

# Understanding Religious Worldviews: Concepts and Roles through Inter-Religious Dialogue in Shaping a Better Prosperous Future for Humanity

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## Abstract

*Every religion has its own worldview that provides an outlook of life for perceiving the reality and truth with a sense of its meaning and values. The essence of religious faith shapes people's attitudes, perceptions, conducts, actions, and enhances the relationships between man-God-universe. In this process, people who adhere to a particular religion tend to explore the phenomena through the lens of religion. However, throughout the history of religion, it has been observed that religious worldviews provoked people to live with peace, love, and co-existence on the one hand, with conflict, violence, and destruction on the other (i.e., Crusades of Christian Europe against Muslims, and Islamophobia). In contemporary time, after the post-9/11, the world community observes hatred, violence, conflict, and aggression between the Muslims and non-Muslims because of propagation against Islam and Muslims, prejudice and unequivocal ignorance. In these turmoil situations, inter-faith dialogue is a vital requirement for establishing world peace and security, and for reducing hatred and conflict that will strengthen to shape a better prosperous future for the entire humanity. Therefore, this article aims to understand the concept of religious worldview and its role in shaping a better prosperous and affluent future for humanity. Particularly this study focuses on: a) understanding the concepts and roles of religious worldviews, b) illustrating how to utilize comprehensively the inter-religious dialogue as a method in enhancing the bridge among people of different faiths for a prosperous future for entire humanity, c) elaborating vibrant methodologies and principles for fruitful religious dialogue among major world religions that explore the common grounds and common values towards understanding each other in this globalized era, d) providing pragmatic recommendations on devising versatile strategies for prolific dialogue among religions in order to make the world a better place to live in with peace, justice and co-existence. Discussion would include implications of the research findings, shortcomings of the current study, and directions for future research.*

**Keywords:** *worldview, religions, dialogue, pluralism, civilizations*

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## Introduction

A worldview or 'weltanschauung' provides an outlook or a window for looking into the physical world, and making sense of realities in the perspective of socio-political and historical context of the civilizations. Every religion has its own comprehensive worldview that provides an outlook for perceiving the reality with a sense of its meaning and values, the central belief system that shapes people's attitudes, beliefs, and actions; and understanding human-God relationships. In this process, people who adhere to a particular religion tend to explore the phenomena through the lens of religion. Islam has a distinctive worldview that forms the basis for social life as well as God-human-universe relationships.

Many people perceived religious worldviews as the source of conflict in the past as well as in this post-modern world. However, religions have been, still are, and will remain in future the basis for uniting people on one hand, and the root of clash on the other. Historically, during the initial years of the spread of Islam, the pagans, idol-worshippers, Christians, Jews, and people of other religious orientations were in war with the worldview of Islam. During the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> century, this conflict is clearly reflected in the Crusades. The Crusades were a series of military conflicts of a religious character fought against Muslims, and waged by much of Christian Europe against external and internal threats. The Crusades originally had the goal of recapturing Jerusalem and the Holy Land from Muslim rule, and Christian Europe initially launched a war in response of a call from the Eastern Orthodox Byzantine Empire for help against the expansion of the Muslim Seljuk Turks into Anatolia.<sup>1</sup>

However, The post-9/11 era recently shaped a hatred, conflict and gap between the Muslim world and the Western world in the name of religion. Rather than blaming individuals who commit the terrorist activities, the religion of those particular persons get blamed, which is not justifiable. This often occurs in cases of ignorance about the difference between the actual principles of religion and the visible behavior of certain (e.g. Muslim-named) persons. On the other hand, politically motivated people and organizations often commit derogatory acts against other religions, which are not permissible according to their own religion. In both the situations, what is lacking is the religious tolerance and mutual co-existence and understanding. Therefore, there is a serious need to enhance mutual understanding, tolerance, and cooperation among religions around the world.

On the other hand, the Islamic worldview changed the people of Arabian Peninsula from barbaric into civilized one. This worldview united the people of other faiths into a community under the leadership of Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him). Islamic civilization has an exemplary reference where the people of other faiths lived together peacefully, achieved full human rights, and granted the freedom to practice their own religion without propagation against Islam; no other

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<sup>1</sup> See Benjamin Z. Kedar, *Crusade and Mission: European Approaches toward the Muslims* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1988).

religion has been able to set such example. Moreover, many Muslim rulers appointed non-Muslims in their administrative and other positions. Therefore, the possibility of minimizing the chance for religious conflict was materialized through upholding Islamic worldview. Rather, it provided the basis for peaceful civilizational co-existence.

Islam claims that the two other Abrahamic religions, Judaism and Christianity are also revealed and divine religions, and Islam is the interpreters of those religions who corrupted it later on. Religious worldviews attempt to get to what is most fundamental in human reality. As we look across the spectrum of religions, we find alternative ways of recognizing something primordial that is the common source of our diverse worldviews. Considering the fact that the three Abrahamic faiths – Islam, Christianity, and Judaism – stem from the same root of Prophet Abraham and have much in common among them; peaceful dialogues are crucial for a harmonious world. Although there are avenues among religious worldviews that are starkly different and fundamentally contradictory, each of them offers many unique possibilities for bridging people of different faiths. In this process, what is necessary is to lay down the framework for successful dialogue and religious worldviews.

