What is Religious Pluralism?

Religious pluralism is an ambiguous and complex idea. Because of its complex nature giving rise to many meanings incompatible with Islamic teachings, it has triggered deep debate among scholars, as well as heated controversy, to the extent that the subject does not seem to have drawn much research interest in the fields of Qur'an and Hadith studies. However, complexity is not an excuse for complete rejection. Meaning that the merits of the subject should be elucidated, with the topic deconstructed and precisely analysed to discover that which is relevant to Islam and which can be explored thematically in the light of the Qur'an with the aim of determining divine guidance in relation to it.

In what follows some of the most important perspectives of religious pluralism will be presented and then analysed for the purpose of exploring the differences and commonalities between them. The different types of religious pluralism will then be outlined and classified according to the fundaments from which they emerge. This analysis will help to identify and hence incorporate the relevant type and elements of religious pluralism into the Islamic framework.

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Different Perspectives on Religious Pluralism

It would be fitting to start this section with reference to John Hick, one of the world's most famous theorists on the subject of religious pluralism. In *An Interpretation of Religion: Human Responses to the Transcendent* (1989), Hick studies religious pluralism in its broadest terms, suggesting that no one religion has a monopoly on truth or way of life to salvation. Salvation, according to Hick, is a process of human transformation in this life, from natural self-centeredness to a new orientation centred on the transcendent divine reality, God, ultimately leading to fulfilment beyond this life.

Hick builds his theory of religious pluralism on the main idea that divine reality is beyond the scope of human conceptual systems – therefore, there is a difference between God in Himself and God in human knowledge. Since Hick describes God as "ineffable Real," he states that it is only human cognitive responses to God, formed and developed within different historical and cultural situations, that are known to people but that the reality of God is unknowable. So, given that no human being can know the divine reality in and of itself, it follows in Hick's opinion, that all religions are equally valid, representing only different human perceptions of God. The key problem with Hick's theory is that it appears to disregard divine revelation which has manifested itself throughout human existence, choosing to focus on human cognitive responses to the divine reality instead, as the origin of religions. In this way, it is very likely that the legal as well as the practical aspects of religion are ignored.

In his book *Theology and Religious Pluralism: The Challenge of Other Religions* (1986) Gavin D'Costa studies and severely criticises Hick's thesis of religious pluralism arguing: "There is the very real possibility that this new Copernican development in Hick's pluralist paradigm relies on agnostic presuppositions."[1]

This disagreement surrounding the issue of religious pluralism among Christian theologians emerges largely from two traditionally held Christian axioms. The first states that salvation is through Jesus Christ alone, while the second suggests that God desires the salvation of all humankind. D'Costa tries to hold together these seemingly contradictory but most important Christian axioms in order to strike a balance between dealing with the challenges posed by other religions and preserving the central beliefs of Christianity. Thus, D'Costa concludes that all salvation is salvation through the grace of God in Christ. However, a problem arises. Since the Christian Gospel has not reached all people, through no fault of their own, it means that God must somehow offer grace to all those who have never properly encountered the Gospel. This offer, according to the author, must be made available through the religions of non-Christian which "have a limited validity up to the time of a real encounter with Christianity."[2] The meaning of D'Costa's view of religious encounter are reflected in T.S. Eliot's words:

> We shall not cease from exploration
> And the end of all our exploring
> Will be to arrive where we started
> And know the place for the first time.[3]

Hans Küng (1991) argues this idea of religious pluralism is not a solution for achieving peace among religions, but rather a strategy which he terms "the strategy of embrace."[4] Although appearing to suggest toleration, it actually "proves to be a kind of conquest through embrace, a matter of allowing validity through domestication, integration through a loss of identity. No serious religion which seeks to remain true to itself will allow this to happen to it."[5]

So instead of entering into endless discussions concerning matters of truth and salvation, Küng would appear to be moving the question of religious pluralism away from strongly theological

issues, to more ethical levels. In his book *Global Responsibility: In Search of a New World Ethic* he views the moral crisis of the postmodern world as an opportunity to gather all religions together under the banner of mutual responsibility to rescue the world from its crisis. However, since religions cannot supposedly succeed in any mutual project before a level of peace is achieved between them, Küng proposes, with regard to religious pluralism, something he terms an "ecumenical strategy."[6] Ecumenical strategy bases itself on the idea that all major religions have potential spiritual and ethical wealth and that a common religious foundation for human values can be established whereby the universal ethical criterion is human dignity. However, it is of paramount importance that each religion realise through self-criticism that "the boundary between truth and untruth is not a priori identical with the boundary between one's own religion and any others."[7]

There is a close affinity between Küng's ideas of religious pluralism and those of Jonathan Sacks in his work *The Dignity of Difference: How to Avoid the Clash of Civilizations*. Sacks sees human dignity as a central aspect of religious pluralism, positing that this dignity should be sought and respected not only in what is held in common between human beings, but also essentially in what is different between them, because it is from matters of difference that tension between religions mostly arises: "we need not only a theology of commonality but also a theology of difference."[8] Furthermore, this new theology of difference should be shaped on the basis of many moral principles likely to lead to a global covenant: responsibility, contribution, compassion, creativity, co-operation, conservation and conciliation.

Sacks criticises Plato's idea (in *The Republic*) that religious truth is universal, that is, the same for everyone at all times. Rather for him religious truth is particular for every religion and it is this which endears one towards one's religion. Therefore, every person must be allowed to live by the faith which he deems true and religion must abandon its historic goal of imposing a

single truth on a plural planet. This notion came into being on the Abrahamic faiths encountering Greek and Roman imperialism, and subsequently developing this into an aspiration to conquer or convert the world.

Yet, religious universalism would appear to be the basis on which Seyyed Hossein Nasr constructs his theory of religious pluralism. Although Nasr's thoughts on inter-faith relations appear throughout his works, it is in *The Heart of Islam: Enduring Values for Humanity* (2002) that he gives particular attention to the subject. Nasr's theory of religious pluralism is based on the oneness of God (*tawḥīd*). Not only is this the main axiom of Islam, but, for Muslims, the main axis of all monotheistic faiths. Knowing that Islam is surrender to the One God, Nasr shows that "Islam means not only the religion revealed through the Qur'an to the Prophet Muhammad, but all authentic religions as such."[9] Thus, the author places emphasis on the idea of Islam being inner paths from human hearts to the oneness of God, a process he calls "the universal nature of the truth" or what Frithjof Schuon who influenced Nasr's ideas terms, the "transcendent unity of religions," or what Reza Shah-Kazemi (2006), in turn influenced by Nasr, defines as "metaphysical universalism."

Although Nasr admits that all religions have their own particularities which must be respected, his theory of a universal truth leads him to the conclusion that the criterion of a believer (*mu'min*), and an infidel (*kāfir*), is faith (*īmān*) in the One God, but not a religion (*dīn*). Therefore, "whoever has faith and accepts the One God, or the Supreme Principle is a believer, or *mu'min,* and whoever does not is an infidel, or a *kāfir*, whatever the nominal and external ethnic and even religious identification of that person might be."[10] Consequently, Nasr's statement implies that the first testification (*shahādah*) of Islam "there is no god but God," *Lā ilāha illā Allāh*, makes a person pronouncing it a believer, whereas the second testification "Muhammad is the Messenger of God," *Muḥammadun rasūl Allāh*, defines that

person as a believer belonging to the Islamic faith. Nasr's perception of religious pluralism is also advanced in his book as a solution for today's unprecedented historical condition where the whole spiritual legacy of humanity is fraught with the greatest danger.

