

## Ethical Foundations of Normative Religious Pluralism in the Qur'an

It should be mentioned from the outset, that with regard to “ethical foundations”, the title of this chapter, the Qur’anic scope of the “ethical” is too broad to categorise on a simple level, to the extent that Izutsu remarks that “Islamic thought at its Qur’anic stage, makes no real distinction between the religious and the ethical.”<sup>1</sup> This breadth of the Qur’anic ethical world poses a challenge for selectivity. However, based on the ethical problematic areas raised in the previous chapter, the selection can relatively be limited to five main ethical foundations of normative religious pluralism: freedom of belief, human dignity, integrity, the imperative of no vilification of what is sacred to others, and forgiveness. An exploration of Qur’anic guidance with respect to these ethical features allows critical examination of exclusivist claims which reject any moral obligation in relation to peaceful people of differing faiths, allowing their blood to be shed and their properties to be destroyed.

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### Freedom of Belief

The universality of freedom as an unchangeable human value

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should be methodologically taken into consideration in the process of Qur'anic exegesis. Freedom in general and freedom of belief in particular are inviolable human rights, since they reflect the unchangeable characteristics of human nature. Thus, to recognise the right of freedom is tantamount to the recognition of human nature. Apart from human nature, freedom does not have other affiliations such as geographical, political or religious. Due to this fact, freedom is considered as an irreplaceable value in the East as well as in the West. For the East, this fact is made clear in the well-known declaration of Caliph 'Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb: "How dare you enslave people, whereas they were born free?!"<sup>2</sup> In the same way, Jean-Jacques Rousseau in the West opens his famous treatise *The Social Contract* with the following statement which has become an inalienable part of western civilisation: "Man was born free, and everywhere he is in chains. One believes himself the master of others, and yet he is a greater slave than they."<sup>3</sup> Moreover, Rousseau argues that there is a firm relationship between freedom and morality. He remarks:

To renounce one's liberty is to renounce one's essence as a human being, the rights and also the duties of humanity. For the person who renounces everything there is no possible compensation. Such a renunciation is incompatible with human nature, for to take away all freedom from one's will is to take away all morality from one's actions.<sup>4</sup>

The interrelationship between freedom and morality increases the level of human responsibility towards the preservation of this right globally. Transgression of the right of freedom leads inevitably to serious interfaith tension and ultimately massacre. For this reason, the famous Islamic scholar and exegete, *mufasssir*, Bediuzzaman Said Nursi emphasised in the context of interfaith conflict between Muslims and Christians that:

Their freedom [of Christian people] consists in leaving them in peace and not oppressing them, for this is what the *Sharī'ah* enjoins. More than this is

their aggression in the face of your bad points and craziness, their benefiting from your ignorance... The freedom of non-Muslims is a branch of our own freedom.<sup>5</sup>

Nursi's statement implies that in order for one to enjoy one's own freedom one has to struggle to gain the freedom of the other. This principle deserves to be considered as a golden rule in respect of normative religious pluralism, i.e. "the freedom of the other is my own freedom." Therefore, the right of freedom is equally valued all over the world as an inviolable human right, which makes its exploration in the case of the Qur'an vital in order to dispel any exclusive claims and historical doubts concerning it.

### The Word Freedom in the Qur'an

The Arabic word for freedom,<sup>6</sup> *ḥurriyyah*, does not exist in the Qur'an directly as a noun, but its primary root *ḥ-r-r* and other derivatives of it do exist. Tracing the derivatives of the root morpheme *ḥ-r-r* in the Qur'an, it becomes clear that six derivatives have been mentioned in thirteen different Qur'anic places. These six derivatives of the root *ḥ-r-r* are: *tahrīr*, *muḥarrar*, *ḥurr*, *ḥarr*, *ḥarūr*, *ḥarīr*. Before analysing these Qur'anic words, it is important to firstly examine the definition of the root *ḥ-r-r* in one of the earliest works in the field of lexicography: *Mu'jam al-Maqāyīs fī al-Lughah* written by Abū al-Ḥusayn Aḥmad ibn Fāris ibn Zakariyyā.

Ibn Fāris distinguishes between two major meanings of the root *ḥ-r-r*, stating: "*ḥ-r-r* has two main meanings: the first being what goes against slavery and has neither defect nor shortcoming, *mā khālafa al-ʿubūdiyyah wa bari'a min al-ʿayb wa al-naqṣ*, whereas the second is the opposite of cold, *khilāf al-bard*."<sup>7</sup> Even though, some scholars have made attempts to derive from the second meaning of the root *ḥ-r-r* significance related to freedom (*ḥurriyyah*) such attempts seem to be rather exaggerated and thus implausible. Therefore, the Qur'anic words derived from

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the root *ḥ-r-r* meaning “hot” (such as *ḥarr*, *ḥarūr*, *ḥarīr*) are unlikely to work in combination with the word freedom (*ḥurriyyah*).

As far as the rest of the derivatives, related to the first meaning of the root *ḥ-r-r* mentioned by Ibn Fāris, are concerned, it is important to discover what Ibn Fāris meant by the definition of *ḥ-r-r* as something that “goes against slavery and has neither defect nor shortcoming, *mā khālaḥa al-‘ubūdiyyah wa bari’a min al-‘ayb wa al-naqṣ*.”<sup>8</sup> In this case, it is relevant to look at the work of another lexicographer who lived in the generation immediately following Ibn Fāris and who seems to have been influenced by him. Al-Rāghib al-Aṣḥānī developed a definition of *ḥ-r-r* by making a clear distinction between the social and the metaphysical meaning of freedom, *ḥurriyyah*. In his *Mufradāt Alfāz al-Qur’ān* he states:

A free man, *al-ḥurr*, is the opposite of a slave, *al-‘abd*, and freedom, *al-ḥurriyyah*, is divided into two kinds. The first one refers to the person who is literally not a slave. This meaning is referred to in the Qur’an: ‘The free for the free.’ (Qur’an *al-Baqarah* 2:178). In the same way, the Qur’an uses the word *tahrīr* to mean literally the process of giving a slave his freedom, as it is mentioned in the Qur’an: ‘Give a slave his freedom’ (Qur’an *al-Mā’idah* 5:89).

As far as the second kind of freedom, *ḥurriyyah*, is concerned, it is referred “to the person who is not dominated by such ugly qualities as greed and the desire for worldly possessions.”<sup>9</sup> This meaning of freedom, *ḥurriyyah*, is derived from the Qur’anic word *muḥarraran*: ‘I do dedicate unto Thee what is in my womb for Thy special service’ (Qur’an *Āl ‘Imrān* 3:35). *Muḥarraran* here means freed from all worldly affairs and specially dedicated to God’s service.<sup>10</sup>

These foregoing definitions of the root “*ḥ-r-r*” show that the Qur’an uses the derivatives from this root to refer mainly to two different levels of freedom, *ḥurriyyah*. The first is the legal aspect of freedom dealing with slavery meaning the actual physical possession of the slave by wealthy people. The second is the ethical

aspect of freedom which deals with the intellectual as well as the metaphysical character of human nature.

In fact, the Qur'anic word *muḥarraran*, from which the second aspect of freedom is derived, defines the concept of freedom in the light of the Oneness of God. By relating the concept of freedom to the Oneness of God, the Qur'an seems to aim at protecting this human right from any possible violation and to maintain it in its highest level of quality. It is very likely that Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī was aware of this fact when he wrote: "Freedom is a natural feature of human nature...Whenever the bodily connection of the soul is the weaker, and the intellectual one the stronger, the soul possesses more freedom and vice versa."<sup>11</sup> According to al-Rāzī's conclusion, it would appear that no one is truly free unless he devotes himself totally to God. Such a concept of freedom is confirmed also by the Prophet who said: "Perish the slave of dinar, perish the slave of dirham."<sup>12</sup>

It should be stressed here, that Islam emphasises the right of freedom on both its levels, the physical and intellectual, respectively. However, the intellectual aspect of freedom is more underscored, since the consequences of its violation are far more dangerous than the ramifications emerging from violation of the physical aspect. It is interesting to mention in this respect al-Ghazālī's understanding of the fact. He remarks that "to enslave the intellectual freedom of man is more dangerous than actual slavery, since the enslavement of intellectual freedom aims to enslave not only man's body, but also his heart and mind."<sup>13</sup> It is obvious from Ghazālī's statement, that he was aware of the political implications of the idea of freedom as he seems to have also been aware of the right of the individual to maintain and protect his freedom. Thus, al-Ghazālī's definition of freedom suggests an understanding of the Arabic term *ḥurriyyah*, which comprises an appreciation of its subtle meanings together with a comprehension of freedom's various other implications, centuries before the age of European enlightenment. For this reason, Franz Rosenthal would appear to be not entirely accurate, when he concludes that "Arabic did not possess a truly workable term

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to express the full force of [the] concept of “freedom” until, in modern times, western influence gave a new meaning to [the] old *hurriyyah*.”<sup>14</sup>

Thus analysing the root morpheme *h-r-r*, in terms of its derivatives in the Qur'an, we see that the Qur'an recognises both the physical as well as the intellectual aspects of freedom. Moreover, in order to guarantee and perpetuate the right of freedom, the Qur'an attributes the concept of freedom to the Oneness of God and thus indicates that nobody among human beings has the right to enslave others physically or intellectually.