Drawing upon the common grounds of religious worldviews, this paper argues that dialogue is an essential for establishing peace in this conflict-ridden world, and that Islamic worldview can take major role in this respect. The study begins with clarifying the concept of religious worldviews in general and Islamic worldview in particular. It sketches the post-9/11 scenario and the changing situation of religious worldviews with particular reference to Islam. This follows with the possibility of dialogues, and presents critique of the failed ‘clash of civilization’ hypothesis. Since religious dialogues have not achieved success, the paper outlines the causes responsible for this. It then proposes the mechanism and strategies for fruitful dialogues among religious worldviews. Finally, the paper delineates the application of interreligious dialogue in bridging people of different faiths for a harmonious future for humanity.

## **Defining Religious Worldviews**

Worldview clarifies the words ‘world’ and ‘worldview’. ‘The world’ is the broadest environment that is cognitively, practically, and emotionally linked to the world in which we live, and this should not be identified with ‘the earth’, nor with ‘the cosmos’, nor with ‘the observable universe’, but with the totality in which we live and to which we can relate ourselves in a meaningful way.<sup>2</sup> A ‘worldview’ is a coherent assortment of concepts and theorems that must allow us to construct a universal image of the world, and in this way to realize as many constituents of our experience as possible.<sup>3</sup> Thus, a worldview is a system of co-ordinates or a frame of reference in which everything presented to us by our diverse experiences. This

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<sup>2</sup> Diederik Aerts, Leo Apostel, Bart De Moor et al. *World Views: From Fragmentation to Integration*, (Brussels: VUB Press, 1994), p. 8.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, p. 8

view is a symbolic system of representation that allows us to integrate everything we know about the world and ourselves in a global framework.<sup>4</sup> The Western notion of the 'worldview' also suggests that 'worldview' is constructed based on a culture, which comes from man's behavior, attitude and experience from generation to generation, and socio-political problems, from our inner experience and our practical dealings with things, as well as from the interpretation of history and of scientific knowledge about our world.<sup>5</sup>

However, from an Islamic perspective, a worldview is not merely the mind's view of the physical world and of man's historical, social, political, and cultural involvement in it, but rather it transcends the boundaries of this world.<sup>6</sup> The worldview of Islam is not based upon philosophical speculation formulated mainly from observation of the sensible experience visible to the eye, nor is it restricted to the world of sensible experience, the world of created things.<sup>7</sup> This is precisely because Islam does not concede to the dichotomy of the sacred and the profane; the Islamic worldview encompasses both the present world (*al-dunya*) and the Hereafter (*al-akhira*), in which the *dunya*-aspect must relate in a profound and inseparable way to the *akhira*-aspect, which has the ultimate and final significance.<sup>8</sup> As a result, the worldview of Islam substantiated from the Revelation, whose cultural practices, traditions, and the sciences, are rooted from that Revelation. This worldview illustrates both the physical and the metaphysical, and each of them directly links to each other.<sup>9</sup>

According to Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, the Islamic worldview is the *vision of reality and truth* that appears before our mind's eye revealing what existence is all about; for it is the world of existence in its totality that Islam is projecting.<sup>10</sup> Islamic worldview is not that is formed gradually through a historical and developmental process of philosophical speculation, scientific discovery, and various cultural objects and values, which are of necessity be left vague and opened for future change and alteration with the paradigms that change in correspondence with changing circumstances.<sup>11</sup> The reality is that Islam is not a form of culture, and its system of thought projecting its vision of reality and truth and the value derived from it, not merely derived it from cultural and philosophical elements aided by science, but one whose original source is Revelation, confirmed by religion, affirmed by intellectual and intuitive principles.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, p. 9

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>6</sup> Syed Muhammad Naquib al-Attas, *Prolegomena to the Metaphysics of Islam: An Exposition of the Fundamental Elements of the Worldview of Islam*, (Kuala Lumpur: ISTAC, 1995), p. 1

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid*, p. 1

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*, p. 1

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid*, p. 2

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*, p. 2

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid*, p. 2

Thus, the worldview of the Western world developed historically; in other words, it was and is derived and shaped by culture and a series of successive scholastic traditions each characterized by the ideological environment, whose foundations are deeply rooted in the passage of the sciences whose premises are based solely on an immersion with the phenomenological.<sup>13</sup> Conversely, the worldview of Islam is not one born of culture or social dilemma, nor is it dependant upon the history or the passage of scientific discovery, nor is it receptive of the dichotomy between the sacred and the profane; but rather this worldview itself gives rise to culture and consequently civilization.<sup>14</sup> In short, *Revelation* that projects the fundamental elements of the worldview, elements whose knowledge is based on certainty.<sup>15</sup> It is a coherent assortment of concepts and set of principles based on revelation (divine knowledge) that guide us to realize the meaning of life, outlook on life, perception of life, mind's view of the physical world, spiritual and metaphysical worlds. It is mind's view of a man's historical, political, economic, social, cultural and civilizational involvement.