However, Legenhausen does not seem to be in favor of Nasr's thesis stating that "to accept only some of the prophets ('a)[11] to the exclusion of others, particularly Muhammad (s),[12] with the excuse that it makes no difference because all religions are ultimately saying the same thing, is to fail to heed the divine call."[13] Clarifying further he states:

> According to Islam, the correct religion ordained by God is that revealed to the last of His chosen prophets, Muhammad (s); this and no other religion is required by Allah of all mankind. ...In the present age, general Islam implies specific Islam, and this must be understood if one is not to fall into error about the position of Islam with respect to religious diversity.[14]

Legenhausen's point of view might appear exclusive, but the fact is that he establishes his theory of religious pluralism on the argument that there exists a plurality of religious pluralisms. For example, he calls that type of religious pluralism which refers to the issue of salvation as soteriological religious pluralism, and similarly defines alethic religious pluralism as one referring to the truth of beliefs. Legenhausen also mentions normative religious pluralism pertaining to how adherents treat the followers of religions other than their own.[15] Thus, the author distinguishes different kinds of religious pluralism, and correspondingly defines the position of Islam towards each of them. For instance, in his opinion and as the above quotation makes clear, Islam is exclusivist in terms of alethic religious pluralism, whereas in respect of soteriological religious pluralism he discerns that salvation is possible for non-Muslims through the grace of God, but not because their faith is correct. With regard to normative religious pluralism, the author suggests that "it is the responsibility

of true believers to treat the followers of other traditions with acceptance and respect."[16]

More generally, Mohammad Amarah in *al-Islām wa al-Taᶜaddudiyyah* [Islam and Pluralism] (1997), comes to the conclusion that pluralism according to Islam is not only the idea of how to tolerate others but is, at first stage, a divine law which functions in the universe in accordance with human nature. Moreover, the author argues that there would not be any meaning to universality, one of the main peculiarities of Islam, without pluralism. Amarah defines pluralism in the Islamic view as justly balanced pluralism, since it avoids all extremes on either side. Thus, the Qur'anic idea of pluralism establishes a right balance between commonalities and the protection of diversity and its peculiarities. This has an important implication when it comes to religious commitment, where it is feared that religious pluralism could lead to a religious melting pot. The author furthers his argument to describe pluralism as a system consisting of two major elements: common ground and diversity based on peculiarities. Therefore, there is no pluralism without common ground between different components, as there is no pluralism without diversity. This theory suggests that to build firm common ground between differences requires a high degree of respect for their peculiarities. Moreover, according to Amarah, Islam regards pluralism as a form of competition to discover the positive sides of human life as well as in the doing of righteous deeds. This conception of pluralism is likely to result in the improvement and development of society.

In another work entitled, *Taᶜaddudiyyah al-Ru'yah al-Islāmiyyah wa al-Taḥaddiyāt al-Gharbiyyah* [Pluralism – Islamic View and Western Challenges] (1997), Mohammad Amarah in addition claims that while in the Islamic view pluralism is regarded as a divine law and thus as a value system, Western governments tend to use it as a political means of gaining influence and power in the Islamic world. The author provides examples of how some Western countries have been using at length the idea of pluralism

through ethnic minorities in the Middle East, in order to achieve Western political interests. Such a claim seems to underline the importance of examining the ethical parameters of religious pluralism.

In contrast, Hassan Hanafi (1977) challenges these theories of religious pluralism by suggesting that religions should be examined through a hermeneutical process which includes three major sections: criticism, interpretation and realisation. The first concerns historical criticism of the text, to determine the authenticity of Scripture in history. The second defines the meaning of the text and mainly addresses the language and historical circumstances in which the text originated. The third concerns realisation of the meaning of the text in human life, which is the final goal of the Divine Word. Through this hermeneutical process, Hanafi regards the point of religious dialogue to be, in this case, defined as a scientific dialogue, not mere "clerical diplomacy and brotherly hypocrisy."[17]

Religious dialogue, which underpins religious pluralism, is presented in Hanafi's work through the personality of Abraham in the Qur'an. The Qur'anic Abraham represents objectivity and honesty in seeking the truth. Thus, the pattern of Abraham in this respect corresponds to the hermeneutical process advanced by Hanafi. On the contrary, after analysing the Qur'anic concept of land (*arḍ*), the author states that there exist political targets disguised as religious interpretation that disrupt religious dialogue. Hanafi points as an example to Zionism as a major obstacle to interfaith relations. Hanafi's work spreads light on the importance of namely "constructive dialogue," which plays a pivotal role in the process of religious pluralism. Moreover, it provides key conceptions helping to understand some controversial notions in the Qur'an such as oppression (*ẓulm*), unbelief (*kufr*), and jihad. As a whole, Hanafi's work and the suggested hermeneutical process in particular move the discussion of religious pluralism to a more epistemological aspect.

The aforementioned discussion clearly reveals the existence of a multiplicity of theories with regard to religious pluralism. However, apart from Legenhausen, who distinguishes between the different types and demonstrates awareness of the fact that there exists a plurality of religious pluralisms, the rest of the scholars explain religious pluralism on a different basis. Some of the theorists like Hick, D'Costa and Nasr tend to discuss religious pluralism on a pure theological basis, though D'Costa and Nasr's views differ significantly from Hick's, since for them religion is not a social product, as Hick's theory implies, but divine revelation through which God describes Himself to His prophets and thus becomes no longer the "ineffable Real." Other scholars such as Küng, Saks and Amarah, emphasise religious pluralism as an ethical process, and where Küng stresses the importance of the moral and spiritual commonalities, Saks calls for the theology of differences and particularities. For Amarah, the correct approach is to strike a right balance between commonalities and particularities because only in this way can the process of pluralism be achieved. Although, religious pluralism appears to some degree as an ethical issue in Hanafi's theory, its main focus is on the epistemological perception of religious pluralism, where the recognition of religious sources is gained through objective justification of beliefs. Furthermore, Hanafi points to the existence of hidden political agendas in the process of interfaith relations, adding a political meaning to the idea of religious pluralism. In this respect, Amarah also states that religious pluralism or the idea of pluralism in general sometimes is perceived by certain parties as a tool for gaining socio-political power and influence among minorities. It is worth mentioning here that even the religious pluralism advocated by Hick has been criticised on the basis that it emerges from ideological liberalism and thus serves the interests of political liberalism by providing a theological basis for it.[18] D'Costa's theory also contains the idea of religious pluralism being used a tool or strategy for converting people to one's own faith.

Thus we are left with a number of different perspectives coming under the conceptual scope of religious pluralism. These range from the purely theological to the outright political. And between the two extremes is an ethical and epistemological value system, which can even be used as a strategy for religious conversion. So, religious pluralism can be envisioned either as a value system or merely a tool for achieving disguised purposes. Moreover, different types of religious pluralism give rise to different problematic areas which cannot be approached identically. Unless we are able to distinguish between the different types of, and approaches to, religious pluralism, a misleading conception of interfaith relations will result. To avoid this we need to trace the evolution of certain etymological and conceptual aspects underpinning religious pluralism in a little more detail to crystallise the framework of this study.

An Etymological Analysis of the Words "Religion" and "Pluralism"

An etymological analysis of the words "religion" and "pluralism" could help provide some understanding of the multiple concepts of religious pluralism by casting light on the relationship between each of the differently formulated concepts of religious pluralism and the etymologically different definitions of the words "religion" and "pluralism."

The word "religion" in the western tradition appears to have eight main etymological meanings:[19]

1. State of life bound by monastic vows, from Anglo-French *religiun*.
2. Conduct indicating a belief in a divine power, from Anglo-French *religiun*.
3. Religious community, from Old French *religion*.
4. Respect for *what* is sacred, reverence for the gods, from Latin *religionem*.

5. Monastic life, from Late Latin *relegare* to "go through again, read again," from *re-* "again" plus *legere* "read."
6. To bind fast or a bond between humans and gods, from Latin *religare*.
7. Particular system of faith, from *religiens* "careful," the opposite of *negligens*, "negligence."
8. Recognition of, obedience to and worship of a higher, unseen power.

These eight definitions differ in terms of their level of religious exclusivism and inclusivism, respectively. However, all are similar in terms of restricting the meaning of religion to a mere vertical relationship between humans and God or more inclusively gods. Even in the case of the third definition, namely "religious community," the horizontal relationship does not extend beyond the circle of religious members, which appears here as a synonym of religious life in monasteries. Of course, the scope of religion in the western tradition has broadened in modern times. For instance, in his work *Religion the Basics*, Nye concludes that:

> Religion is something that humans do. Religion is an ambiguous term, with a range of meanings and references. In particular, it refers both to specific religious traditions, and also to an aspect of human behaviour which is often assumed to be universal. Religion is a part of everyday life; it is an aspect of culture.[20]

Nye's mention of religion as an aspect of human behaviour broadens the scope of religion by focusing not only on the pure theological aspect of it but on its ethical dimensions as well.

What does religion mean in Islam however? After a thorough etymological analysis of the word *dīn* (religion) in *Islam and Secularism*, al-Attas concludes that in addition to the sincere and total submission to God's will, *dīn* also means "the natural tendency of man to form societies and obey laws and seek just

government."[21] It is clear from al-Attas' definition of *dīn*, that it concerns different kinds of relationship. The first is to some extent identical to the western definition of religion, meaning the relationship between man and God. However, the second concerns humanity's horizontal relationships, in a sense related to the whole process of building societies and governing them justly. Although, there would seem to be no further room for expansion of the scope of religion, its definition has been further developed to mean the very essence and core of civilisation. In this respect, al-Fārūqī argues that:

> Religion is the essence and core of civilisation, in that it is the foundation of all decisions and actions, the ultimate explanation of civilisation with all its inventions and artefacts, its social, political, and economic systems, and its past and future promise in history. Religion constitutes the spirit of which the facets of civilisation are the concrete manifestations.[22]

According to this definition, there is no separation between religion and any other aspect of civilisation, to the extent that even one's behaviour towards the environment is regarded as a religion. In other words, it would appear that religion in the Islamic context simply means making a life, where the only limit is intention.