### Qur'anic Indications of Freedom of Belief

Freedom of belief is a fundamental right supported by the Qur'an in a number of verses. Examining all Qur'anic statements on this subject however it would seem that we can focus on two main verses to show that Islam recognises complete freedom of faith: *al-Baqarah:256* and *al-Ahزاب:72*.

#### *Surah al-Baqarah Verse 256*

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 handhold, that never breaks. And Allah heareth and knoweth all things. (*al-Baqarah 2:256*)

An exegetical examination of verse 2:256 will follow. This will focus primarily on four main aspects: a) historical context; b) linguistic structure; c) thematic linkage between the verse and its textual context; d) modern context (the world today world and its reality).

Methodologically speaking, it is important to initially outline the historical context of the verse (the occasion of its revelation or *sabab al-nuzūl*), to allow for greater accuracy and a more comprehensive understanding. In this respect, the historical context in which verse 2:256 was revealed provides us with a reliable

historical source of information. In this regard al-Wāhidī, in his work *Asbāb al-Nuzūl*, reports from Ibn ‘Abbās that:

The children of some of the al-Anṣār’s women used to die young. Prior to Islam their superstitious mothers would consequently take an oath to devote their children to Judaism if they remained alive. Thus, those children who became Jews followed Judaism even after their parents from the al-Anṣār had embraced Islam. However, when the Jewish tribe Banū Naḍīr was expelled from al-Madinah, some of the al-Anṣār wanted to force their Jewish children to embrace Islam in order to stay with their Muslim families in al-Madinah. At that point, God revealed the verse “Let there be no compulsion in religion.”<sup>15</sup>

This narration is also transmitted by al-Ṭabarī, Abū Dāwūd, al-Nisā’ī and others. In terms of the authenticity of the narration, al-Albani concludes that “it is an authentic narration, *ṣaḥīḥ*.”<sup>16</sup>

So, this being the occasion for the revelation of verse 2:256, it is apparent that the verse was revealed in the historical context of a religious conflict between the Jews and Muslims of Madinah. It was a religiously diverse society. Another point which can be derived from the narration is that it was parents who were attempting to force their children to convert from Judaism to Islam. Even so, despite the nature of familial ties and what others might consequently see as mitigating circumstances providing reason enough for a possible violation of freedom of belief, this was not accepted by the Qur’an which categorically states: “there is no compulsion in religion” (2:256). And this clear and unequivocal Qur’anic position with regards to freedom of faith, prohibiting compulsion in religion, whether among family members, and in the context of interfaith conflict, is absolute, promoting freedom of belief to be a universal value and inviolable human right.

Yet, there have been claims by certain quarters that verse 2:256 was abrogated by Qur’anic verses prescribing fighting against the “unbelievers.” Al-Ṭabarī attributes such a claim to Ibn Zayd,<sup>17</sup> while al-Nuḥās reports Sulaymān ibn Mūsā to have been among those who favored the abrogation claim for

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2:256.<sup>18</sup> Ibn Ashur, in contrast, reasons that taking into account that the verse was revealed after the conquest of Makkah, then verse 2:256 abrogated “the verses prescribing fighting against those who refuse to embrace Islam.”<sup>19</sup>

Clearly the issue of abrogation (*naskh*) in the Qur'an is controversial.\* Even in the case of this one single verse (2:256), there exist two opposing claims. One reason for the controversy is problems arising from the definition of abrogation itself. Prior to al-Shāfi'ī's *Al-Risālah*, *naskh* was used in its broadest sense to mean both specifying the meaning by different linguistic approaches as well as the substitution of an earlier rule, *ḥukum*, with a chronologically succeeding one.<sup>20</sup> With regards to the latter, that is substitution of an earlier rule, it should be stressed that the way in which this type of abrogation is determined in the case of the Qur'an is not through reasoning, *ijtihād*, but through an authentic hadith attributed to the Prophet himself.<sup>21</sup>

Another issue, which should be taken into consideration while discussing abrogation in the Qur'an, is the condition that scholars have set as necessary for the acceptance of any claim of abrogation. This condition requires existence of an absolute contradiction between two or more verses together with absence of any possible way in which the verses in question can be understood together.<sup>22</sup> In this respect Abū Zahrah states that: “Together with a number of scholars, we participated in writing a work of Qur'anic exegesis entitled *Al-Muntakhab*. In our entire work on the Qur'an, we did not find any two verses that can be regarded as contradictory to each other.”<sup>23</sup> This complete lack of any contradiction leads Abū Zahrah to conclude: “We adopt the same attitude of Abū Muslim al-Aṣḥānī<sup>24</sup> and say that there is absolutely not any case of abrogation in the

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\* Abrogation in the Qur'an is a controversial issue. For a detailed and comprehensive understanding of abrogation in the Qur'an, please see Israr Ahmad Khan, *Theory of Abrogation: A Critical Evaluation* (Research Management Centre, International Islamic University Malaysia, Kuala Lumpur, 2006). Also see Dr. Taha J. Alalwani, *Naḥwa Maḥqif Qur'anī min al-Naskh* [Towards a Qur'anic Position on Abrogation] (Egypt: Maktabah al-Shuruk al-Dawliyyah, 2007), in which he rejects the concept of abrogation entirely. [Editor].

Qur'an."<sup>25</sup> This conclusion is also confirmed by the late Muhammad al-Ghazali.<sup>26</sup>

In addition the Prophet did not force anyone in his entire life to embrace Islam. He invited people to the message of God and then left matters of faith to their own volition.

In view of these conclusive arguments the claim of abrogation with regard to verse 2:256 is rejected, as is the very concept of *naskh* itself. Hence verse 2:256 was not abrogated, in the sense of freedom of belief having been substituted by its opposite, coercion to accept Islam. The reasons are clear: a) there is no authentic *ahādīth* attributed to the Prophet in this respect. b) there is no contradiction between the verse pertaining to freedom of belief and those concerning the imperative to fight. Indeed as will be discussed in more detail later, the motivation underlying the latter was not the belief system of those of other faith. c) The abrogation claim clearly contradicts the purpose of abrogation stated by the Qur'an itself in surah *al-Baqarah*:

None of Our revelations do We abrogate or cause to be forgotten, but We substitute something better or similar: Knowest thou not that Allah Hath power over all things? (*al-Baqarah* 2:106)

As can be seen, the purpose of abrogation, according to the Qur'an itself, is to substitute something for another thing that is better or similar to the abrogated subject, and by no means to substitute something for something that is worse. Thus, it is unacceptable to claim that the Qur'an has abrogated the right of freedom of belief in order to substitute it for fighting and compulsion.