### **Post-9/11 era: Consequences and Effects on Religious Worldviews**

The incidence of 9/11 has not only consequences and effects on the political and economic landscape of the world, but also the religious and spiritual dimension of communities around the planet. Some people used religions to achieve their personal goal or political purpose. Following that catastrophic event, people around the world started to perceive religion differently. Some ignorant people, particularly link Islam with terrorism, violence, and barbarism, which tarnish the image of Islam and Muslims that is unfair and biased mindset. Islam never commands Muslims to involve with such activities. It is fair to say that after September 11, all religions began to be looked at a more jaundiced eye. In this process, the importance of religious worldviews diminishes and terribly affects. On the other hand, people's curiosity to know about religions has increased dramatically.

In order to protect religions, dialogue, particularly interfaith dialogue is one of the best methods and respecting for pluralism, which are very important after the post-September 11 milieu.<sup>16</sup> Some members of certain religious groups have engaged in incendiary remarks about others, prompted by misconceptions and fear of the others' belief systems and the behavior they supposedly engender. There are incidences of hatred, killing, destruction and other types of crimes committed towards people of other faith. Hence, the essence of dialogue is crucial in the formation of a peaceful world.

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<sup>13</sup> Syed Ali Tawfik al-Attas, "The Islamic Worldview and Its Relevance to Modern Society", paper presented at the Conference on The Islamic Perspective: New Approaches to Development, Management and Governance, AIM Conference Centre, Manila, 6 March 2008.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> Asma Afsaruddin, Celebrating Pluralism and Dialogue: Qur'anic Perspectives, *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, 42:3 (Summer) 2007, p. 389

It is an essential to analyze the events of 9/11 to find out the real causes and factors of the attack instead of blaming blindly religions and followers of religions<sup>17</sup>. Immediately after 9/11, some people blamed the entire Muslim nation as terrorists and so-called ‘the fear of further Islamic terrorism coincided with the simultaneous fear of civil unrest as a result of physical attacks against Muslims and their property.’<sup>18</sup> However, little initiative was taken to find out the real perpetrators behind this heinous act allegedly done by the so-called some misguided Muslims. The actions of the hijackers had nothing to do with Islamic theology and Islamic belief system, as the killing of innocent civilians is specifically forbidden in the Qur’an (verse 5: 32); and yet, the consequences of their actions will have everything to do with how and where Islam will be going in the twenty-first century.<sup>19</sup>

Islamic civilization can provide inspiration for those searching the past for examples of the dialogue of civilizations. The Jews, Christians, and Muslims living in Spain under Muslim rule until 1492 created a rich cultural synthesis, which resulted in literature, art, architecture, and progress of higher quality.<sup>20</sup> It is highly relevant today to show that the Muslim world has a great multi-religious record, as in Andalusia and Sicily, that pluralism was never a major issue for Muslims.<sup>21</sup> Therefore, the so-called “clash of civilization” hypothesis does not stand on the ground that the worldview of Islam always encourages a peaceful co-existence of religious diversity in societies.

### **The Role of Religious Worldviews in shaping a better future for humanity through dialogue**

Regarding dialogue, three relevant concepts can derive from the Qur’an and scriptures: mutual knowledge and understanding, the commonality of human beings based on righteousness, and reconciliation of hearts.<sup>22</sup> These concepts are critical to the fashioning of a religious paradigm of reconciliation and a theology of forgiveness within the Islamic milieu, creating a shared idiom with other faith traditions, thus paving the way to better interreligious and intercultural understanding today. Love and knowledge of one another are inextricably intertwined, as scripture suggests, and point the way to arrive at a better mutual understanding and promotion of peaceful coexistence among diverse peoples.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Murad W. Hofmann, “Religious Pluralism and Islam in a Polarised World”, in Roger Boase (Ed.), *Islam and Global Dialogue: Religious Pluralism and the Pursuit of Peace*, (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), p. 236

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid*, p. 236

<sup>19</sup> Akbar S. Ahmed, “Islam and the West: Clash or Dialogue of Civilizations?”, in Roger Boase (Ed.), *Islam and Global Dialogue: Religious Pluralism and the Pursuit of Peace*, (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), p. 105

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid*, p. 106

<sup>21</sup> Murad W. Hofmann, “Religious Pluralism and Islam in a Polarised World”, p. 236

<sup>22</sup> Asma Afsaruddin, *Celebrating Pluralism and Dialogue: Qur’anic Perspectives*, p. 389

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid*, p. 389

In terms of the necessity of dialogue, Abdulaziz Othman Altwajri analyzes the future prospects of Muslim-western dialogue, and views that dialogue is among religions 'a vital requisite'.<sup>24</sup> He asserts that for achieving peace and tolerance dialogue with West is "indeed a binding duty"<sup>25</sup>, and outlines five factors on which dialogue should be based, which are: equity and mutual fulfillment, addressing all issues, considering to achieve mutual goals of both parties in a civilized manner, and in accordance with pre-established programs.<sup>26</sup> He believes that dialogue with the Christian West has failed so far to achieve its objectives.<sup>27</sup> He concludes that dialogue with the West must not remain restricted to one domain, but should extend to broader vistas.<sup>28</sup>

