Tamer (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2013), 390.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibn Taymiyyah, *Al-Radd 'ala man qala bi-fana' al-janna wa al-nar*, 23.

⁵⁵ Jon Hoover, "Islamic Universalism: Ibn Qayyim Al-Jawziyya's Salafi Deliberations on the Duration of Hell-Fire," *The Muslim World*, Vol. 99, No. 1 (2009): 180.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 186.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

He has conveyed that His Mercy encompasses everything and that He has: “Decreed upon Himself mercy,” (6:12) and He said: “My Mercy outstrips my anger,” and “My Mercy overcomes my Anger” (7:156). These are general and unrestricted. Because if punishment was deemed to have no end, then there wouldn’t be any Mercy at all.⁵⁸

This differs from the eternal bliss of paradise, which is an expression of God’s eternal attributes.

The Bliss (of Paradise) flows necessarily from His names which are intrinsic to His essence and so must be eternal along with the eternality of His names and attributes. As for punishment, it is only one of His creations, and that which is created can have an end just like the *dunya* and other such things - particularly a creation that was created for a wise purpose pertaining to other than itself.⁵⁹

The doctrinal foundation of Ibn Taymiyya’s proposal is the belief that God’s mercy and forgiveness are essential qualities of God’s attributes.⁶⁰ This differs from divine chastisement, a religious response to human sins. Wrath and chastisement are not part of the divine attributes. As such, God’s wrath will not last forever. In contrast, while the mercy of God is eternal and all-encompassing, his chastisement is limited and therapeutical. In the eight conclusion Taymiyya argues,

It is established that apart from the fact His Mercy is all-encompassing, He is also All-Wise and the All-Wise only creates according to His overall wise purpose. Just as His wise purpose is mentioned in several places. For so long as it is understood that those He punishes, He punishes for a wise purpose, then this is possible. In this world, there is a wise purpose behind Divinely ordained punishments. Likewise, there are profound wisdoms behind what He decrees of calamities. Amongst them; cleansing of sins, purification of souls, deterring the perpetrator as well as others in the future and in it lies a cautionary lesson. And the Garden is pure and no one enters it except the pure.⁶¹

To summarise Ibn Taymiyya’s view, Divine mercy will not allow eternal punishment. It must end because God’s wise purpose

⁵⁸ Ibn Taymiyyah, *Al-Radd ‘ala man qala bi-fana’ al-janna wa al-nar*, 23.

⁵⁹ Ibid

⁶⁰ Hoover, “Islamic Universalism,” 188.

⁶¹ Ibn Taymiyyah, *Al-Radd ‘ala man qala bi-fana’ al-janna wa al-nar*, 24.

demands it.⁶² Therefore, there is a purpose in God's decision to send people into the Fire. Once this purpose is attained, then the mercy of God will be shown to all. The existence of fire is God's way of creating the best of all possible worlds. The Fire, according to Ibn Taymiyya, was not a whimsical decision but an expression of divine wisdom since the beginning of the world.⁶³ Ibn Taymiyya states that, "when they are punished thoroughly by the Fire, their souls are cleansed of that evil, then this is rationally consistent with wise purpose, just as is the case with suffering of this world."⁶⁴ In the cessation of the Fire, it will be finally made known that God's punishment is wise and exemplifies God's all-encompassing mercy. In the end, God will put everything in their proper place; every creature is within the merciful hand of their Creator. In this way, God's mercy and justice meet at the end of God's eschatology.⁶⁵

**A Preliminary Conclusion:
Universal Salvation in Nurcholis Madjid, Ibn Taymiyya, and
Karl Barth**

First, I find it intriguing that Barth, Ibn Taymiyya, and Madjid each endeavour to rethink their theological traditions to propose a universal scope of salvation. They all attempt to be faithful to their practices, and yet they are not afraid to deviate from inherited consensus to open a new avenue of expressing God's universal love. Their theologies give a glimpse of beatific eschaton within the particularity of their tradition. Tradition does not constrain them to formulate an exclusivist or separatist theology but instead inspires hope in God's universal eschatology. All three accounts witness the friendliness of God to all, albeit expressed differently. Particularly in the account of Ibn Taymiyya and Karl Barth, the eschaton is depicted as God's gift for humanity, and it is a gift that expresses the triumph of God's mercy and, in the case of Barth, the victory of Jesus Christ. Neither of them falls into the temptation of annihilation and limited salvation, which separate humanity into those who belong to the saved and those who are considered the damned. The theologies of all three affirm that all people are bound by the same fate in a shared future, which means they should live peacefully with one another in the present. They testify that divine grace encapsulates everyone and everything and that God should not be depicted as a discriminative being who, since the beginning, favours a particular group of people. Finally,

⁶² Hoover, "Islamic Universalism," 189.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 191.

⁶⁴ Ibn Taymiyyah, *Al-Radd 'ala man qala bi-fana' al-janna wa al-nar*, 24

⁶⁵ Jon Hoover, *Ibn Taymiyya's Theodicy of Perpetual Optimism* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 226-228.

they testify that human beings can confidently place their future in the hands of God, who takes the fate of humanity as his own business. Surely, we cannot be overconfident in our future salvation, but we can live in peace and free of fear in the faith that the love and mercy of God will finally triumph.