Having outlined the historical context of verse 2:256, we next turn to examining its linguistic structure. A rhetorical approach employing a laconic style, *al-'ijāz bi al-qaṣr*, gives us a concise statement using few words to express a rich and deep meaning. Indeed al-Rummānī in his work *al-Nukat fī I'jāz al-Qur'ān*, defines this approach as a main feature of the Qur'an proving its miraculous nature.<sup>27</sup>

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A linguistic exploration focusing on the Arabic text, *lā ikrāha* “Let there be no compulsion,” gives us grammatically expression of a generic negative (*nafī istighrāq al-jins*), which indicates a complete negation of the idea of compulsion in all its forms.<sup>28</sup> Accordingly, it makes the scope of the prohibition of compulsion in religion fall inclusively on all human beings. In this regard, it should be emphasised that restriction of the scope of the prohibition as applying only to the People of the Book and those who are subject to paying the *jizyah*, as al-Ṭabarī has suggested,<sup>29</sup> contradicts the Islamic concept of the terrestrial test through which all human beings are examined before God.<sup>30</sup> Moreover, the view that the scope of the prohibition is limited to those who are subject to paying the *jizyah* is untenable, since the verse prescribing *jizyah* (9:29) was revealed in connection to the expedition of Tabūk which took place in 630 CE /9 AH<sup>31</sup> approximately five years after the revelation of verse 2:256, which was revealed when the Jewish tribe Banū al-Naḍir was expelled from Madi-nah in 625 CE/4 AH.<sup>32</sup> On the other hand, the issue of fighting pagans (appearing to be the most frequent argument presented in favor of the restriction of the prohibition of compulsion) is misdirected, for it was motivated by their aggression towards Muslims and constant war mongering, and not by their belief system.<sup>33</sup>

Another linguistic point supporting argument for the universality of freedom of belief occurs in the sentence following the initial statement: “Let there be no compulsion in religion: *Truth stands out clear from Error*” (2:256, *italics mine*). This sentence functions here as a justification for prohibiting compulsion.<sup>34</sup> In other words, compulsion in religion is prohibited because Truth (*rushd*) is clear and Error (*ghay*) is clear. So, compulsion is prohibited and freedom adopted because in the context of the former Truth disappears and Error appears, whereas in the context of the latter Truth, becomes clear. These dialectical relations between freedom and compulsion can be further elaborated by reviewing the verse once more:

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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 handhold that never breaks. And Allah heareth and knoweth all things.  
(*al-Baqarah* 2:256)

The verse apparently presents us with three main dialectical dichotomies: compulsion-freedom; truth-error; and evil (*tāghūt*)-God. The first dichotomy sets off a dual chain reaction, which can be illustrated as follows: freedom → truth (*rushd*) → God; compulsion → error (*ghay*) → evil (*tāghūt*). Thus, as the three dialectical dichotomies indicate attaining final goals is dependant on their starting point, and this being so to attain God we would need to start from freedom, whereas evil will be the end result of compulsion as the starting point. We can therefore deduce precisely that coercion in matters of belief will in all likelihood lead people only to evil.

Historical and linguistic contexts aside, we now move onto examining thematic links. It is methodologically important to study the Qur'an in terms of its own context in which a verse occurs as failure to do so could lead to a distortion of its correct meaning. In this respect, examining Qur'anic verses which eventually lead up to the verse "Let there be no compulsion in religion," we see that these verses concern the issue of fighting (*qitāl*). In particular, the verses preceding 2:256 refer to a battle in which the believers among the children of Israel fight a force led by the formidable warrior Goliath (*Jalūt*) who is killed at the hands of the young prophet David. The purpose of the battle was to defeat oppression, as clear from the verse:

They said: "How could we refuse to fight in the cause of Allah, seeing that we were turned out of our homes and our families?" (Qur'an *al-Baqarah* 2:246)

The occurrence of the verse "Let there be no compulsion in religion" (2:256) following soon after the account of this event is a clear indication that the purpose of the fight was not geared

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towards converting people from one faith to another.<sup>35</sup> On the other hand, the promotion of the freedom of belief in the textual context discussing oppression shows again that the purpose of fighting, *qitāl*, is to free people from oppression and allow them to exercise their human rights, regardless of their religion, ethnicity or nationality.

As far as the verses succeeding the verse “Let there be no compulsion in religion” are concerned, they present three different narratives. The first concerns a dispute between Abraham and a ruler granted power by God, where the main argument concerns the oneness of God; the second refers to a man who God causes to die for a hundred years, and who is then raised up again; and the last concerns Abraham’s request to God to show him how He gives life to the dead. The main argument of the second and third narrative is that it is only God who causes life and death.

What is significant in the case of these three narratives is that their central argument is supported and proved through compelling evidence and experience. This in itself thematically confirms the Qur’anic rule of no coercion in faith in the sense that the way to persuade people of a certain belief should be through constructive argument, and not by force or compulsion.

Therefore, within the Qur’an’s own context the verse “Let there be no compulsion in religion” corroborates the right to freedom of belief in two ways. First, the context disapproves of using force in respect of belief and second it demonstrates this by encouraging the use of compelling arguments and experience as a mean to persuade people of a certain belief.

Another context to be consulted with respect to no coercion in matters of faith is that of today’s world and civilisational reality in terms of human rights and values. In other words, the relevant question here is what importance does today’s world attach to the right of freedom? To answer this question, it seems appropriate to refer to one of the core sources exploring historically human experience in the civilisational process. This is Arnold Toynbee’s *A Study of History*, wherein the author concludes that the right of freedom of choice is a criterion for the rise and

decline of civilisations: “A broken-down society would prove to have forfeited a salutary freedom of choice through having fallen under the bondage of some idols of its own making.”<sup>36</sup> So, the consideration of freedom of choice in the context of today’s world as a criterion for the rise and decline of societies, does not allow exegetes to fail to recognise the right of freedom of belief as a universal right in the case of the verse “Let there be no compulsion in religion” (2:256).

In sum an exegetical study of verse 2:256 at the historical, linguistic, thematic and civilisational levels, has shown that the right of freedom of belief is endorsed by the Qur’an as a universal right and value, which cannot be subject to abrogation or restricted to a certain group of people.

#### *Surah al-Aḥzāb Verse 72*

The second Qur’anic verse to be exegetically examined with reference to freedom of belief is verse 72 of surah *al-Aḥzāb*:

We did indeed offer the Trust to the Heavens and the Earth and the Mountains; but they refused to undertake it, being afraid thereof: but man undertook it. He was indeed unjust and foolish. (Qur’an *al-Aḥzāb* 33:72)

Once again the first step is exploration of the historical context of the verse. As obvious from the name of the chapter *al-Aḥzāb*, referring to the siege of Madinah by confederates, the surah is a Madinan one.<sup>37</sup> However, apart from the fact of the verse having been revealed in a multicultural society which Madinah was, it seems difficult to trace any other historical facts related to the verse. This is because there does not seem to exist any historical occasion for its revelation. It is important to point out that the perception of some scholars that every Qur’anic verse must refer to a special occasion appears to be a methodological mistake in the field of Qur’anic exegesis. This view has led to Qur’anic texts being burdened with historical events having no relation to the texts in question. In fact, the number of the verses which refer to special occasions is restricted as “most of

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the Qur'anic stories, past events mentioned in the Qur'an, and even the texts referring to the hereafter, have been revealed initially without special occasions."<sup>38</sup> Furthermore, verse 33:72 relays information concerning an event which took place before the revelation of the Qur'an, so it is also clear why there is no special occasion for its revelation. Therefore, the key to its understanding is the linguistic text itself and its relation to the Qur'an's own context. In this respect, al-Salih importantly remarks that "the exploration of the relationship between the verse and its textual context compensates for the lack of special occasion or confirms it in the case of its availability."<sup>39</sup>

Following this line of reasoning we begin with a linguistic analysis of the verse's content. The crux of this is the word *al-amānah* or trust. *Al-amānah* has caused controversy among exegetes, historically being interpreted in a variety of ways since no prophetic explanation exists in direct relation to it. For example, al-Ṭabarī narrates a number of different meanings of "trust" such as obedience to God, loyalty to humankind, and Adam's trust towards his son Qābīl. However, after mentioning all these he concludes that "the most relevant understanding of "trust," *al-amānah*, is to be left to its general meaning including all religious obligations as well as the obligations towards people."<sup>40</sup> Unlike al-Ṭabarī, al-Zamakhsharī restricts meaning to the obedience of God.<sup>41</sup> In a similar way, al-Rāzī defines the meaning of "trust" as "the commandment of God, *al-taklīf*."<sup>42</sup> Yet, as the commandment of God is not exclusively related to human beings but includes the rest of the universe, al-Ālūsī distinguishes between the fulfilment of the commandment of God by force and fulfilment by choice. He states that "the commandment of God (*al-taklīf*) was accepted by man on the basis of his own choice and without compulsion."<sup>43</sup> Likewise, its undertaking was rejected by the heavens, earth and mountains. By this reasoning he implies that freedom of choice would appear to be a more suitable meaning of *al-amānah* than the commandment of God, for it is fulfilled equally by those who accepted the trust as well as by those who rejected it. The sense of meaning al-Ālūsī gave to *al-*