Osman Bakar argues that on the basis of past experience, Islam has sufficient spiritual and intellectual means to conduct a worldwide dialogue not only with its sister religions in the Abrahamic family, but also with Far Eastern religions like Taoism, Confucianism, and even Shintoism in the pursuit of a truly universal civilization and a global ethics based on shared spiritual, moral, and ethical values.<sup>29</sup> In Islam, civilization-consciousness is deeply rooted in such Qur'anic ideas as a common human ancestry, a common humanity, universal goodness of mankind, universality of divine favors to the human race, the wisdom of ethnic and cultural pluralism, intercultural cooperation for common good of all mankind, global social justice, and a common responsibility for the protection of our planet earth.<sup>30</sup>

The promotion of religious pluralism in society within the guidelines of Shari'ah can enhance the realization of a better world to live in. Peter Byrne defines religious pluralism in terms of three equality conditions:<sup>31</sup>

1. All major religions traditions are equal in respect of making common reference to a single transcendent, sacred reality.
2. All major religions traditions are equal in respect of offering some means or other to human deliverance.
3. All major religions traditions are equal in their inability to provide a norm for interpreting the others, and offer accounts of the nature of the sacred.

Muhammad Legenhausen has distinguished between reductive and non-reductive religious pluralism. The proponents of reductive forms of religious pluralism attempt to identify a common element among different religions on the basis of which the religions are successful in some specific way, whereas, according to non-reductive religious pluralism, God guides whomever He will (Qur'an 2: 272),

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<sup>24</sup> Abdulaziz Othman Altwajri, *Future Prospects of Muslim-western Dialogue*, (Rabat, Morocco: ISESCO, 1997), p. 9

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid*, p. 10

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid*, p. 11

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid*, p. 17

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid*, p. 19

<sup>29</sup> Osman Bakar, *Islam and Civilizational Dialogue: The Quest for a Truly Universal Civilization*, (Kuala Lumpur: University of Malaya Press, 1997), p. 2

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid*, p. 8

<sup>31</sup> Peter Byrne, *Prolegomena to Religious Pluralism: Reference and Realism in Religion*, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995), p. 12

not only by the virtue of features common to several religions but also by their unique divine qualities. While reductive pluralism holds that what is good in any religion is what it has in common with other religions, non-reductive pluralism is the view that each religion has unique features through which God may guide people.<sup>32</sup> He concludes that reductive pluralism is incompatible with Islam because it does not require us to accept all of the prophets; it requires only to obey the divine prescriptions given through God's last messenger (peace be upon him).<sup>33</sup> In any case, the worldview of Islam is accommodative to the diverse cultures around the world as long as it abides by the principles of Shari`ah.

### **The Methodologies and Principles for effective dialogue**

The key to successful dialogue is through highlighting the belief in the same Omnipotent, Omnipresent God who controls everything in the universe. There are differences in the concepts of God in different religions, and yet there are many common elements that unite the whole humankind under the same God, everyone worships. Islam and Judaism uphold belief in one God, whereas Christianity prescribes three Gods in One. The point is that in spite of many differences among religions, there are the common elements that can bind the diverse religions into a peaceful unit for bringing positive change in society. Rather than looking into 'the clash of ignorance' and finding fault of each other, we should focus on the common faith in God who creates humankind in a unique fashion.

Likewise, the Abrahamic basis of religions can promote solidarity in this conflict-ridden world. The Qur'an mentions, "an excellent example for you in Abraham and those who followed him" (Qur'an 60: 4). Norman Solomon, Richard Harries, and Tim Winter argue that the figure of Abraham can set the tone for dialogue between Jews, Christians, and Muslims by offering the premise that they treat each other on an equal footing.<sup>34</sup> Sergio Pignedoli mentions that the faith we inherited from Abraham has as its central pivot a monotheism free from uncertainties or equivocations, as we profess one God, the Creator of the world, provident, active, the judge of human's actions, and Who has spoken to the mankind through the Prophets.<sup>35</sup> He asserts that the basic unity of faith is of such importance that it allows us to consider our differences with serenity, which means that we can speak together at an atmosphere of understanding, because we all

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<sup>32</sup> Muhammad Legenhausen, "A Muslim's Non-Reductive Religious Pluralism", in Roger Boase (Ed.), *Islam and Global Dialogue: Religious Pluralism and the Pursuit of Peace*, (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), p. 51

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid*, p. 66

<sup>34</sup> Norman Solomon, Richard Harries, and Tim Winter, "Abraham in Jewish, Christian and Muslim Thought", in Norman Solomon, Richard Harries, and Tim Winter (Eds.), *Abraham's Children: Jews, Christians, and Muslims in Conversation*, pp. 36-39, (London: T&T Clark, 2005), p. 39

<sup>35</sup> Sergio Pignedoli, "The Catholic Church and the Jewish and Muslim Faiths: Trialogue of the Three Abrahamic Faiths", in Ismail Raji al-Faruqi (Ed.), *Triologue of the Abrahamic Faiths*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., (Virginia: IIIT, 1991), p. 2

are “believers in the same God”.<sup>36</sup> Islam supports and perpetuates its sense of unity by maintaining that all three religions are composed of prophets of God.<sup>37</sup>

The three Qur’anic concepts from which universal ethical principles may be derived to promote harmonious relationships among diverse peoples and faith communities in full recognition, even in celebration, of differences among religions: (i) the knowledge of one another (*al-ta`aruf*), based on respect for diversity and difference; (2) the commonality of human beings, based on righteousness and ethical conduct rather than on religious labels and denominations; and (3) the reconciliation of hearts (*ta’lif al-qulub*), which is a cornerstone of Islamic peace-building.<sup>38</sup>

The concept of *al-ta`aruf* or ‘knowledge of one another’ derives from Qur’an 49:13, which states: “O humankind! We have created you from a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes, that you might get to know one another. The noblest of you in God’s sight is the one who is most righteous.”