In sum an etymological analysis of the word "religion" reveals, at least theoretically, that a western or more precisely Christian traditional definition of the term, is much more limited than the Islamic one; while the former tends to considerably emphasise the theological aspect of religion related more often to the issue of religious truth, its justification, and religious salvation, the latter underlines religion as an engine of the civilisational process. The term "pluralism," has the following etymological meanings:[23]

1. A term in church administration, from plural, which comes from Old French *pluriel* meaning "more than one" or from Latin *pluralis* meaning "belonging to more than one."

2. A term in philosophy for a theory which recognises more than one ultimate principle.
3. A term in political science for a theory which opposes monolithic state power.
4. Toleration of diversity within a society or state.

These four etymological definitions of the word "pluralism" show the dynamic evolution of the concept during the 19th and 20th centuries. Emerging as a mere administrative term indicating the responsibility of a single person for more than one office in a church, pluralism was later developed further to mean recognition of the condition of multiplicity, as obvious from the second definition. Moreover, according to the third and fourth definitions, pluralism did not remain a static concept in terms of recognition of diversity only, but an ideal opposing ideas of domination and monopoly, as well as promoting an ethical approach toward toleration of difference.

In recent years, pluralism has further developed to mean "the construction of communitarian consensus starting from a situation of extreme particularism."[24] This recent definition adds a new significant element which can be defined as active engagement in the process of pluralism. Such engagement aims to reach, through constructive dialogue, a possible form of communal consensus without violating particularities, which seems to be the most important issue concerning debate on pluralism. Thus, in the light of this definition, pluralistic consensus is not constructed on the basis of commonalities only, but more importantly on representing a balance between commonalities and particularities.

To etymologically define the meaning of pluralism, it is also relevant to state what pluralism is not. Pluralism is neither exclusivism nor monopoly, nor domination or monolithic power. It is an orientation towards multiplicity, the recognition of diversity, the moral acceptance of, and respect for, difference, the search for consensus without violating particularities. In this way,

following the dynamic nature of both terms, "religion" and "pluralism," which have evolved from entirely limited notions to universal concepts, it would appear that the concept of religious pluralism relates mostly to both ultimate principles as well as ethical practices and thus should be perceived and implemented as a value system rather than as an instrument for achieving political domination or religious exclusivism.

We can now clearly distinguish two basic, conceptual levels of religious pluralism: theological and ethical. The former pertains to ultimate theological principles such as religious truth and salvation, whereas the latter is linked to ethical practices. The conceptual classification of religious pluralism into theological and ethical levels, however, needs to be further expanded in order to explore a number of concepts used often interchangeably with the notion of religious pluralism and thus to identify more precisely the relevant type and elements of religious pluralism to Islam.

Religious Pluralism with Special Reference to the Concept of Religious Truth and Salvation

The limited definition of religion outlined earlier as entirely related to its theological aspect, leads to a discussion of religious pluralism mainly on the basis of religious truth and salvation, for in the western context it has been in this particular sphere that modern religious pluralism emerged. As Legenhausen remarks, "modern religious pluralism arose specifically in reaction to widespread Christian views about salvation."[25] Yet religious pluralism discussed in this respect poses a serious challenge for especially monotheistic faiths because religious truth and salvation are highly sensitive theological matters and focus of such discussion is largely on the eschatological dimensions and ramifications of religious pluralism. Different concepts used interchangeably with religious pluralism have been developed within its theological sphere. The most important of these are outlined below.

Religious Inclusivism

Religious inclusivism asserts that "one's own group possesses the truth while, other religious groups contain parts of the truth and thus they are less likely to be saved."[26] Although the possibility of salvation for other faiths is not entirely rejected here, the possession of the whole truth is nevertheless limited to one religion only. It is worth mentioning the theory of *Anonymous Christians* at this point from whence the concept of religious inclusivism has emerged. This theory, developed by Karl Rahner in his voluminous work *Theological Investigations* (1966), and serving as the main principle of inclusivism in the Catholic tradition, claims that it is possible for non-Christians to attain salvation, but through Christ and not through their own religions, since despite their rejection of Christianity, they might be committed in reality to those values which are central to the Christian revelation. Such inclusivism is used interchangeably with pluralism in Rahner's writings. He states:

> Pluralism is meant here as a fact which ought to be thought about and one which, without denying that – in part at least – it should not exist at all, should be incorporated once more from a more elevated viewpoint into the totality and unity of the Christian understanding of human existence.[27]

As far as the Christian understanding of human existence is concerned, according to Rahner, it is to understand that non-Christians are actually anonymous Christians. Rahner writes:

> It is nevertheless absolutely permissible for the Christian himself to interpret this non-Christianity as Christianity of an anonymous kind which he does always still go out to meet as a missionary, seeing it as a world which is to be brought to the explicit consciousness of what already belongs to it as a divine offer or already pertains to it also over and above this as a divine gift of grace accepted unreflectedly and implicitly.

The theory of *Anonymous Christians* reflects to a large degree the Islamic point of view with regard to religious truth and

salvation. Although Islam recognises the fact that Judaism and Christianity contain parts of religious truth, being earlier revelations, it maintains that the correctness of religious truth cannot be reached with rejection of Muhammad, the last of God's prophets. Consequently, to gain salvation without accepting the whole prophetic circle is something that could happen only through God's grace. As for the element of "anonymity" in Rahner's theory, it very much corresponds to the Islamic concept of *fiṭrah*, human nature, where every human being is regarded has having been born in a state of Islam. Therefore, the point at which different religions converge and diverge, in the case of religious inclusivism, is religious mission or *daʿwah*, the call to Islam. For this reason, the view of inclusivists does not seem to entirely fit the etymological definition of pluralism, since according to them religious truth is not multiple, thus religious domination is seen as a purpose and religious pluralism as an instrument for achieving that purpose.

Religious Relativism

The term religious relativism is often used interchangeably with religious pluralism. On the philosophical level, relativism means that "reality exists only in relation to or as an object of the thinking subject."[28] Consequently, religious relativism maintains that:

> One religion can be true for one person or culture but not for another. No religion, therefore, is universally or exclusively true. Religious beliefs are simply an accident of birth: If a person grows up in America, chances are good that he might become a Christian; if in India, that he will be a Hindu; if in Saudi Arabia, that he will be a Muslim. If what one believes is the product of historical happenstance, the argument goes that no single religious belief can be universally or objectively true.[29]

This perception of inter-religious relations, or religious relativism, is what John Hick actually calls religious pluralism. As mentioned earlier, he defines religious pluralism as "the view

that the transformation of human existence from self-centered-ness to Reality-centeredness is taking place in different ways within the context of all the great religious traditions."[30] The Relativists' conception of religious pluralism is based on the assumption that it is only human cognitive responses to God, formed and developed within different historical and cultural situations, that are known to people, but that the reality of God is unknowable. The assumption seems to disregard divine revelation however, throughout human history, as a true manifestation, and thus ignores the legal as well as the practical aspects of different religions.

Religious Syncretism

The *Oxford English Dictionary* first affirms the word syncretism in 1615. It is derived from modern Latin *syncr tismus*, meaning the joining, or agreement, of two enemies against a third person.[31] Syncretism also refers to "the system or principles of a school founded in the 17th century by George Calixtus, who aimed at harmonising the sects of Protestants and ultimately all Christian bodies."[32]

As far as religious syncretism is concerned, it is defined as:

> The developmental process of historical growth within a religion by accretion and coalescence of different and often conflicting forms of belief and practice; as understood by Christian theology, the religious attitude which holds that there is no unique revelation in history, that there are many different ways to reach the divine reality, that all formulations of religious truth or experience are inadequate expression of that truth, and that it is necessary to harmonize all religious ideas and experiences so as to create one universal religion for mankind.[33]

It would appear that religious syncretism presents itself as having evolved beyond religious relativism, since the latter separates different claims of truth on the basis of birth place and cultural identity, whereas the former aims to create one belief system through a blending of the different claims. Obviously,

religious syncretism is unlikely to meet the requirements of religious pluralism, where the balance between religious commonalities and religious particularities is regarded by religiously committed people as the core issue in the process of religious pluralism.