*amānah* was later developed by Ibn Ashur to mean “intellectual power, *al-‘aql*.”<sup>44</sup>

Finally, the latest definition of *al-amānah* has been formulated by al-Sharawi, who seems to have summarised the previous definitions and thus formed a more explicit concept of “trust”. He concludes that “trust, *al-amānah*, means the ability of human beings to choose their actions. Therefore, the trust, *al-amānah*, which was offered by God to his creatures, is the freedom of choice or the ability of these creatures to choose whether to believe or disbelieve.”<sup>45</sup>

In sum *al-amānah* has witnessed significant evolution in its definition, both in terms of the sense of meaning given to the term as well as understanding of it. This commences with a classical understanding focusing on obedience to God in terms of His commandments. Yet the issue remains that this would mean by implication that the heavens, earth, mountains did not follow God’s commandment refusing to undertake “the trust” (*al-amānah*) something which is unacceptable, as the Qur’an itself repeatedly confirms that the universe continuously praises and glorifies God. For this reason, al-Rāzī seems to have been puzzled over how human beings, the universe, and angels obey God’s commandment, stating that they all obey God in different ways, and pointing to the angels’ obedience of God as being similar to the way human beings eat and drink.<sup>46</sup> This last observation by al-Rāzī implies that apart from human beings, all other creatures obey God on the basis of instinct without any involvement of free choice or will. Therefore, providing that all creatures share the ability to obey God, the interpretation of *al-amānah* as obedience is unconvincing, since the “trust,” in the verse exclusively belongs only to human beings. In fact the point, on which al-Rāzī seems to have been puzzled and could not designate appears to be what succeeding exegetes, and particularly al-Sharawi, have defined as a free choice or free will.

On the whole, the most reasonable designation for the word “trust” (*al-amānah*) seems to be free choice or free will, which means the ability of humans to choose through an intellectual

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power whether to believe or disbelieve in the commandment of God. Thus, it is this ability that was offered to the heavens, the earth, and the mountains, and which they refused to undertake because of its eschatological ramifications, that mankind accepted. Given to them directly by God as a gift, *al-amānah* was also a fundamental feature of the terrestrial test carrying tremendous eschatological responsibility. For this reason, human free will or the ability of humans to choose freely is metaphorically determined in the verse as “trust.”

Not only has verse 33:72 related freedom of choice to human beings but also rhetorically illustrated God's approach through which He presents this great “trust” to them. This approach is expressed in the verse by the word offer, *ʿard*, which means that freedom of choice itself was initially offered by God to man on the basis of freedom of choice, far from any compulsion. The important emphasis given to freedom of choice and its consequences is signified by the ending of the verse which presents two nouns (*ẓalūm* and *jahūl*) in *ṣīghah al-mubālaghah* form (that is, forms of intensification/hyperbolic forms) to give intensification of meaning: “...He [the human being] was indeed unjust (*ẓalūm*) and foolish (*jahūl*)” (33:72). Those among mankind who fail to choose in accordance with the requirements of Allah are *ẓalūm* (to God); and they are also *jahūl*, because they did not utilize the freedom of choice granted them in a way that guarantees them perpetual happiness.

To further support the argument that verse 33:72 refers to humans beings as inherently endowed with freedom of choice, which serves as a foundation of freedom of belief, we need to examine some thematic relationships within the surah. In this respect, there seems to be an important clue to understanding the dichotomy between freedom of belief and compulsion in the fourth verse:

Allah has not made for any man two hearts in his (one) body: nor has He made your wives whom ye divorce by *ẓihār* your mothers: nor has He made your adopted sons your sons. Such is (only) your (manner of) speech by

your mouths. But Allah tells (you) the Truth, and He shows the (right) Way. (Qur'an *al-Aḥzāb* 33:4)

The verse clearly underlines the fact that man cannot live in two different universes. Actually, the reality that “Allah has not made for any man two hearts in his (one) body,” implies the inability of the method of compulsion to create any real intellectual pattern going against the endowed freedom of choice. Analogically, the verse provides two examples: one’s wife cannot become one’s mother nor can one’s adopted child become one’s real child. Therefore, given that the importance of certain beliefs or certain actions is based on what is in man’s heart, the use of force and compulsion appears to be not only pointless but also deceptive. In this respect, one of the purposes of the verse in particular, and the whole of surah *al-Aḥzāb* in general, is to criticise hypocrisy, which is one of the main topics of the chapter.

Moving to the Qur’anic textual context preceding verse 33:72, we see another thematic relationship in terms of the eschatological consequences of man’s terrestrial freedom of choice:

Verily Allah has cursed the Unbelievers and prepared for them a Blazing Fire – To dwell therein forever: no protector will they find, nor helper. The Day that their faces will be turned upside down in the Fire, they will say: “Woe to us! Would that we had obeyed Allah and obeyed the Messenger!” And they would say: “Our Lord! We obeyed our chiefs and our great ones, and they misled us as to the (right) Path. Our Lord! Give them double Penalty and curse them with a very great Curse!” (Qur’an *al-Aḥzāb* 33:64-68)

These verses convey the terrible regret expressed in the hereafter by those who failed to obey God in their earthly life, as well as their great wish that they had obeyed Him. This combination of regret and wish, expressed by the words *yālaytanā* (“woe to us”) functions in the eschatological context as a metonymy of regret.<sup>47</sup> In other words, the Arabic word *layt*, woe, indicates

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one's wish to do what one had a choice to do in the past, but failed in doing. Thus, this metonymy laconically expresses the Qur'anic concept of freedom of choice as pertaining to not only people's right to choose freely their belief in this world but also their accountability for that choice in the hereafter. In fact, it is this issue of eschatological accountability which may be the reason underlying the heavens, earth, and mountains' refusal to undertake the trust offered.

To summarise, our analytical study of verse 33:72 has demonstrated that the verse itself and the context in which it exists prove the distinguished nature of human beings as possessors of free will. In fact, freedom of choice, according to the verse, is the main boundary distinguishing human beings from the rest of creation. Therefore, this ability to choose freely, the right of freedom of belief in this world, is seen as tantamount to constituting what a human being actually is.

### Freedom of Belief versus Oppression: The Dialectics of Opposites in Three Qur'anic Stories

The Qur'anic attitude towards the right of freedom of belief can also be dialectically examined by analysing three stories critically presented in the Qur'an. These are known as: "the makers of the pit of fire" (*aṣḥāb al-ukhdūd*); "the sorcerers of Pharaoh" (*saḥarāh Fir'awn*); and "the companions of the cave" (*aṣḥāb al-kahf*).

The first was revealed in surah *al-Burūj*, in the context of Makkan socio-political circumstances. The story concerns a pre-Islamic community of monotheistic believers burnt to death for no other reason than their belief in God. The act of killing people because of their faith has been criticised by the Qur'an and defined as a crime:

Woe to the makers of the pit (of fire), Fire supplied (abundantly) with fuel:  
Behold! They sat over against the (fire), And they witnessed (all) that they  
were doing against the Believers. And they ill-treated them for no other

reason than that they believed in Allah, Exalted in Power, Worthy of all Praise! – Him to Whom belongs the dominion of the heavens and the earth! And Allah is Witness to all things. Those who persecute (or draw into temptation) the Believers, men and women, and do not turn in repentance, will have the Penalty of Hell: They will have the Penalty of the Burning Fire. (Qur'an *al-Burūj* 85:4-10)

The Qur'anic statement “and they ill-treated them for no other reason than that they believed in Allah” (85:8), clearly demonstrates that the root cause of the persecution and slaying of these people was their belief system. Therefore, the Qur'anic criticism of such a kind of religious oppression dialectically reveals the Qur'anic endorsement of the right of freedom of belief.