“Indeed”, the Prophet asserts, “God will not question you regarding your pedigree and tribal affiliation on the Day of Judgment, for only the most righteous is the noblest before God.”<sup>39</sup>

A related verse, Qur’an 5:48, further underscores this notion:

*For every one of you We have appointed a law and way of life. And if God had so willed, He could surely have made you all one single community, but (He willed it otherwise) in order to test you by means of what He has given you. So hasten to do good works! To God you all must return; and then He will make you truly understand all that on which you were inclined to differ.*

Every community – religious or religio-cultural – is thus regarded as having its own law and its own way of life and as being capable of attaining spiritual growth in keeping with this law and way of life.<sup>40</sup> According to the Qur’anic view of prophecy, various prophets were sent over time to different communities to give them specific laws and to indicate a way of life to their people in keeping with their genius and in a manner that would ensure their spiritual and societal development. Each community’s laws or way of life should be such as to ensure growth and the enrichment of life, without causing harm to others. Apart from this, a wide variety of local customs and cultural variations has traditionally been tolerated in many

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<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> Harold Coward, *Pluralism in the World Religions: A Short Introduction*, (Oxford: Oneworld, 2000), p. 65

<sup>38</sup> Asma Afsaruddin, *Celebrating Pluralism and Dialogue: Qur’anic Perspectives*, p. 389

<sup>39</sup> Al-Hakim al-Naysaburi, *Al-Mustadrak ‘ala as-Sahihayn*, Tafsir Surah al-Hujurat, Hadith no. 3725, 2/503; *Al-Adab al-Mufrad li al-Bukhari*, Kitab ash-Shi`r, bab al-Hasab, no. 898, 1/309.

<sup>40</sup> Asma Afsaruddin, *Celebrating Pluralism and Dialogue: Qur’anic Perspectives*, p. 391

Islamic societies through time.<sup>41</sup> Qur'an (49:13) goes beyond simple toleration of our diversity of background; it further advocates that one should proactively get to know one another (*li-ta'arafu*) so as to inspire in us affection for the other and to appreciate the diverse gifts and richness that we bring, in accordance with God's plan, to one another.<sup>42</sup>

The commonality of humans, based on righteousness and faith in God, is a belief that may be regarded as naturally proceeding out of the Qur'anic regard for pluralism and diversity based on religion, ethnic background, etc.<sup>43</sup> The Qur'an asserts that all righteous believers will receive their reward from God, as in verse 2:62, which states unequivocally, "Those who believe, those who are Jews and Christians and *Sabeans*, whoever believes in God and the Last Day and does right, surely their reward is with their Lord, and there shall no fear come upon them, neither shall they grieve." Another verse (29:46) advises Muslims to say to the People of the Book, as Jews and Christians are known, "We believe in the revelation which has come down to us and in that which came down to you; our God and your God is one, and it is to Him that we submit." According to this Qur'anic vision, believers are to come to the aid of one another, whether they be Christians, Jews, or Muslims, and they are to work with one another in enjoining what is right and preventing what is wrong, a basic moral and ethical principle in Islam.<sup>44</sup>

The theme of the oneness of humankind is repeated several times in the Qur'an. We are told that all human beings have been 'created of a single soul' (4:1) and that they are all descended from the same parents (49:13). At the same time, the Qur'an also recognizes and accepts the physical diversity of God's creation. This is not a contradiction; the Islamic worldview has often been described as based on diversity within unity, or "the integration of multiplicity into unity".<sup>45</sup> Within the global community of human beings who are equal before the Divine Being, linguistic, ethnic, and cultural differences are embraced as part of God's mercy. Diversity in physical appearance, ethnic and cultural traits, etc., is thus to be respected.<sup>46</sup>

In a significant Qur'anic verse (2:177), we are given a definition of a truly righteous person that is revealing of the qualities of such an individual. This verse states:

*It is not righteousness (or virtue) that you turn your faces toward the East and the West, but righteousness belongs to the one who believes in God, and the Last Day, and the angels and the Book and the prophets, and who gives away wealth out of love for Him to the near of kin and to the orphans, to the needy, the traveler and to*

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<sup>41</sup> *Ibid*, p. 391

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid*, p. 393

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid*, p. 394

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid*, p. 394

<sup>45</sup> Syed Hossein Nasr, *The Heart of Islam* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 2002), p. 6

<sup>46</sup> Asma Afsaruddin, *Celebrating Pluralism and Dialogue: Qur'anic Perspectives*, p. 394

*those who ask and in order to set slaves free. These are they who keep up prayer and pay the obligatory alms, who keep their promise when they make one, and are patient in distress and affliction and in times of conflict-these are they who fulfill their duty.*