Metaphysical Universalism

Another suggested form of religious pluralism is metaphysical universalism which attempts to strike a right balance between relativism and exclusivism. In metaphysical universalism there is a clear distinction between faith (*īmān*) and religion (*dīn*). Faith or *īmān*, represents the inner paths from human hearts to the Oneness of God, whereas religion or *dīn*, represents particular religious affiliations and peculiarities.[34] Therefore, religious truth and salvation, according to this theory, are related to faith, *īmān*, not to religion, *dīn*. This in turn means that "whoever has faith and accepts the One God or the Supreme Principle is a believer (*mu'min*), and whoever does not is an infidel (*kāfir*), whatever the nominal and external ethnic and even religious identification of that person might be."[35]

Metaphysical universalism is focused on the philosophical and mystical dimensions of the revelation and thus heavily reliant on esoteric approaches to interpretation. However, separating between *īmān* and *dīn* for the sake of creating a pluralistic platform accommodating other religions in terms of religious truth and salvation, seems an untenable exercise, since for both general and particular Islam, acceptance and belief in all God's prophets is an unconditional imperative. Furthermore, Nasr's separation theory claims that it is faith (*īmān*) in the Oneness of God that defines a person as a believer, which reasoning does not take into account the fact that one of the six main pillars of faith (*īmān*) in Islam is not religion (*dīn*), but a belief in all prophets.[36]

In sum all foregoing theological concepts of religious pluralism, whose roots lie in a particular Christian religious context, seem incompatible with Islam for reasons discussed throughout

this section. Thus, religious pluralism applied as full and equal engagement on a purely theological level with reference to religious truth and salvation seems to be out of the question due to all the great religions of the world having developed and adopted their specific doctrines concerning religious truth and salvation. To clarify this assertion, it is worth quoting the statement of Pope Leo XIII in his *Immortale Dei* in which he states:

> To hold, therefore, that there is no difference in matters of religion between forms that are unlike each other, and even contrary to each other, most clearly leads in the end to the rejection of all religion in both theory and practice. And this is the same thing as atheism; however it may differ from it in name.[37]

However, two elements emphasised by the theories can be incorporated into the Islamic framework of religious pluralism. These are religious commonalities and religious particularities. On the one hand, they seem to form the backbone of religious pluralism, and on the other, to pose a great challenge to religions in terms of establishing a right balance between these dichotomic elements.

Religious Pluralism with Special Reference to the Universal Code of Ethics

As concluded in the previous section, there is a little room in Islam for accommodating religious pluralism in the eschatological sphere with regards to religious truth and salvation. This section focuses on the ethical level of religious pluralism. Varieties of different theories have emerged as a result of the debates surrounding the issue of religious pluralism on the basis of the universal code of ethics. Yet, all these different theories can be summarised into three main conceptions interchangeably used with religious pluralism. These are: ecumenism, religious humanism and religious toleration.

Ecumenism
According to the *World Christian Encyclopedia*, the ecumenical movement is "the movement to bring together all denominations and Christian bodies for fellowship, consultation, joint action, and eventually organic union. Ecumenism is, therefore, ecumenical principles and practices as exemplified in the ecumenical movement."[38] Initially, ecumenism was introduced as an idea to unite Christian denominations. However, it has been developed, apparently under the pressure of the challenges of the modern world, to mean cooperation between different religions. Ecumenism in this broad sense is often referred as religious pluralism.

Ecumenism's attempt to bring together the different religions relies on the idea that all major religions have potential spiritual and ethical wealth which lays common religious foundations for human values, where the universal ethical criterion is human dignity. And ecumenism aims by this strategy aims to rescue humanity from the moral crisis of the postmodern world and achieve a global peace.[39]

Ecumenical theory seems to contain a number of important elements, i.e. an ethico-spiritual common ground between faiths, human dignity, and religious cooperation, and also all these pluralistic elements can be incorporated into the study of the Qur'anic conception of religious pluralism. The ethico-spiritual common ground aspect is more akin to being considered an essential component of the structure of religious pluralism, that is commonality, rather than as its foundation. This is largely due to the fact that human dignity should be sought and respected not only in what is common between human beings, but also and most importantly in what is different between them, since the tension between religions mostly arises from differences.

Religious Humanism
Religious humanism is defined by the *World Christian Encyclopedia* as "a modern North American movement composed chiefly of non-theistic humanist churches and dedicated to

achieving the ethical goals of religion without beliefs and rites resting upon supernaturalism; sometimes called Christian humanism."[40] By emphasising the importance of universal human values, religious humanism makes an attempt to create a good and peaceful life on both a personal and social level in the diverse world. In this respect it is associated with religious pluralism.

The focus on universal human values has significant implications for this study in terms of considering these values as one of the contexts in which the methodology of Qur'anic exegesis should rest upon. Moreover, core ethical values such as freedom of belief, integrity and forgiveness, are to be incorporated into the exploration of the Qur'anic conception of religious pluralism. However, since religious humanism defines a religion as a social product created by humans with the aim of contributing to people's well-being, it seems to be more closely allied to the idea of secularism rather than religious pluralism. It is important to mention here that although religious humanism emerged initially from a Christian environment, it began to adopt many different forms, including what is called Islamic humanism, which emphasises universal human values, but tends to disregard religious doctrines.

Religious Toleration

Religious toleration means "the attitude of tolerance and acceptance, on the part of a state or a majority church, towards religious minorities."[41] It is obvious that the definition is orientated towards religious minorities, which makes the notion of religious toleration merely one of meaning the absence of religious persecution. However by allowing and accepting religious diversity, religious toleration can lead to either a diverse society or mere religious ghettoes. Nevertheless, the idea of toleration seems inadequate to bridge effectively the divide between different religious communities and engage them in the process of interfaith dialogue. In fact, from the perspective of mutual interaction in

society, religious pluralism differs significantly from religious toleration. In this respect, Diana Eck concludes that:

> Pluralism is not just tolerance, but *the active seeking of understanding across lines of difference*. Tolerance is a necessary public virtue, but it does not require Christians and Muslims, Hindus, Jews, and ardent secularists to know anything about one another. Tolerance is too thin a foundation for a world of religious difference and proximity. It does nothing to remove our ignorance of one another, and leaves in place the stereotype, the half-truth, the fears that underlie old patterns of division and violence. In the world in which we live today, our ignorance of one another will be increasingly costly.[42]

Eck's critique of religious toleration raises an important question about the main objectives of religious pluralism. The purpose of interfaith relations should not be limited only to allowance for the existence of diversity, but should be extended to encompass the achievement of mutual understanding, engagement, contribution, and support among different religions. Thus the obvious shortcomings of religious toleration to create common as well as practical goals and objectives for interfaith relations makes it necessary for this study to explore the Qur'anic objectives of religious pluralism.

To summarise, unlike an exclusively eschatological based religious pluralism whose reference point is truth and salvation, an ethically based religious pluralism in contrast mainly focuses on the terrestrial dimensions and ramifications of interfaith relations. Thus, the scope as well as the significance of this latter kind of pluralism, directly related to the peacebuilding process, seems to be much greater than the former. It also appears that religious pluralism based on a universal code of ethics has a better chance of realisation on a much larger societal scale. However, as discussed, all three concepts, used interchangeably with religious pluralism in terms of an ethical code, have their limits. Ecumenism does not provide a solution for differences, religious humanism disregards religion as a divine phenomenon, and

religious toleration is reluctant to encourage any mutual engage-
ment for the sake of better interfaith understanding as well as
effectiveness.

[2]
The Islamic Framework of Religious Pluralism

What this chapter has shown is that there exists a plurality of
religious pluralisms. And the fact that plurality exists is reason
for studying the Qur'anic conception of religious pluralism for
otherwise we are in danger of being left with extremes of religi-
ous exclusivism or religious relativism, neither of which address
the issue correctly. Even though many types of religious plural-
ism can be classified, only three appear to be fundamental. The
first type pertains to the issue of religious truth. This type is often
referred to as alethic religious pluralism, from the Greek word
alétheia truth. The second type concerns the question of religious
salvation and hence is referred to as soteriological religious plu-
ralism, from the Greek word *sótéria* salvation. Finally, the third
type is associated with how to treat people of different faiths to
one's own, and thus provides an ethico-behavioural pattern of
interfaith communication. This type of religious pluralism is
called normative religious pluralism.[43] The relevance of the three
types of religious pluralism to Islam will be examined in what
follows, which in turn will determine the scope of the research on
the Qur'anic conception of religious pluralism.

Alethic Religious Pluralism and Islam

Alethic religious pluralism concerns religious truth. More specif-
ically, it aims at recognising that all religions equally possess the
truth. Although religious relativism allows ample room to ac-
commodate this type of religious pluralism, in Islam the conflict
is immediately apparent. A universal divine message has been
revealed to mankind and Muslims will not compromise on this.