However, critical unanswered questions about their proposals remain. In all three accounts, how will they account for what has been called the “deterministic” side of eschatological universalism? How will particularly Ibn Taymiyya and Karl Barth account for a human free will that responds in freedom to God’s gracious eschaton, given the fact that in both Barth’s and Ibn Taymiyya’s proposal, their fate is decided for them? Will the future be a gift without a human possibility of rejecting it? No doubt, for all three theologians, an adequate theological response to these questions can be construed, but that might be a topic for another article. The remainder of this article is dedicated to the three different ways these theologians construe the meaning of universalism, the theological doctrines employed to reach it, and the place of particularity in their respective constructs.

First, these three theologians propose different forms of universalism. Madjid’s universalism is a universalism of Islam as a religion that encapsulates all other faiths. He employs the concept of Islam as *rahmatan lil’alamin* (mercy to all creation), which delineates that the essence of all religion is self-surrender to the will of God (*al-Islam*). The central motif of his thinking is the universality of Islam as the climax of all faiths. Ibn Taymiyya’s universalism is an optimist universalism.⁶⁶ He proposes that the existence of evil will never cancel the purpose of God. Eventually, Hellfire will cease existing, and all people will be saved. The central motif in his theology is the universal mercy of God that will finally triumph over sin and evil. Karl Barth’s universalism is a form of “pessimistic universalism.”⁶⁷ His theology is shaped by the doctrine of election in which God takes the side of humanity and reconciles everything through Christ by being rejected and having suffered for the sake of humankind. The central motif of Barth’s theology is the particularity of Jesus Christ as victor over sin and evil. In Jesus Christ, the ontological being of humanity as elected beings is defined and decided. Theology, however, cannot be overconfident because human sin allows for the rejection of her ontological being by society.

Second, while the theologies intersect significantly, these theologians find different departure points in reaching the idea of universal salvation. Madjid identifies the doctrines of the unity of

⁶⁶ Cf. *Ibid.*, 209.

⁶⁷ Greggs, “Pessimistic Universalism: Rethinking the Wider Hope with Bonhoeffer and Barth,” 501.

God, prophecy, and humanity as Islamic theology's most significant teachings that express salvation for all. God reaches out to all people throughout the ages by sending his messengers to all people. There is no discrimination between people in different places and times. In this regard, Madjid seems to combine the communicative love and the justice of God. Ibn Taymiyya identifies the mercy of God as the essential attribute that will eventually embrace all people in the final stages of eschatology. Hell, as such, serves as the remedy for the unbelief and syncretism that plague human lives. God is also just in His judgment; no one deserves to be punished forever and ever. In Ibn Taymiyya's view, there is a limitation to the punishment of the Hellfire. In this respect, Ibn Taymiyya seeks to combine God's mercy and justice. Barth's theology combines God's love and freedom. God's love for humanity is expressed in the facilitation of the possibility of the free decision by humanity to reject God's love, and to be alienated for the sake of humankind. In the pre-temporal eternity, God has an identity as the world's saviour; God is Jesus Christ, who lives, suffers, and dies for all in God's immanent being. In this regard, the salvation of all is very close and intimate to God's very being.

Finally, the three theologians are different in construing separation and particularity. For Madjid, there is no separation between religions, and there is only mild particularity in which Islam is the latest in God's revelations. Madjid does not claim that Islam has a better understanding of God than other religions but that the unity of disclosure means that the Qur'an sums up and explains the relationship between all disclosures in the agreement of One God and one prophetic line. Ibn Taymiyya holds a decisive view of interim separation but resolves that separation at the end of the eschaton. The separation between believers is relativized by God's wise purpose in purifying all people and restoring the purpose of creation. The particularity of Islam is only relative to its clarity and purity in revealing true monotheism (*tawhid*). Even this is resolved in the end when the chastisement of Fire sanctifies all impurity of beliefs and disbelief. Karl Barth maintains that there is no separation in the ontological being of humanity in her election through Jesus Christ. While there are different human responses to God's election, it is only human response to their being in Jesus Christ. But his theology has a strong particularity in the identity of God in Jesus Christ. God's being is defined by God's decision to be God in Jesus Christ. God, the creator, has its true meaning in God, the redeemer in the temporal reality of Jesus Christ.

These three points echo a choir of different voices that testify in their unique tunes the universal grace of God. Whether these three voices speak of the one and same eschatology must be left as an open question. Both the temptation to dissolve

differences and downplay their similarity fail to appreciate the otherness of each theologian and the hope each is trying to express. As such, this paper will conclude with a note that Basel and Jakarta have something to say to each other. In light of the above conversations, there is an open space for friendly engagement and mutual understanding of the shared hope for the future of humanity. As such, this work looks forward to further meetings between Barth and other Islamic theologians to find mutual understanding, lively conversation, and creative engagement between the two faiths.

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