This Qur'anic *ayah* stresses the importance of compassionate behavior, sensitivity to others' sufferings and needs, and one's own steadfastness in the face of calamities and afflictions.<sup>47</sup> Of course, like any other faith tradition, Islam has its own truth-claims and requires of its adherents (as do other religions) allegiance to a core set of confessional/creedal principles. Beyond such core beliefs and at the level of deeds, we are able to move into the realm of recognized commonalities among many faith traditions, based on universal, shared notions of human dignity, charity, and justice, for example. Interfaith dialogue is premised on the discovery of such common ground among different religious groups and the formulation of a shared religious idiom.<sup>48</sup>

When the Prophet emigrated from Makkah to Madinah (two cities in what is Saudi Arabia today), he found himself in a pluralist situation. There was religious as well as tribal diversity in Madinah. He not only accepted this diversity but also legitimized it by drawing up an agreement with different religious and tribal groups and accorded them specific rights on the basis of this agreement. This agreement, the Pact or Constitution of Madinah, represented the foundation of a revolutionary new political and religious culture. What is noteworthy in this agreement is that all together – Muslims of Quraysh from Makkah, Muslims of Madinah belonging to various tribes, and the Jews of Madinah belonging to different tribes-were understood to constitute a unified community (*Ummah*).<sup>49</sup>

With regard to Muslims, it is essential, as Fazlur Rahman has observed, that they see beyond the historical formulations of their faith and return today to the wellsprings of the Qur'an for moral and spiritual renewal. In this manner, Muslims will be able "to distinguish clearly between normative Islam and historical Islam".<sup>50</sup> Those who are doing precisely that have been rewarded by being able to retrieve a Qur'anic worldview that is accepting of diversity and peaceful coexistence, a worldview that was often mirrored in the praxis of the early Muslim community particularly and one that is especially relevant to our own times.<sup>51</sup>

Finally, the concept of 'reconciliation of hearts' (*ta'liful-qulub*) has a very important bearing on interfaith dialogue and coexistence. Qur'an 8:63, for example, states: "And He [God] has joined (or reconciled) their hearts. If you had spent all that is on Earth, you could not have joined their hearts, but God has united them. Indeed, He is Almighty, All-Wise." The medieval commentators agree

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<sup>47</sup> *Ibid*, p. 395

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid*, p. 395

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid*, p. 395

<sup>50</sup> Fazlur Rahman, *Islam and Modernity: Transformation of an Intellectual Tradition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), p. 141

<sup>51</sup> See Charles Kurzman, ed., *Liberal Islam: A Sourcebook* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998)

that this verse specifically refers to two fiercely warring tribes in pre-Islamic Madinah known as the Aws and the Khazraj, who became reconciled with one another after their submission to God. Their resulting love for one another dissolved their bitter differences that had been based on tribal affiliation.<sup>52</sup>

A similar Qur'anic verse (3:103) states, "Hold fast, one and all, to the 'rope of God' and let nothing divide you. Remember the grace of God toward you when you were enemies; He joined your hearts and you became through His grace brothers." Two more related Qur'anic verses similarly emphasize the transformative power of love for and forgiveness of one's enemy as a result of true faith and righteousness. Qur'an 41:34 states, "Repel evil with what is better than it; then the one between whom and yourself enmity prevails will become like your friend"; and Qur'an 3:134 states, "The righteous are those who suppress their anger and forgive people- verily God loves those who do good." These two verses counsel believers not to give in to the natural impulse to seek revenge for the infliction of some harm upon them. The suppression of one's possibly justifiable anger and subsequent forgiveness is a far superior course of action, because it is selfless and leads to the desired result, that is, to the peaceful resolution of conflicts.<sup>53</sup>

The Qur'anic concept of *ta'lif al-qulub* was considered an important ethical principle in early Islamic history and set in motion a praxis of reconciliation vis-a-vis non-Muslims in particular that is worthy of resurrection in the contemporary period. This concept engendered the important socio-legal category of 'those whose hearts are to be reconciled' (*mu'allafat al-qulub*), referring to people whose friendship and alliance were to be nurtured and cultivated in a number of ways in the early period. This category of people included new converts to Islam and non-Muslims, Jews, Christians, and even 'polytheists' (as they are termed in the literature), whose good will and friendship were deemed as contributing to the well-being of the community.<sup>54</sup>

The Prophet's generosity further extended to the former staunch enemies of Islam, especially the nobility of the tribe of Quraysh, who were granted a general amnesty after the fall of Makkah to the Muslims in 630 C.E. and whose hearts were now to be reconciled to Islam.<sup>55</sup> The Prophet's practice was continued by his early successors. Under the second Caliph, 'Umar ibn al-Khattab (d. 644), poor Jews and Christians received provisions from the public treasury for their maintenance.<sup>56</sup> Qur'anic notions of forgiveness and compassion, and their transformative power to effect reconciliation among diverse peoples will readily strike a chord among many interlocutors from diverse faith traditions that similarly

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<sup>52</sup> Asma Afsaruddin, *Celebrating Pluralism and Dialogue: Qur'anic Perspectives*, p. 399