So, alethic religious pluralism is not recognised by Islam. This is because "according to Islam, the correct religion ordained by God is that revealed to the last of His chosen prophets, Muhammad (s); this and no other religion is required by Allah of all mankind. In this sense, Islam is exclusivist."[44] Thus, the prescription of accepting the Prophet Muhammad alongside the rest of God's prophets exists in the Qur'an as a necessary condition for the correctness of faith and religion together. For this reason, belief in God and the Prophet Muhammad is simultaneously a pillar of faith as well as a pillar of religion. There are dozens of Qur'anic verses, whose meaning is clear, requiring belief in the last of God's prophets, Muhammad:

> O ye who believe! Believe in Allah and His Messenger, and the scripture which He hath sent to His Messenger and the scripture which He sent to those before (him). Any who denieth Allah, His angels, His Books, His Messengers, and the Day of Judgment, hath gone far, far astray. (Qur'an *al-Nisā'* 4: 136)[45]

The imperative in this verse is directed towards all people claiming to be believers: "O ye who believe! Believe in Allah and His Messenger." In another verse, this imperative extends further to cover not only those claiming a belief, but the whole of humanity:

> Say: "O men! I am sent unto you all, as the Messenger of Allah, to Whom belongeth the dominion of the heavens and the earth: there is no god but He: it is He that giveth both life and death. So believe in Allah and His Messenger, the unlettered Prophet, who believeth in Allah and His words: follow him that (so) ye may be guided." (Qur'an *al-Aʿrāf* 7: 158)

The description of the Prophet in the verse as unlettered is to leave no room for doubt that the prophet being referred to is Muhammad and not any other. Moreover, the Qur'an explicitly stipulates that any attempt aiming to transgress the integrity of the prophetic circle leads undoubtedly to unbelief:

> Those who deny Allah and His Messengers, and (those who) wish to sepa-
> rate Allah from His Messengers, saying: "We believe in some but reject
> others": And (those who) wish to take a course midway, – They are in truth
> (equally) unbelievers; and we have prepared for unbelievers a humiliating
> punishment. (Qur'an *al-Nisā'* 4:150-151)

Therefore, "to accept only some of the prophets ('a) to the
exclusion of others, particularly Muhammad (s), with the excuse
that it makes no difference because all the religions are ultimately
saying the same thing, is to fail to heed the divine call."[46]

According to Islam religious truth cannot be reached without
the acceptance of Muhammad as God's final messenger. This
Qur'anic doctrine is affirmed by authentic *aḥādīth*. For example
Imam Muslim narrates the following in his authentic collection
of Hadith:

> It is narrated on the authority of Abū Hurayrah that the Messenger of Allah
> (SAW) said: "By Him in Whose hand is the life of Muhammad, he [/she, i.e.
> anyone] who amongst the community of Jews or Christians hears about
> me, but does not affirm his belief in that with which I have been sent and
> dies in this state (of disbelief), he shall be but one of the denizens of Hell-
> Fire."[47]

Although al-Nawawī explains that it is necessary for all peo-
ple from the time of Prophet Muhammad onwards to accept his
prophethood, he qualifies this by stating that those who have not
heard about him and his message, and remain true to their reli-
gion based on the Oneness of God, will be forgiven.[48] Whilst al-
Nawawī's explanation opens to a certain degree the possibility
of a salvation in which the prophethood of Muhammad is not
accepted, it firmly closes the door to debating religious truth
where his prophethood is rejected.

In fact, where the Qur'an praises certain People of the Book in
relation to religious truth, not the normative aspect of life, this is
due to their having accepted the Oneness of God, His final mes-
senger Muhammad, and the Qur'an. For instance:

> Not all of them are alike: Of the People of the Book are a portion that stand
> (for the right); they rehearse the Signs of Allah all night long, and they pros-
> trate themselves in adoration. They believe in Allah and the Last Day; they
> enjoin what is right, and forbid what is wrong; and they hasten (in emula-
> tion) in (all) good works: They are in the ranks of the righteous. (Qur'an Āl
> ʿImrān 3:113-114)

The occasion of revelation of these two verses explicitly
shows that the People of the Book praised by the verses were
those who had accepted the Prophet Muhammad as the final of
God's messengers together with the Qur'an as the last revelation.
In this regard, al-Ṭabarānī narrates the following:

> We were told by Muḥammad ibn ʿAbdullāh, who said: we were told by
> Abū Kurayb, who said: we were told by Yūnus ibn Bakīr, who narrated
> from Muḥammad ibn Isḥāq, who said: I was told by Muḥammad ibn Abū
> Muḥammad, the servant, *mawlā*, of Zayd ibn Thābit, who said: I was told
> by Saʿīd ibn Jubayr or ʿIkrimah, who narrated from Ibn ʿAbbās, may God
> bless him and his father, who said: when ʿAbdullāh ibn Salām, Thaʿlabah
> ibn Suʿayyah, Asad ibn ʿUbayd, and other Jews embraced Islam and
> believed in it, some of the Jewish rabbis, who were people of unbelief, said:
> "those who believed in Muhammad and followed him are the worst of our
> people, because if they were among our prominent people, they would
> never have abandoned the religion of their fathers." At that point, in rela-
> tion to their statement, Allah Almighty revealed [the verse] "Not all of
> them are alike" until "[They are in the ranks] of the righteous" (3:113-
> 114).[49]

With regard to the authenticity of al-Ṭabarānī's narration, al-
Ḥāfiẓ al-Haythamī in his *Majmaʿ al-Zawā'id* concludes that "all
the transmitters [in the foregoing chain of transmission] are
trustworthy, *thiqāt*."[50]

Therefore, the occasion of the revelation clarifies that the
belief in God and the hereafter, which was adopted by those
among the People of the Book praised in the verses, included the

acceptance of Muhammad as the final prophet, and the Qur'an as the last revelation. More clearly verse 199 of the same surah (*Āl ʿImrān)* states:

> And there are, certainly, among the People of the Book, those who believe in Allah, in the revelation to you, and in the revelation to them, bowing in humility to Allah. They will not sell the Signs of Allah for a miserable gain! For them is a reward with their Lord, and Allah is swift in account. (Qur'an *Āl ʿImrān* 3:199)

This Qur'anic description is clear in praising those among the People of the Book who in addition to belief in what had been sent to them, also believed in the revelation sent to Prophet Muhammad.

Another Qur'anic verse also affirms that those among the People of the Book who are "well-grounded in knowledge," and "the believers", also believe in what had been sent to the Prophet Muhammad:

> But those among them [the People of the Book] who are well-grounded in knowledge, and the believers, believe in what hath been revealed to thee [Muhammad] and what was revealed before thee: and (especially) those who establish regular prayer and practise regular charity and believe in Allah and in the Last Day: to them shall We soon give a great reward. (Qur'an *al-Nisā'* 4:162)

Similarly the Qur'an praises a group of the People of the Book for their profound recognition of the religious truth revealed to the Prophet Muhammad:

> And when they [some of the People of the Book] listen to the revelation received by the Messenger, thou wilt see their eyes overflowing with tears, for they recognise the truth: they pray: "Our Lord! We believe; write us down among the witnesses. "What cause can we have not to believe in Allah and the truth which has come to us, seeing that we long for our Lord

to admit us to the company of the righteous?" (Qur'an *al-Mā'idah* 5:83-84)

In sum all Qur'anic praises referring to the truth of the beliefs held by the People of the Book are based on the fact that the people being praised are those who had accepted the Prophet Muhammad and believed in his message. At this point it should be emphasised that for both general and specific Islam a necessary condition for the correctness of faith and hence for reaching religious truth is the acceptance of all of God's prophets, including the Prophet Muhammad:

> Behold! Allah took the covenant of the prophets, saying: "I give you a Book and Wisdom; then comes to you a Messenger, confirming what is with you; do you believe in him and render him help." Allah said: "Do ye agree, and take this my Covenant as binding on you?" They said: "We agree." He said: "Then bear witness, and I am with you among the witnesses." If any turn back after this, they are perverted transgressors. (Qur'an *Āl ʿImrān* 3:81-82)

In the textual context of the above covenant requiring a belief in all God's prophets, the following Qur'anic verse exists:

> If anyone desires a religion other than Islam (submission to Allah), never will it be accepted of him; and in the Hereafter he will be in the ranks of those who have lost (all spiritual good). (*Āl ʿImrān* 3:85)

The existence of verse 85 in the textual context prohibiting separation between God's prophets in terms of belief in and acceptance of them all, leads to the conclusion that following the arrival of Muhammad, the requirement of belief in general Islam, revealed to all God's prophets before Muhammad, became requirement of belief in specific Islam. In this sense, religious truth had taken its final form in terms of a specific Islam revealed for every time and place. Of course, this does not mean that

God's revelations prior to Muhammad were incorrect, but rather that they were revealed for the guidance and salvation of particular peoples and places. In addition, within the message of specific Islam is incorporated whatever is needed from previous revelations, following the era after the Prophet Muhammad to the end of time.[51]

Therefore, Islam does not recognise alethic religious pluralism according to which all religions possess equally religious truth. Failure to accept the integrity of God's prophets and their revelations contradicts, in the Muslim view, religious truth. And there is consensus on this position among Muslim theologians, exegetes, and jurists at both the classical and modern levels. For this reason, there is no room for examining Qur'anic content on the basis of alethic religious pluralism.