The second Qur'anic story known as “the sorcerers of Pharaoh,” *saḥarāh Fir'awn*, has been revealed in three different but all Makkan surahs: *al-A'raf*, *Ṭā Hā*, and *al-Shu'arā'*. The story is about a group of extremely skilful sorcerers ordered by Pharaoh to prove Moses' message to be false. However, after seeing clear evidence proving his message to be true, the sorcerers declare their submission to God. At this point Pharaoh violates the sorcerers' right to choose their faith, and threatens to slay them by cutting off their hands and feet on opposite sides and then crucifying them. This threat is depicted in the Qur'an as follows:

So the magicians were thrown down to prostration: they said, “We believe in the Lord of Aaron and Moses.” (Pharaoh) said: “Believe ye in Him before I give you permission? Surely this must be your leader, who has taught you magic! Be sure I will cut off your hands and feet on opposite sides, and I will have you crucified on trunks of palm-trees: so shall ye know for certain, which of us can give the more severe and the more lasting punishment!” (Qur'an *Ṭā Hā* 20:70-71)

Although the sorcerers' acceptance of Moses' message was based on evidence and experience, their right to freedom of belief

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was violated by one of the most evil figures (aside from Satan) in the Qur'an, Pharaoh. In fact, Pharaoh's coercion in matters of faith is constantly criticised throughout the Qur'an dialectically proving the right to freedom of belief.

The third story appears in the Makkan surah *al-Kahf*. The story is known as "the story of the companions of the cave," *qiṣṣah aṣḥāb al-kaḥf*. The Qur'anic account refers to a group of young monotheistic believers religiously persecuted and threatened with death by stoning if they refuse to abandon their religion. The Qur'an describes the persecutors' attitude towards religious diversity as follows:

"...And let him behave with care and courtesy, and let him not inform any one about you. For if they should come upon you, they would stone you or force you to return to their cult, and in that case ye would never attain prosperity." (Qur'an *al-Kahf* 18:19-20)

The approach of compulsion and punishment in respect to the religious other is presented in the verses as an exclusive and oppressive pattern of behavior. The Qur'anic disapproval of such a pattern dialectically approves its opposite behavioral paradigm based on freedom of belief and inclusivism.

Therefore, the three Qur'anic stories, historically revealed in the oppressive context of Makkah, exemplify the dark side of human experience towards religious diversity. Analysis of the stories reveals the crucial point being criticised by the Qur'an to be religious persecution and punishment (whether by burning, crucifying or stoning) in response to determining one's belief system. More importantly, by revealing these stories in the Makkan context, the Qur'an on the one hand criticises Makkan oppression, and on the other dialectically prepares the ground as well as the mindset of Muslims for the establishment of a new multicultural society in Madinah based on freedom of belief and religious pluralism.

In sum, an examination of the different aspects of freedom of belief discussed in this section reveals the Qur'an to define this

right as a value as well as a foundation of man's earthly test. Such is the significance of the right to freedom of belief, that it has been added to the main objectives of Islamic law, *Maqāṣid al-Sharī'ah al-Islāmiyyah*.<sup>48</sup> Therefore, ethico-behavioral patterns of religious compulsion and disregard for the right to freedom of belief in any Muslim context should not be regarded as a normative teaching of Islam, but as a cultural transformation of Islam.

[2]

Human Dignity

Although freedom of belief alone could allow for the existence of diversity, it is inadequate to create a sincere encounter of different religious commitments. This is largely because freedom is often perceived as a personal value. For this reason, in order not to be reduced to a vehicle for creating segregated religious communities, normative religious pluralism should rest on another universal value, which pertains equally to the nature of all human beings. This universal value is human dignity and will be examined next as the second Qur'anic foundation of normative religious pluralism.

Human dignity can simply be defined as "the worth of being human."<sup>49</sup> This short definition can be further clarified by Immanuel Kant's conclusion on human dignity, wherein he states: "Act so that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in that of another, always as an end and never as a means only."<sup>50</sup> Therefore, the dignity of a human person is humanity itself, which according to Kant, should be the final target of human treatment.

Needless to say, the importance of human dignity has become, at least theoretically, one of the foundational bases of the modern world and hence there will hardly be a question left unanswered on the subject. In particular, once human rights became one of the main concerns of the United Nation, a vast amount of literature on human dignity was produced, to a degree that there now exists in Geneva an entire library on the

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subject. Our analysis however will focus on Qur'anic exegesis with a particular focus on human dignity as a universal foundation of normative religious pluralism. For thorough exposition of the Qur'anic attitude towards human dignity analysis will concentrate on two different levels, the first concerning the anthropological aspect of human dignity in the Qur'an, and the second examining some Qur'anic doctrines forming an ideological framework for preserving human dignity.

### An Anthropological Analysis of Human Dignity in the Qur'an

At the outset, it should be clarified that by anthropological analysis in this context is meant exploration of the Qur'anic view on the genesis of human beings and their status among other creatures. By exploring anthropologically the Qur'anic view on the genesis of humans, this particular section of the research aims to show the relationship between human dignity and the inclusivity of God's love and compassion.

God's extreme care of human beings in the process of creation appears mainly in three points connected to human dignity. First, the Qur'an states that man has been created in the best of moulds: "We have indeed created man in the best of moulds" (Qur'an *al-Tīn* 95:4). This means that a human being has been created in the best physical, spiritual and intellectual form.<sup>51</sup> Secondly, the process of man's creation has been conducted directly by God's hands, something also underpinned by God's criticism of *Iblīs* when he refuses to honor man (whom God created with His hands) by prostrating to him:

(Allah) said: "O *Iblīs*! What prevents thee from prostrating thyself to one whom I have created with my hands? Art thou haughty? Or art thou one of the high (and mighty) ones?" (Qur'an *Ṣād* 38:75)

Finally and most importantly, God breathed of His spirit into man:

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But He fashioned him in due proportion, and breathed into him something of His spirit. And He gave you (the faculties of) hearing and sight and feeling (and understanding): little thanks do ye give! (Qur'an *al-Sajdah* 32:9)

These three aspects of man's creation show that man has been created by God with extreme and special care. God's care of the creation of man suggests the universality as well as the inclusivity of God's love and compassion towards all people. This fact, in turn, promotes the inviolability and the respect of human dignity to a universal value. This assertion is supported by the following authentic hadith:

A believer is that person, who loves others and is loved by others, and there is nothing good about a person who does not love others and is not loved by others, and the dearest people to God are those who are most beneficial to other people.<sup>52</sup>

The statement of the Prophet that "the dearest people to God are those who are most beneficial to other people" underlines, on the one hand, the vertical relationship between God and those who care about His human creatures, and on the other emphasises the universality of human dignity and its foundational role in respect of the ethico-behavioral pattern of human relations.

The Qur'anic attitude towards human dignity is also manifested in the highest status that human beings enjoy among the rest of God's creatures. In this respect, the Qur'an says:

We have honoured the sons of Adam; provided them with transport on land and sea; given them for sustenance things good and pure; and conferred on them special favors, above a great part of Our Creation. (Qur'an *al-Isrā'* 17:70)

God's great care and love for humanity appears again in this verse. However, this time the inviolability of human dignity is emphasised in a more particular sense. For instance, the past tense verb "honoured" is preceded by the word *laqad*. According

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to Arabic grammar a past tense verb preceded by *laqad* expresses a certainty and affirmation. This means that there must not be any doubt as to the fact of the dignity of all human beings having been honoured directly by God Himself. What is important to note here is that when it comes to the dignity of a human being, the Qur'an makes no distinction between people on the basis of their differing affiliations and identities. Instead, it states in a very inclusive way that "We have honoured the sons of Adam" (Qur'an *al-Isrā'* 17:70).