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid*, p. 401

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 402-403

<sup>55</sup> See, e.g., Martin Lings, *Muhammad: His Life Based on the Earliest Sources* (Cambridge, U.K.: Islamic Texts Society, 1995), p. 299

<sup>56</sup> Abu Yusuf, *Kitab al-Kharaj* (The Book of Land Taxation) (Cairo: at-Maktaba al-Salafiyya, 1962), p. 122

emphasize the redemptive nature of love, both divine and human.<sup>57</sup> Such notions in tandem create a shared, global idiom in which to express the best of our respective religious traditions and to create a common discourse of righteousness and of ethical behavior toward others. On this basis, we may hope to get to know one another well, moving far beyond mere tolerance of one another toward genuine pluralism, paving the way to enduring religious reconciliation and peaceful coexistence of peoples of different persuasions.<sup>58</sup>

In dialogue, it is important to respect the integrity of religious traditions in the variety of their structures and organizations. Dialogue is a co-operative and collaborative activity. All partners involved need to be included in the planning process from the very beginning. The strength of setting the agenda together lies in the fact that all partners own the agenda and become committed to making it work. For the conduct of dialogue, clear objectives and commonly agreed criteria for participation and regular assessment are essential. In dialogue, we should mature in faith. Dialogue should drive all communities to self-criticism and to re-thinking the ways in which they have interpreted their faith traditions. Dialogue should bring about change in the experience of faith, helping people to deepen and grow in their faith in unexpected ways. In dialogue, we affirm hope. In the midst of the many divisions, conflicts and violence there is hope that it is possible to create a human community that lives in justice and peace. Dialogue is not an end in itself. It is a means of building bridges of respect and understanding. It is a joyful affirmation of life for all.

In dialogue, we should strive towards mutual respect. Dialogue partners are responsible for hearing and listening to the self-understanding of each other's faith. Trust and confidence comes from allowing partners to define themselves, refraining from proselytism, and providing an opportunity for mutual questioning, and if appropriate justified criticism. Such practices promote an informed understanding of each other, which becomes the basis for all other relationships. In dialogue, we nurture relations. Building bonds of relationship with those considered 'the other' is the goal of all dialogues. Such bonds however are not built easily or quickly. Therefore, patience and perseverance are crucial in the practice of dialogue. The tenacity to go on, even when the fruits are not obvious, is one of the basic disciplines of dialogue.

Inter-religious dialogue can help overcome misunderstandings and misinterpretations of the religious views of others, and facilitate a better understanding of the serious points of other cultures' and peoples' religious experience. The true inter-religious dialogue is not an encounter between religious systems in abstract ways, but rather a meeting between human persons who share a common human nature. Inter-religious dialogue can contribute to transplanting new seeds from one culture to another, and to bringing to maturity existing, but dormant, seeds in various religions. A conscious and creative involvement in inter-religious dialogue presupposes a living relationship with our

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<sup>57</sup> Asma Afsaruddin, *Celebrating Pluralism and Dialogue: Qur'anic Perspectives*, pp. 405

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 406

own religious community and a solid theological knowledge of our religion. Without this, there is a danger that those involved in the dialogue may slip away from their own religious communities and become a closed circle of intellectuals who speak mostly to and for themselves.

### **Qur'anic Approaches of Interfaith Dialogue**

The Qur'an as a universal book of God addresses to humankind to worship God and follow His guidance and it celebrates religious diversity. Likewise, the Islamic history provides us with the information that Islam dealt with the issue of religious diversity and unity of faith in Madinah in the most concrete fashion, as the Prophet (peace be upon him) had to deal with both the Jewish tribes of Madinah and the Christian community of Najran. Also, the Madinan Charter provided the basis for religious pluralism and tolerance. Thus, the examples provided by the Prophet (peace be upon him) illustrate the grounds for religious dialogue for a peaceful and harmonious future.

Referring to religious diversity, the Qur'En (5:48) mentions: "To each among you have we prescribed a law and an open way. If Allah had so willed, He would have made you a single people, but (His plan is) to test you in what He hath given you: so strive as in a race in all virtues. The goal of you all is to Allah; it is He that will show you the truth of the matters in which you dispute." In another occasion, the Qur'En ((2:62)) asserts that every God-abiding person can go to heaven: "Those who believe (in the Qur'En), and those who follow the Jewish (scriptures), and the Christians and the Sabians,- any who believe in Allah and the Last Day, and work righteousness, shall have their reward with their Lord; on them shall be no fear, nor shall they grieve."

Likewise, the Qur'En (29:46) says that Allah and whoever is worshipped as God by others are identical: "And do not dispute with the People of the Book, except with means better (than mere disputation), unless it be with those of them who inflict wrong (and injury): but say, "We believe in the revelation which has come down to us and in that which came down to you; Our Allah and your Allah is one; and it is to Him we bow (in Islam)"." In another occasion, the Qur'En (42:8) asserts that Allah has guaranteed the existence of more than one religion: "If Allah had so willed, He could have made them a single people; but He admits whom He will to His Mercy; and the wrongdoers will have no protector or helper." The Qur'En (11:118) also says, "If thy Lord had so willed, He could have made mankind one people: but they will not cease to dispute."