Soteriological Religious Pluralism and Islam

Soteriological religious pluralism pertains to the question of religious salvation in the hereafter. According to representatives of this kind of pluralism as different religions equally guide their adherents to salvation all religious people will be saved in the hereafter. Although in the case of Islam, religious salvation in the main is interdependently related to religious truth requiring belief in the Prophet Muhammad, there seems to be a certain degree of possibility for salvation for cases not truly corresponding to religious truth, but saved on the basis of God's will:

> Allah forgiveth not (the sin of) joining other gods with Him; but He forgiveth whom He pleaseth other sins than this: one who joins other gods with Allah, Hath strayed far, far away (from the right). (Qur'an *al-Nisā'* 4:116)

The verse points out that God will never forgive anyone associating other gods with Him, but if He so wills, forgive any other sins. Thus, the question of salvation for those remaining true to

belief in the Oneness of God, but who for various reasons fail to acknowledge the Prophet Muhammad, is left to God's will. Although the verse in isolation does not mention belief in the Prophet as a necessary condition for salvation, read in conjunction with other verses, as the following argument will make clear, acceptance of his prophethood becomes unequivocal. At this point, it should be noticed that this verse does not represent a principle on the basis of which definitive statements concerning salvation can be made.[52] All that the verse conveys is that the outcome for those who do not associate other gods with God but who do commit other sins, is left to God's will in the hereafter.

The Qur'an contains two verses which would seem to suggest possible salvation for those who have faith in God as a Qur'anic principle but who do not accept the prophecy of Muhammad:

> Those who believe (in the Qur'an), 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. (Qur'an *al-Baqarah* 2:62)

> Those who believe (in the Qur'an), those who follow the Jewish (scriptures), and the Sabians and the Christians, – any who believe in Allah and the Last Day, and work righteousness, – on them shall be no fear, nor shall they grieve. (Qur'an *al-Mā'idah* 5:69)

One of the purposes for the revelation of these verses was to dispel the social stigma which came to be unfairly attached to those Jews, Christians, and others who had embraced Islam and followed the Prophet Muhammad. As mentioned earlier an authentic narration describes certain religious leaders accusing those of their people who had embraced Islam, as stating: "those who believed in Muhammad and followed him are the worst of our people, since if they were among our prominent people they would never have abandoned the religion of their fathers."[53] In

other words the narration would suggest that belief in Muhammad was already a given fact meaning the verses were not referring to Jews, Christians and others on a general level, meaning *all* people of these and other faiths, but rather a specific set of people who had accepted Islam and were following the Prophet Muhammad.

In fact, by mentioning the word *ṣābi'īn* (sabians) the verses dispel any accusations levelled at whosoever embraces Islam, since the Arabic word *ṣābi'īn* derived from *ṣ-b-'a* means to convert from one religion to another new religion.[54] For this reason, Makkan pagans used to call the Prophet and his followers *ṣābi'īn*, on the grounds that they had abandoned polytheism and embraced a new faith (Islam).[55]

Note, Nasr's theory of metaphysical universalism described earlier, relies on these verses to attempt to prove that religious salvation is universal on the assumption that the verses require only belief in God and the Last Day without considering the integrity of Gods prophets.[56] Yet, there is unanimous agreement between classical and modern scholars of Islam that the following part of the conditional sentence, "any who believe in Allah," requires belief in all prophets including Prophet Muhammad.[57] In this respect, Ali states the following:

> The verse [5:69] does not purport to lay down an exhaustive list of the articles of faith. Nor does it seek to spell out the essentials of a genuine belief in Allah, which has no meaning unless it is accompanied by belief in His Prophets for it is through their agency alone that we know Allah's Will and can abide by it in our practical lives. This is especially true of His final Prophet, Muhammad (peace be on him) whose message is universal, and not confined to any particular group or section of humanity. Belief in the Prophethood of Muhammad (peace be on him) is thus an integral part and a logical corollary of belief in Allah. Moreover, it is also an essential test of genuineness of such belief. This becomes clear when the verse is read in conjunction with other relevant verses of the Qur'an. See, for instance, 4:170, 5:16, 21, 7:157, 158, 21:107, 25:1, 33:40, 61:6. See also 2:40, 3:31-32, 4:150-151.[58]

Therefore, the universality of religious salvation cannot be accommodated to the Islamic framework of religious pluralism. Because for humanity as a whole the Islamic conception of belief in God requires also belief in the Prophet Muhammad as clarified by the existence of dozens of Qur'anic verses as well as authentic *aḥādīth* mentioned in the faith section of all hadith collections. Even the expression "grace of God," employed in Karl Rahner's (1966) theory of religious inclusivism as a possible solution for universal religious salvation, is restricted in the case of Islam, to the acceptance of Muhammad as God's final prophet:

> "And ordain for us that which is good, in this life and in the Hereafter: for we have turned unto Thee." He said: "With My punishment I visit whom I will; but My mercy extendeth to all things. That (mercy) I shall ordain for those who do right, and practise regular charity, and those who believe in Our signs – Those who follow the Messenger, the unlettered Prophet, whom they find mentioned in their own (scriptures) – in the Law and the Gospel – for he commands them what is just and forbids them what is evil; he allows them as lawful what is good (and pure) and prohibits them from what is bad (and impure); he releases them from their heavy burdens and from the yokes that are upon them. So it is those who believe in him, honour him, help him, and follow the light which is sent down with him – it is they who will prosper." Say: "O men! I am sent unto you all, as the Messenger of Allah, to Whom belongeth the dominion of the heavens and the earth: there is no god but He: it is He That giveth both life and death. So believe in Allah and His Messenger, the Unlettered Prophet, who believeth in Allah and His words: follow him that (so) ye may be guided." (Qur'an *al-Aʿrāf* 7:156-158)

So, God's mercy, according to these verses, is inclusive for all things in this world. However, to gain God's mercy in the hereafter, requires acceptance of the Prophet Muhammad from all of mankind and particularly the People of the Book, who find mention of the unlettered Prophet in their scriptures. Note, the

sentence "those who follow the Messenger" is attached to the previous descriptions of those gaining God's mercy in the here-after without any grammatical conjunctions. This is a rhetoric method known in the Arabic language as *faṣl* (unsegment) where the grammatical conjunction is omitted due to the existence of complete union between sentences.[59] Thus, the application of *faṣl* between the sentences "those who believe in Our signs – those who follow the Messenger, the unlettered Prophet" (7:156-157), shows that those who believe in God's signs, are the same who follow the unlettered Prophet. Such completeness of faith is determined by the Qur'an as a way of gaining God's mercy and hence religious salvation: "So it is those who believe in him [the Prophet Muhammad], honour him, help him, and follow the light which is sent down with him – it is they who will prosper" (7:157). The word "prosper" here means both happiness and salvation.[60]

It is worth pointing out that the historical roots of soteriologi-cal pluralism in Islam seem to date back to the 9th century, when the intellectual institute and academy known as the *Bayt al-Ḥikmah* (House of Wisdom), reached the peak of its activities focusing largely on the translation of mainly Greek scientific works into Arabic. The access to Greek philosophical works resulted in the emergence of symbolic interpretations of the Qur'an. Thus, for the first time in Islam the issue of religious plu-ralism came to be approached from a philosophical aspect. For instance, al-Fārābī's theory of prophecy, in which he argues that the language of revelation is symbolic in nature and that the prophets receive these symbols from God through their imagina-tion (*takhayyul*)[61] can be considered as the starting point of the esoteric interpretation of the Qur'an and thus, as the root of the-ories attempting to accommodate both soteriological as well as alethic pluralism to Islam.

Thus, as the discussion demonstrates, overall the doctrine of religious salvation in Islam is interdependently related to reli-gious truth. In this sense, according to Islam, all those believing

in the Oneness of God and following God's prophets prior to the advent of Prophet Muhammad, are likely to be saved, for they acknowledged religious truth. And in the same vein, all those who accepted Prophet Muhammad following his prophethood, are likely to be saved. However, there seems to exist a third group remaining true to the Oneness of God (not associating any other gods with Him), but who never acknowledge the prophethood of Muhammad and his final message. Their case is left to God's will. If He wills, He will save them, and if He wills, He will punish them. Therefore, unlike its totally exclusive position with respect to religious truth, the Islamic position appears slightly more inclusive with regard to religious salvation, but not pluralistic. However, since this inclusivism in terms of religious salvation depends only on God's will, the soteriological aspect of religious pluralism is something that cannot be examined or proved in Islam.