The universally honoured status which the Qur'an confers on human dignity can also be found in the prophetic ethico-behavioral model which serves as a practical reflection of the verse. In this respect, Jābir ibn 'Abullah narrates:

A funeral procession passed in front of us and the Prophet stood up and we too stood up. We said, "O Allāh's Apostle! This is the funeral procession of a Jew." He said: "Whenever you see a funeral procession, you should stand up."<sup>53</sup>

In another similar case, 'Abd al-Raḥmān ibn Abū Laylā narrates that:

Sahl ibn Ḥunayf and Qays ibn Sa'd were sitting in the city of Al-Qādisiyyah. A funeral procession passed in front of them and they stood up. They were told that that funeral procession was of one of the inhabitants of the land i.e. of a non-believer, under the protection of Muslims. They said, "A funeral procession passed in front of the Prophet and he stood up. When he was told that it was the coffin of a Jew, he said: 'Is it not a living being (soul)?'"<sup>54</sup>

This normative teaching of the Prophet in connection to the dignity of religiously different people, reveals two important points which deserve attention. The first pertains to the exclusive question raised by Muslims in both texts that why should they stand up given that the dead person was a Jew or generally, a non-believer. This query reflects the challenging process of transforming an exclusive mentality into a universal one. It

seems transforming the pre-Islamic perception of the other into a new understanding of human relations was a long term educational process.

The second point relates to the Prophet's method of teaching Muslims how to respect others. In fact, the Prophet established the ethico-behavioural model of treating others on a universal basis. The reason for respecting others was clearly stated by the Prophet in the form of a counter-question: "Is it not a living being, *'a laysat nafsan?'*." Therefore, the main reason for respecting people is the fact that they are human beings. For this particular reason, the Prophet not only respected the dignity of people during their life, but also after their death.

According to the Qur'an, the dignified status of humans, given to mankind directly by God, is based on the fact that people have been created as intellectual beings endowed with knowledge, wisdom and free will.<sup>55</sup> At this point, it is important to look into some Qur'anic verses in order to understand the relationship between the intellectual nature of human beings and their dignity. The Qur'an remarks that when God initially informs the angels that He is going to create a new being called man, the angels appear to have disliked the project on the grounds that man would likely cause violence and bloodshed on Earth. However, once having witnessed man's intellectual power the angels suddenly change their attitude and bow down to him:

Behold, thy Lord said to the angels: "I will create a vicegerent on earth." They said: "Wilt Thou place therein one who will make mischief therein and shed blood? Whilst we do celebrate Thy praises and glorify Thy holy (name)?" He said: "I know what ye know not." And He taught Adam the names of all things; then He placed them before the angels, and said: "Tell me the names of these if ye are right." They said: "Glory to Thee, of knowledge we have none, save what Thou Hast taught us: In truth it is Thou Who art perfect in knowledge and wisdom." He said: "O Adam! Tell them their names." When he had told them, Allah said: "Did I not tell you that I know the secrets of heaven and earth, and I know what ye reveal and what ye

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conceal?" And behold, We said to the angels: "Bow down to Adam" and they bowed down. Not so Iblis: he refused and was haughty: He was of those who reject Faith. (Qur'an *al-Baqarah* 2:30-34)

These verses reveal that man was able to dispel the accusation of being violent and thus to defend his dignity through use of his intellectual power.<sup>56</sup> However, what should be borne in mind is that man's dangerous potential to commit violence and shed blood becomes reality when his intellectual power is neglected and his dignity is violated.

This relationship between human intellectual power and dignity is remarkably underscored by Sacks in his work *The Dignity of Difference*, where he concludes that "education is the single greatest key to human dignity."<sup>57</sup> In the same way, the Bible states that:

And God said; Let us make man in our image, after our likeness: and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the heavens, and over the cattle, and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth. And God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them. (Genesis 1:26-27)

In his interpretation of the Biblical verses, Saint Thomas Aquinas argues that the creation of man in God's image means that the human person is an intelligent being. Thus, according to the Bible also there exists a relationship between God's creation of humans, their intellectual nature, and human dignity.

The foregoing discussion on the relationship between the intellectual power of humans and their dignity shows that these two features are interdependently related. It means that the dignity of human beings is related to their ideologies, beliefs and way of thinking. Therefore, to respect the dignity of man means to respect also their ideological differences. Moreover, knowing that God has honoured mankind by endowing him with intellectual power, it is worth seeking wisdom in the face of the different

other. In stark contrast, disregard of and rudeness towards other people's beliefs means violation of their dignity, which in turn can easily trigger man's inherent potential negativities.

In sum, our anthropological analysis of human dignity in the Qur'an reveals that human dignity is a universal right and value, inviolable and to be respected, emerging from God's love, care, and compassion towards man. Furthermore, the relationship between intellectual power and dignity requires people to respect differences on the one hand, and to seek intellectual exchange across the lines of these differences on the other. In this way, being interdependently related to the intellectual power of mankind, human dignity forms a universal foundation of normative religious pluralism.

### **Qur'anic Doctrines Concerning The Preservation of Human Dignity**

Here focus will be on the broadest Qur'anic doctrines forming a framework likely to accommodate any elaborations concerning the preservation of human dignity. In fact, it can be assumed that the whole theory of the higher objectives of Islamic law, *maqāṣid al-sharī'ah*, which serves as an ideology for dignifying a human being, rests on these Qur'anic doctrines. The purpose of the discussion is to prove once again that according to the Qur'an, dignity is an inviolable human feature which stands above human ideology, thus constructing a universal foundation of normative religious pluralism.

The preservation of human dignity "has been a central concept in the Arabic culture since the pre-Islamic period."<sup>58</sup> In this respect, a great deal of data regarding the value of dignity can be found in pre-Islamic poetry, although this dignity was confined to a certain subject, identity, or social status. This narrow view created social destabilisation primarily because the modus operandi was to preserve the dignity of some by violating and destroying the dignity of others. The Qur'an importantly confirmed the value of human dignity and simultaneously made it

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clear that the dignity of all human beings was inviolable so moving away from the prejudice of the pre-Islamic concept and broadening its scope to include all humanity. Moreover, in order to preserve human dignity from any possible violation, the Qur'an set universal doctrines, guiding the ethico-behavioral model of treating others.

The first of these Qur'anic doctrines (aimed at preserving human dignity) relates one's deeds directly to personal responsibility: "Namely, that no bearer of burdens can bear the burden of another" (*al-Najm* 53:38).

This verse is mentioned five times in five Makkan surahs: *al-Najm*, *Fāṭir*, *al-Isrā'*, *al-An'ām*, and *al-Zumūr*.<sup>59</sup> And the fact that it appears only in Makkan surahs is testament to the Qur'an's early concern to preserve human dignity from any possible violation. In this respect, al-Zamakhsharī argues that the verse comes as a response to the following Qur'anic verse:

And the Unbelievers say to those who believe: "Follow our path, and we will bear (the consequences) of your faults." Never in the least will they bear their faults: in fact they are liars! (Qur'an *al-Ankabūt* 29:12)<sup>60</sup>

This statement asserting that one can bear the consequences of the deeds of others is an attempt to negate the notion of personal responsibility. The negation of personal responsibility means a loss of sovereignty over life, which in turn appears as tantamount to the loss of dignity, and to prevent the dignity of a human being from such violation, the Qur'an established the basic principle of personal responsibility in 53:38.

According to Rashid Rida, this verse is "considered as a major principle of all revealed religions throughout the history of mankind, and it also constitutes one of the most central foundations of the reform of human personal as well as collective life."<sup>61</sup> This is because the destiny of man should rest in their own hands and everyone should be the author of his or her deeds and life by bearing a personal and moral responsibility before God.<sup>62</sup> In fact, the realisation of the importance as well as the

dimensions of personal responsibility, as imparted by the verse, constructs a major principle for preserving human dignity by implying that nobody should become the victim of other people's faults.