The Qur'En asks Muslims to be tolerant and respectful of other religions. The Qur'En (2:256) affirms, "Let there be no compulsion in religion: Truth stands out clear from Error: whoever rejects evil and believes in Allah hath grasped the most trustworthy hand-hold, that never breaks; and Allah hears and knows all things." Another ayah (109:6) resounds the same: "To you be your Way, and to me mine." The Qur'En (49:13) also says that "O mankind! We created you from a single (pair) of a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes, that you may know each other (not that ye may despise (each other). Verily the most

honored of you in the sight of Allah is (he who is) the most righteous of you. And Allah has full knowledge and is well acquainted (with all things).”

In matters of religion, the Qur’Ēn (16:125) demands Muslims to speak with courtesy: “Invite (all) to the Way of your Lord with wisdom and beautiful preaching; and argue with them in ways that are best and most gracious: for your Lord knows best, who have strayed from His Path, and who receive guidance.” Similarly, the Qur’Ēn (2:111) asks people to invite others with reason and intellect: “And they say: “None shall enter Paradise unless one is a Jew or a Christian”. Those are their (vain) desires. Say: “Produce your proof if ye are truthful”.” In addition, the Qur’Ēn (40:4) suggests avoiding engagement in idle speculation about the nature of God: “None can dispute about the Signs of Allah but the Unbelievers. Let not, then, their strutting about through the land deceive you!” The Qur’Ēn (22:8) also says, “Yet there is among men such a one as disputes about Allah, without Knowledge, without Guidance, and without a Book of Enlightenment”.

However, Muslims have frequently failed to live up to the Qur’anic model. The followers of different religious traditions should compete with one another in piety, not in propagating hatred. The Qur’Ēn (2:177) asserts, “It is not righteousness that you turn your faces Towards east or West; but it is righteousness to believe in Allah and the Last Day, and the Angels, and the Book, and the Messengers; to spend of your substance, out of love for Him, for your kin, for orphans, for the needy, for the wayfarer, for those who ask, and for the ransom of slaves; to be steadfast in prayer, and practice regular charity; to fulfill the contracts which you have made; and to be firm and patient, in pain (or suffering) and adversity, and throughout all periods of panic. Such are the people of truth, the Allah-fearing.”

The Qur’Ēn and xadĒth not only enjoin Muslims but also the followers of other faiths to engage in meaningful dialogue, cooperation, and agreement. The Qur’Ēn (3:64) mentions, “Say: “O People of the Book! come to common terms as between us and you: That we worship none but Allah; that we associate no partners with him; that we erect not, from among ourselves, Lords and patrons other than Allah”. If then they turn back, say: “Bear witness that we (at least) are Muslims (bowing to Allah’s Will).” In addition, the Qur’an does not demand Jews and Christians to give up their identity and become Muslim. Therefore, the Qur’anic principles suggest mutual understanding and peaceful co-existence of religions.

## Conclusion

Religion has become a decisive force in the contemporary world, and it is crucial that it be a force for good, for conflict resolution, and not conflict creation.<sup>59</sup> Throughout the discussion, it has been argued that religious worldviews can and

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<sup>59</sup> Jonathan Sacks, “The Dignity of Difference: Avoiding Clash of Civilizations”, in Roger Boase (Ed.), *Islam and Global Dialogue: Religious Pluralism and the Pursuit of Peace*, (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), p. 131

should bring about the establishment of a harmonious society with faith as the core for the realization of a better future. In doing so, meaningful dialogue among religions is crucial for enhancing knowledge of other religions, discarding ignorance, abandoning hatred of others in the name of religions, and looking into the perspective of an increasing multicultural world of today. In order to have meaningful dialogue, we should highlight the common avenues that unite humankind as a single body.

The objective of the dialogue should be the enhancement of understanding of each other, and not the claim of superiority or inferiority of others. By taking the Abrahamic faiths as the basis, meaningful dialogue is possible through recognition of differences among religions, augmenting the knowledge of one another (*al-ta`aruf*) based on respect for diversity, looking into the commonality of human beings based on righteousness and ethical conduct, and the reconciliation of hearts (*ta`lif al-qulub*). The Qur'anic principles suggest the ways of engagement in dialogue among religious worldviews. Although, some *ayat* of the Qur'an may literally seem discouraging to the process of dialogue, a careful examination of the *ayat* would reveal that Islam actually encourages dialogue among religions, and promotes mutual co-operation among them.

The Islamic message is integration, not assimilation: the Muslims should therefore adhere to their divine model of religious pluralism, which allows them to *accept* other religions, while maintaining the profile of their own.<sup>60</sup> In this way, Muslims should engage in fruitful dialogue for mutual understanding of worldviews in a post-9/11 world where religions are losing their relevance. As one scholar argues, if those of different faiths are to understand one another better, nothing is more important to strive for than deeper knowledge of the history of one's own faith and that of others through encounter, shared experience, and study.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Murad W. Hofmann, "Religious Pluralism and Islam in a Polarised World", p. 244

<sup>61</sup> John Bowden, "Religious Pluralism and the Heritage of the Enlightenment", in Roger Boase (Ed.), *Islam and Global Dialogue: Religious Pluralism and the Pursuit of Peace*, (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), p. 13

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