Normative Religious Pluralism and Islam

Up to this point our entire discussion has enabled us to determine normative religious pluralism as part of the ethical sphere of religious pluralism, since, as defined previously, this is linked to the ethico-behavioural paradigm of treating religiously different people. In this way, unlike alethic and soteriological religious pluralism, where the locus of discussion revolves around the eschatological dimensions of pluralism, in the case of normative religious pluralism it is the terrestrial dimensions that are of main concern to the participants. Thus, normative religious pluralism is seen as the most central to the peacebuilding process in this world.

Moreover, discussion so far has also enabled us to extract different elements from the ethical sphere of religious pluralism and incorporate these to the particular sphere of normative religious pluralism. This has allowed for a more accurate description of it by placing emphasis on the focus of normative religious

pluralism dwelling entirely on human beings. This in turn implies that not only coreligionists, but people belonging to other religions should be treated on the basis of universal human values based on freedom and human dignity. In the same way, this kind of pluralism suggests respect for the religious particularities of differing faiths, and engagement in terms of commonality, to achieve mutual understanding, contribution, and support. Last but not least, normative religious pluralism goes deeper to recognise integrity, affection, and forgiveness towards adherents of other religions as main ethical parameters.

It is obvious from this description of normative religious pluralism how it corresponds to Islam and the Qur'an, particularly since the focus of both is mainly on human beings. On the other hand, the ethical aspects, the structural and constructive elements as well as the objectives of normative religious pluralism, all these components identified through the discussion on the human experience of religious pluralism create a subject area where Islam and the Qur'an can contribute substantially. That is by revealing the divine guidance towards such a subject on both a historical and normative basis. In the following pages some examples, mostly historical, will be presented in order to exemplify more clearly the different aspects of normative religious pluralism before delineating the Qur'anic exploration of it.

The most significant and ethical aspects of normative religious pluralism are freedom and human dignity. These aspects were first witnessed in interfaith relationship settings when the Prophet Muhammad and his adherent, having been rejected by the Quraysh Makkans, were welcomed along with the new religion, in both Abyssinia and Yathrib, later called al-Madinah al-Munawwarah. In Abyssinia, "there was a righteous king called the Negus in whose land no one was oppressed and who was praised for his righteousness."[62] Consequently, Muslims were welcomed by the Christians of Abyssinia and were also "allowed complete freedom of worship."[63] The Prophet and his followers were also welcomed in Yathrib (al-Madinah), where

he in turn not only accepted the religious and tribal diversity of the city, but legitimised this by establishing a significant agreement with the different groupings. This document is known as *The Constitution of Madinah*.[64] In fact, the inhabitants of Abyssinia and Yathrib were both descendants of Qaḥṭānī Arabs, who lived as part of a great South Arabian civilisation,[65] *Arabia Felix* (latin meaning Happy Arabia), in which ethical values such as freedom and respect for human dignity were to some degree present. This statement is supported by the Qur'an itself, since it mentions certain facts concerning the Queen of Sheba (*Malikah Saba'*), whose kingdom was in South Arabia. The Queen of Sheba is described in the Qur'an as a very fair, kind and wise person. These features of her character can be discovered in the response she gives to Prophet Solomon, when he sends her a letter inviting her to visit him and submit fully to the one God, Lord of the Worlds. The Queen of Sheba responds:

> (The Queen) said: "Ye chiefs! Here is – delivered to me – a letter worthy of respect. It is from Solomon, and is (as follows): 'In the name of Allah, Most Gracious, Most Merciful: Be ye not arrogant against me, but come to me in submission (to the true Religion).'" She said: "Ye chiefs! Advise me in (this) my affair: no affair have I decided except in your presence." They said: "We are endued with strength, and given to vehement war: but the command is with thee; so consider what thou wilt command." She said: "Kings, when they enter a country, despoil it, and make the noblest of its people its meanest thus do they behave. But I am going to send him a present, and (wait) to see with what (answer) return (my) ambassadors." (Qur'an *al-Naml* 27:29-35)

Significant conclusions underlining the origins of freedom and the respect for human dignity in the case of the Qaḥṭānī Arabs can be drawn from these Qur'anic verses:

1. Although the content of Solomon's letter is not beneficial to her, the Queen of Sheba describes it as "a letter worthy of

respect" (Qur'an 27:29). Ibn al-ʿArabī states in his *Aḥkām al-Qur'ān* that, "the description of the letter as 'worthy of respect' is the most honourable description, since the same description is used for describing the Qur'an."[66] By using such an adjective to describe the letter, the Queen shows her ability to evaluate fairly the methodology through which the letter has been written, and her understanding of international relations, as she reduces possible tension on both levels, internally among her ministers, and externally, between the two countries, respectively.

2. The Queen also demonstrates that she conducts state affairs on the basis of mutual consultation speaking volumes for her character. She states to her ministers: "No affair have I decided except in your presence" (Qur'an 27:32). Far from being a despot she seeks advice from the people surrounding her: "Ye chiefs! Advice me in (this) my affair" (Qur'an 27:32). In adopting this manner she shows respect to others, maintaining their dignity, and "makes them feel confident and capable of making decisions."[67]

3. The Queen of Sheba appears in the Qur'an as a peace-loving person who knows how to lead a peace process. She employs her knowledge of previous human experience in the field of war and occupation and through the method of *istiṣḥāb* "presumption of continuity,"[68] decides to send Solomon not a military presence, but a gift, which is usually given with the aim of achieving closeness and love. She says: "Kings, when they enter a country, despoil it, and make the noblest of its people its meanest thus do they behave. But I am going to send him a present, and (wait) to see with what (answer) return (my) ambassadors" (Qur'an 27:34-35). A truly remarkable woman.

It seems that Qaḥṭānī Arabs were to some extent aware of ethical values such as freedom and human dignity, and it appears they also had knowledge of diplomacy which enabled them to

maintain good international relations. In contrast, the mentality of ʿAdnānī Arabs, northern inhabitants of *Arabia Ferox* (latin for Wild Arabia), was "purely egotistic"[69] and exclusive, which made them, as Dozy concludes, different from Qaḥṭānī Arabs.[70] The Makkans were a part of the ʿAdnānī peoples, and as such values of freedom and respect for human dignity did not hold a universal dimension for them. Their loyalties were confined only to a certain tribe or more precisely to certain persons known as tribal leaders. For this reason, the Prophet Muhammad and his adherents were persecuted in Makkah at the beginning of Islam and peaceful co-existence was not allowed to flourish. At that point, the Qur'an commenced the process of transforming nomadic egocentric ethics into universal ones. This process can be regarded as a process of enlightenment based on both revelation and reason simultaneously forming thereby a source of critical ideas, including the importance of freedom and human dignity as primary values of society. For instance, the Qur'an from the very beginning of its revelation criticised any attempt targeting religious freedom. Surah *al-ʿAlaq*, unanimously agreed as the first surah to be revealed,[71] raises the rhetorical question: "Seest thou one who forbids a votary when he (turns) to pray?" (Qur'an *al-ʿAlaq* 96:9-10).

Three significant points, in connection with freedom, human dignity and normative religious pluralism, can be derived from this Qur'anic question:

1. As Ibn Ashur remarks in his *al-Taḥrīr wa al-Tanwīr*, "the main function of this question is to express astonishment;"[72] that is, astonishment at behavior of this type threatening religious freedom. Since banning or restricting religious freedom is an act of oppression, the Qur'an expresses its astonishment at this in the form of a question. By employing this rhetorical device, which is a type of linguistic metaphor, the Qur'an conveys that this kind of behavior is a phenomenon which contradicts human nature and ethical values.