Another Qur'anic doctrine preserving human dignity is the belief that the earth belongs only to God, and that He created it for the benefit of all human beings equally. The Qur'an says:

It is He Who hath created for you all things that are on earth; Moreover His design comprehended the heavens, for He gave order and perfection to the seven firmaments; and of all things He hath perfect knowledge. (Qur'an *al-Baqarah* 2:29)

Al-Sharawi's comment on this verse is that "it comes to draw our attention to the fact that the earth is the property of God and that we do not own anything except as trustees on behalf of God during our earthly life."<sup>63</sup> On the other hand, Abū Ḥayyān al-Andalusī states that the words "for you," *lakum*, are related to the whole of mankind and that the preposition "for," the letter *lām* making the word *la*, functions as a reason for the creation of the earth. In other words, it means that for the benefit of the whole of mankind God created the earth.<sup>64</sup>

The fact that the earth belongs to no human being but only to God and that He is the Merciful Sustainer of the whole of mankind forms an inviolable right to life for every human being regardless of their different identities. In this respect, the Qur'an makes it clear that the right to life cannot be violated for ideological reasons:

And remember Abraham said: "My Lord, make this a City of Peace, and feed its people with fruits, – such of them as believe in Allah and the Last Day." He said: "(Yea), and such as reject Faith, – for a while will I grant them their pleasure, but will soon drive them to the torment of Fire, – an evil destination (indeed)!" (Qur'an *al-Baqarah* 2:126)

The Prophet Abraham's perception of God's mercy towards

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human beings in this world was corrected by God.<sup>65</sup> So, religious affiliation or identity does not matter when it comes to exercising the right to life, but rather it is “God’s mercy which covers the whole of mankind and provides all with essential needs for [a] secure life.”<sup>66</sup> The Qur’an underscores more vividly, the fact that all people receive God’s favor and that this is not closed to anyone:

Of the bounties of thy Lord We bestow freely on all – These as well as those:  
The bounties of thy Lord are not closed (to anyone). (Qur’an *al-Isrā’*  
17:20)

Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī comments on this verse: “God provides all people with everything they need for a dignified and pleasant life. God’s bounty is open to all and restricted to none. This is because the earth is a place where human beings are examined before God.”<sup>67</sup>

In sum, Qur’anic doctrine asserts that the earth belongs to God alone but has been created for the benefit of all mankind. This grants every human being therefore an inviolable right to life. This Qur’anic position preserves human dignity and implies that no one has the right to monopolise the life of others. Moreover, to emulate God’s mercy towards people, believers should make an effort to contribute positively towards creating a dignified and pleasant life for all human beings regardless of their religious differences.

Another clear Qur’anic doctrine preserving human dignity is removal of any intermediaries between God and man. According to the Qur’an, every single person regardless of his/her identity and social status can freely connect, without any need for special authority, with God.

When My servants ask thee concerning Me, I am indeed close (to them): I listen to the prayer of every suppliant when he calleth on Me: Let them also, with a will, Listen to My call, and believe in Me: That they may walk in the right way. (Qur’an *al-Baqarah* 2:186)

Although this verse occurs in the context of verses explaining fasting, this does not mean we restrict its scope to Muslims only, the direct relationship between God and man referred to is inclusive of all human beings. It is important to note that the word “servants,” *‘ibād*, used in the verse can refer to all human beings, as is the case in the following verse:

He is the Irresistibly Supreme over His servants. And He is the Wise, Acquainted with all things.<sup>68</sup> (Qur’an *al-An‘ām* 6:18)

There is no disagreement among scholars over the meaning of the word “servants,” *‘ibād*, used in this verse. They are unanimous that it refers to all human beings. Moreover, Abdel Haleem goes further to translate “servants,” *‘ibād*, in this verse as God’s creatures.<sup>69</sup> Therefore, providing that the word servants, *‘ibād*, is used in the Qur’an in an inclusive way, it cannot be used as a reason for limiting the principle of direct relation exclusively to Muslims. In other words, God’s encouragement to His servants, *‘ibād*, to seek a direct relation with Him is meant for all people, though the primary addressees might be considered Muslims, seeing as the verse is presented in the context of fasting:

Ramadan is the (month) in which was sent down the Qur’an, as a guide to mankind, also clear (Signs) for guidance and judgment (Between right and wrong). So every one of you who is present (at his home) during that month should spend it in fasting, but if any one is ill, or on a journey, the prescribed period (Should be made up) by days later. Allah intends every facility for you; He does not want to put to difficulties. (He wants you) to complete the prescribed period, and to glorify Him in that He has guided you; and perchance ye shall be grateful.

When My servants ask thee concerning Me, I am indeed close (to them): I listen to the prayer of every supplicant when he calleth on Me: Let them also, with a will, Listen to My call, and believe in Me: That they may walk in the right way. (Qur’an *al-Baqarah* 2:185-186)

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Ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī mentions a possible occasion for the verse's revelation explaining: "a person came and asked the Prophet whether God was close to people in order to whisper to Him or He was far from them so to raise their voices while speaking to Him."<sup>70</sup> Muhammad Abduh comments on this: "It is very likely such a question to have been raised by Arabs or Bedouins, since they were accustomed to seek intermediaries between them and God."<sup>71</sup> So, it can be assumed that in allowing mankind to freely communicate with God, in that context, Islam ushered in a new phenomenon. In this respect Henry Corbin remarks in his *History of Islamic Philosophy*:

The first thing to note is the absence in Islam of the phenomenon of the Church. Just as Islam has no clergy in possession of the "means of grace," so it has no dogmatic magisterium, no pontifical authority, no Council which is responsible for defining dogma.<sup>72</sup>

In fact, the absence of any special authority serving as an intermediary between man and God plays an important role in preserving human dignity, since such authority could be corrupted and thereby become a source of injustice and oppression destroying the dignity of human beings.

Furthermore, according to the Qur'an, when people commit a sin or feel guilty over any wrongdoing, they do not need to confess their sin to anyone pretending to possess the "means of grace." All that they need to do is turn directly to God and beg forgiveness:

Say: "O, my Servants who have transgressed against their souls! Despair not of the Mercy of Allah: for Allah forgives all sins: for He is Oft-Forgiving, Most Merciful". (Qur'an *al-Zumar* 39:53)

Ibn Ashur explains that "O, my Servants" in this verse refers primarily to pagans.<sup>73</sup> The direct relationship offered by God to man is for every human being, and everyone is given the privacy to confess his/her sins to God alone in order not to expose their

dignity to humiliation. In a similar way, according to the verse, human sin should be seen as an opportunity for compassion, forgiveness, and change, instead of accusation, hatred and enmity.

It will be seen that these Qur'anic doctrines hence emphasise three essential elements for human existence: man's deeds, life, and relationship to God. Due to all three's critical importance for man's earthly as well as eschatological existence, they have been meant by God to be strictly characteristic of every single human being. Thus, the doctrines form a framework for preserving human dignity in such a way, that no one person has the right to monopolise any other person's deeds, life, and relationship to God.

Overall, the examination demonstrates that the Qur'an does not require a special religious affiliation with regards to respect for human dignity and its inviolability, and more importantly, determines this respect for human dignity as a natural right and universal value. Thus, an ethico-behavioral pattern oriented towards humiliation of the dignity of religiously different people contradicts the normative teaching of the Qur'an.

[3]

### Integrity

Integrity towards religiously different people was identified in the previous chapter as an essential ethical element, which protects the process of normative religious pluralism from becoming mere diplomacy. Furthermore, integrity can be regarded as the most central inward dimension of normative religious pluralism. Due to this importance it is essential to examine the Qur'an's stand towards integrity and establish whether it approves treating those of different faith with truthfulness despite their differing beliefs.

The Qur'an's universal ethical system in general, and its attitude towards freedom of belief and respect for human dignity in particular, indicate that integrity towards non-Muslims is a naturally obvious stance to observe. Consequently, such behavior

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cannot be transgressed or contradicted by other normative teachings of Islam, except in the case of religious persecution, killing and oppression (to be discussed in detail in chapter five). Although the Qur'anic position is plainly obvious nevertheless for the purpose of clarity, it is important to conduct further exegetical examination.

People should use integrity towards those of other faiths and the most central Qur'anic verse in regard to this is:

Allah forbids you not, with regard to those who fight you not for (your) faith nor drive you out of your homes, from dealing kindly and justly with them: for Allah loveth those who are just. (Qur'an *al-Mumtaḥinah* 60:8)

Analysis of the verse reveals that it encompasses three main aspects which allow an accurate and comprehensive conclusion to be derived with respect to the issue of integrity towards the other. The first is the historical aspect and this is related to the debate on the current status of the verse, whether it has been abrogated or not. The second is linked to the question of the identity of those who are meant to be treated with kindness and justice. The third concerns focus on the meaning of the verb *tabarrūhum*, translated as “dealing kindly.”