2. The Qur'an uses the present tense of the verb forbid (*yanhā*, "forbids") while referring to a past event in order to keep that event ever present in people's minds (that is the act of forbidding religious freedom) so that they avoid doing so. According to Ibn Hishām al-Anṣārī, "the Arabs use a verb of present tense referring to a past event, with the aim of keeping that event always present in mind as if it was happening at the moment of mentioning it."[73]

3. More important to note is the grammatical shift (*iltifāt*) from the second to the third person: "Seest thou one who forbids a votary when he (turns) to pray?" Ibn ʿAṭiyyah states that "there is no argument among the interpreters of the Qur'an about to whom 'one who forbids' and 'a votary' refer. They all agree that the former refers to Abū Jahl,[74] whereas the latter refers to the Prophet Muhammad."[75] In this case, where "the addressee is the Prophet,"[76] the normal grammatical way of expressing the above meaning would be to say: "seest thou one who forbids *you* (Muhammad) when *you* turn to pray," but instead of saying: "who forbids *you* (Muhammad)," the Qur'an states, "who forbids *a votary*." As Ibn al-Athīr in his *Al-Mathal al-Sā'ir* comments, "the shift from one form to another is done only when it is required for some special reasons"[77] we can conclude that there is a reason for this grammatical shift (*iltifāt*) from the second person (Muhammad) to the third person (a votary). In this respect, al-Zamakhsharī's explanation that the linguistic shift (*iltifāt*) "is a habit of speech of the Arabs seeking to raise the interest of the listener,"[78] should not be regarded as the special reason for the shift (*iltifāt*) in this case. Actually, the grammatical shift from the Prophet to a votary is required for the process of transforming extant nomadic egocentric ethics into universal ones. By concentrating on a votary instead of the Prophet, the Qur'an from the very beginning of its revelation announces religious freedom as a value system, which cannot be monopolised by anyone. Therefore, the main function of the

linguistic shift (*iltifāt*) here is to emphasise disapproval of forbidding or restricting religious freedom, whether for the Prophet or any other worshiper, as everyone's dignity should be respected. As can be seen, this rhetorical approach, known as shift (*iltifāt*), implies subtle meanings, which might be the reason why Ibn al-Athīr calls it "the core of the rhetoric, *balāghah*."[79/80]

Another important aspect of normative religious pluralism is the establishment of right balance between religious commonalities and particularities through constructive conversation. This aspect was clearly implemented by the Prophet through the foundation of *The Constitution of Madinah*, which on the one hand declared different religious groups as one nation, *ummah wāḥidah*,[81] but on the other hand preserved their religious particularities. Thus, the inclusive concept of "one nation," *ummah wāḥidah*, based on the recognition of religious particularities confirms the Prophet's approval of normative religious pluralism, which appeared in different manners in that society. For instance, Ibn Hishām mentions that a Christian delegation from Najran visited the Prophet in the mosque, *al-Masjid al-Nabawī*, in Madinah, with the aim of discussing points of doctrine including the nature of God. In spite of doctrinal disagreements, the Prophet received them warmly, allowed them to perform their prayers in the mosque, and signed a treaty with them.[82] Of course all these early interfaith interactions were geared towards achieving mutual understanding, mutual engagement, contribution and support between religiously different people.

The early achievements of such important objectives of normative religious pluralism are documented in non-Muslim sources dating back to the 7th century. For example, this is Patriarch Ishôyahb III, writing to his correspondent Simeon of Rewardashir around the year 650, during the heat of the intra-Christian controversy of the time:

> As for the Arabs, to whom God has at this time given rule (*shultānâ*) over the world, you know well how they act toward us. Not only do they not oppose Christianity, but they praise our faith, honour the priests and saints of our Lord, and give aid to the churches and monasteries.[83]

Furthermore, it would appear that essentially important is to conduct the whole process of normative religious pluralism on the basis of integrity, compassion and forgiveness. Such ethical qualities could gain interfaith relations further strength and mutual trust, as this seems to have been the case in different aspects of life throughout the history of interfaith relations. For instance, with respect to academic debate and interfaith dialogue some non-Muslim sources relate that during the reign of the Abbasid Caliph, al-Ma'mūn, inter-faith dialogues regularly took place in Baghdad. One of these debates documented, is that held by Theodore Abū Qurrah with a number of Muslim scholars in the presence of Caliph al-Ma'mūn himself.[84] Abū Qurrah was "a monk of the monastery of Mar Sabas in Judea, and for a while he also served as the bishop of the Melkite community in Ḥarrān in Mesopotamian Syria."[85] Although he was not a Muslim, he was deeply respected by the Caliph for his ideas. This is obvious from some of the expressions al-Ma'mūn directed towards Abū Qurrah during the debate, i.e.: "By God you are right, Abū Qurrah! By God you have done well Abū Qurrah and have put your opponents to shame!"[86] It appears that al-Ma'mūn's purpose behind the platform of debate was to encourage people to seek knowledge rather than to seek to dominate by their opinions. It is reported that before a debate the Caliph would say: "This is a *majlis* [council] characterised by justice and fairness. No one will commit excesses in it. So present your argument and answer without dread. There is nothing here except by that which is better."[87] The result of al-Ma'mūn's integrity and objectivity is expressed by Abū Qurrah himself where the Christian monk and scholar prays for the Muslim ruler in the following words:

> May God strengthen the Commander of the Faithful, the *imām* al-Ma'mūn, the victorious leader, the fortunate caliph, the beloved master, whose assault is terrible, the one who is gracious to the one rejected, and counsel of the one assisted, possessor of remarkable compassion, courage granted, and a community sought...May God inspire in him patience, mercy and justice for all his subjects![88]

Integrity as an important ethical aspect of normative religious pluralism is also attested to in Muslim academic writing towards religiously different people. In this regard, Hilary Kilpatrick remarks:

> It is rare for members of the dominant religion in a society to write about aspects of a subordinate religion in the same society in a non-polemical spirit. Yet the *diyārāt* works, books about monasteries compiled in Iraq and Egypt in the fourth/tenth century, reflect an attitude on their Muslim authors' part of remarkable openness towards Christian customs and institutions; they exemplify such a non-polemical approach. For this reason they deserve to be taken account of in any discussion of Arab Christianity during the ʿAbbasid period.[89]

This mutual trust and respect between Muslims and non-Muslims is historically also apparent in more social aspects of life. It is reported that one day when "the caliph al-Muʿtazz felt thirsty out hunting, one of his companions suggested they should visit a good friend of his, a monk at the Mār Mārī monastery, and when they arrived, they were given cool water to drink, a meal, and entertaining conversation."[90]

Given this how is it that some Muslims from the past as well as today have chosen to adopt an exclusive approach even in respect of normative religious pluralism? The answer could be partly due to specific historic circumstances and partly to a lack of distinguishment between differing types of religious pluralism, alethic, soteriological, and normative. They would seem to be of the opinion that, "one has no obligations whatsoever

toward those who are not of one's faith, that their blood is permitted to be shed and their property taken."[91] This exclusive attitude towards those of different faiths is likely to have been triggered by a chain of historical interfaith conflicts, for instance, the transgression of the mutually signed pact of the *Constitution of Madinah* by Jewish tribes in the 7th century;[92] the coalition between Byzantine Christians and the northern Arab Christians against Islam in the 7th century;[93] and John of Damascus' public pronouncement of Islam as heresy in the 8th century. In his work *Concerning Heresy*, John of Damascus, one of the most prominent and influential Christian scholars of the time, regarded the Prophet Muhammad as heralding the era of the Antichrist and also claimed that Muhammad had plagiarised the Qur'an from the Bible.[94] This was the first anti-Islam polemic written by a member of Byzantine Orthodoxy. Other elements causing division were the religiously motivated Crusades against Muslims in the 11th, 12th and 13th centuries and afterwards. All these interfaith conflicts, which took place during the formative period of Islamic sciences and the conceptual perception of interfaith relations, might have created good reasons for religious exclusivism and hatred to grow and flourish even outside the context of war and oppression, which seem to be the only reasons justifying the transgression of normative religious pluralism in Islam. On the other hand, the Muslims' counter-attack and reaction to historical interfaith conflicts as well as inability to recognise different types of religious pluralism has resulted in misleading conclusions among many non-Muslims that Islam teaches no respect for religiously different people.

In sum, due to the problematic areas outlined, it is vital that we return to the authentic sources of Islam for solutions to questions of interfaith relations, especially since the normative teachings of these sources have been contaminated by irrelevant historical, methodological and ideological issues.

[3]
Conclusion

Religious pluralism is a complex concept accommodating a multiplicity of definitions with considerable discrepancy between them in terms of their themes, scopes, and problematic areas. Inability to distinguish between all the different types of religious pluralism will lead to confused understanding and misleading conclusions if the appropriate type of pluralism is not isolated and relevant approaches corresponding to that type are not adopted. Both alethic and soteriological religious pluralism emerged from the specific context of Christianity as a result of theological discussions exploring religious salvation. However, since religious truth and consequently religious salvation claims are considered as irreconcilable and thus inherently divisive, religious pluralism reduced to that particular level becomes an unmanageable issue. In this respect, the best solution might be to concentrate on the terrestrial dimensions and ramifications of religious pluralism, namely normative religious pluralism, which is the most relevant type with respect to Islamic theology and the Qur'anic content.

Thus, the following chapters will explore the Qur'anic conception of normative religious pluralism elaborating on elements mentioned in this chapter: ethical foundations of normative religious pluralism, its structural and constructive elements, and its objectives.