With regard to the first aspect – the issue of abrogation – its worth pointing out that abrogation has been so excessively applied by some classical sources of Qur'anic exegesis, that there seems to have existed a tendency to regard as abrogated any positive Qur'anic verse concerning the religiously different other. And verse 60:8 is no exception. For instance, al-Ṭabarī reports Ibn Zayd and Qatādah having adopted the attitude of abrogation with regard to it, so according to Ibn Zayd: “The above verse has been abrogated by the verses ordering Muslims to face by their swords pagans and slay them if they refuse to accept Islam.”<sup>74</sup> Qatādah asserts much the same pointing to: “Then fight and slay the Pagans wherever ye find them” (Qur'an *al-Tawbah* 9:5)<sup>75</sup> as having abrogated verse 60:8.

To critique the abrogation claim we need to first clarify (as

discussed earlier) that the term abrogation (*naskh*) prior to al-Shāfi‘ī’s *Al-Risālah* was used in its broadest sense to mean both specifying as well as substitution. By specifying is meant elucidating the meaning of Qur’anic general words by different linguistic approaches, and by substitution is meant substitution of an earlier Qur’anic rule, *ḥukum*, with a chronologically successive one (as is claimed for verse 60:8 by i.e. Ibn Zayd and Qatādah).<sup>76</sup>

To state that the treatment of people on the basis of kindness and justice has been replaced by a new rule ordering their bloodshed, largely due to their different belief system, needs to be firmly underpinned by clear evidence. However, in respect of verse 60:8, which allows Muslims to treat peaceful people with kindness and justice, there does not exist a single piece of authentic evidence from the Prophet indicating that the verse has been abrogated. This might be the reason behind al-Ṭabarī’s statement that in the case of verse 60:8 the claim of abrogation is unacceptable.<sup>77</sup>

On the other hand, those scholars who support the occurrence of abrogation have set a clear condition for its acceptance. The condition requires an absolute contradiction between two or more verses and the absence of any possible way of reconciliation.<sup>78</sup> However, according to Abū Zahrah such a condition is not applicable to the Qur’an. He states: “Together with a number of scholars, we participated in writing a work of Qur’anic exegesis entitled *Al-Muntakhab*. In our entire work on the Qur’an, we did not find any two verses that can be regarded as contradictory to each other.”<sup>79</sup>

Therefore, the question arising is whether the kind and just treatment of people, expressed by verse 60:8, contradicts the Qur’anic imperative of fighting? The answer lies in the textual context of 60:8. Verse 60:9 immediately following 60:8 states:

Allah only forbids you, with regard to those who fight you for (your) Faith, and drive you out of your homes, and support (others) in driving you out, from turning to them (for friendship and protection). It is such as turn to

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them (in these circumstances), that do wrong. (Qur'an *al-Mumtahinah* 60:9)

This verse explicitly clarifies that the prohibition of kind treatment is directed against those who are engaged in fighting Muslims and driving them out of their homes. In contrast verse 60:8 clearly allows Muslims to treat with kindness and justice those people who do not initiate war against them or expel them from their homes. In this way, there is no contradiction between the imperative to fight and the prescription of inclusive kindness towards people, since the former applies only to the people of war, while the latter is related to peaceful people in general.

Therefore, the abrogation claims made by Ibn Zayd and Qatādah in respect of verse 60:8 are untenable, for they contradict the textual context of the verse, the Qur'anic normative principles of warfare, the character of the Prophet, and universally accepted human values. Such claims are also not supported with any authentic evidence. Moreover, the point which is to be noted is that these abrogation claims are attributed to exegetes of the third exegetical generation of the Successors, but not to the Prophet or the Companions. This fact suggests the possibility of the claims having been employed later in the history of interfaith relations as evidence underpinning exclusive attitudes towards religiously different people.

Turning to the second aspect of the analysis of 60:8, which concerns the question of who the people meant to be treated with kindness and justice are, it appears that once again a number of exclusive claims have been made. For instance, Mujāhid claims that the people meant to be treated with kindness and justice are those who had embraced Islam in Makkah, but did not immigrate to Madinah.<sup>80</sup> On the other hand, al-Rāzī states the following:

There is a disagreement about who are those people that 'do not fight you.' However, most of the scholars see that those are the people of covenant, *ahl al-'ahd*, who signed an agreement neither to fight against the Prophet and

Muslims nor to help anybody against them. Actually, it was the tribe of Khuzā'ah that signed an agreement neither to fight against the Prophet nor to drive him out of his homeland. For this reason, those people were treated with kindness and loyalty until the covenant came to its end.<sup>81</sup>

Another opinion mentioned by al-Rāzī is that those people who are meant to be treated with kindness and justice, are women and children.<sup>82</sup> Finally, for Ibn Zayd and Qatādah the people referred to are the peaceful pagans, although for them the verse has been abrogated.

Reviewing the varying opinions, it is evident that all are restricted and thus exclusive in some respects. Mujāhid, Ibn Zayd, and Qatādah's opinion is limited in terms of religious affiliation and thus exclusively restricts treatment with kindness and justice only to Muslims. As for the opinion ascribed by al-Rāzī to most scholars, it restricts treatment with kindness and justice only to people of the covenant, where this kind treatment is limited to the end of the covenant. In this respect, the opinion is exclusive in terms of time and also suggests that the general state of human relationships is war, except in the case of existing a covenant. Whereas, according to the second opinion mentioned by al-Rāzī, kind and just treatment is limited only to women and children and thus is exclusive in terms of gender and age.

Hence the feature common to all exclusive based opinions is the act of giving specific meaning to the general statement (and meaning) of verse 60:8. However, according to one of the most important rules of Qur'anic exegesis, both legal regulations, *al-ahkām al-shar'īyah*, and reports, *al-akhbār*, retain their general meaning until there comes reason and evidence for giving them a specific one. In the same way, occasions of revelation, *asbāb al-nuzūl*, do not make specific the general meanings of the Qur'anic words.<sup>83</sup> For this reason, throughout his exegetical analysis relying heavily on these rules of Qur'anic exegesis al-Ṭabarī concludes on 60:8 that the people to be treated with kindness and justice are all people of all nations and religions, who neither fight against Muslims nor expel them from their homes. This is

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due to the fact that the verse should remain in its general sense, since there is nothing to specify it.<sup>84</sup> In favor of this inclusive opinion are scholars such as al-Zamakhsharī and Ibn Ashur.<sup>85</sup>

Therefore, the Qur'anic exegetical rules lead us to the conclusion that the scope of verse 60:8 inclusively covers all peaceful people and thus encourages Muslims to deal with all human beings on the basis of kindness and justice. Conversely, the scope of the verse cannot accommodate only those people who initiate war against Muslims or drive them out of their homes.

Having proved that verse 60:8 has not been abrogated and that it has an active meaning, as well as being inclusive in scope, it is important to study the meaning of the verse with particular focus on the verb *tabarrūhum*. This has been translated as “dealing kindly” but of course its subtle and accurate meaning has been lost in translation, because Qur'anic Arabic has great depth of meaning and when translated from Arabic into any other language, nuances conveyed by the original are not always fully transmitted. An approximation can only be given.

The verb *tabarrūhum* is a key word for understanding the Qur'anic attitude towards integrity as a central ethical element in the process of normative religious pluralism. In order to examine the meaning of *tabarrūhum* in depth, we need to first methodologically explore the Qur'anic usage of this word. In this regard, it should be mentioned that the root morpheme of *tabarrūhum* is *b-r-r*, the infinitive *barra*, and the noun *birr*. The adjective of *barra* is *barrun*, and the plural of this is *abrār* or *bararah*.

To examine the Qur'anic usage of the root *b-r-r* we begin with surah *al-Baqarah* in which the meaning of *birr* is defined in two separate places. The first Qur'anic definition of *birr* occurs in the following verse:

It is not righteousness (*birr*) that ye turn your faces towards East or West; but it is righteousness (*birr*) – 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,

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for those who ask, and for the ransom of slaves; to be steadfast in prayer, and practice regular charity; to fulfil the contracts which ye 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 God-fearing. (Qur'an *al-Baqarah* 2:177)

In this verse the noun of *birr* is translated as “righteousness,” whereas in 60:8, where the word exists in the form of a verb (*tabarrūhum*), it has been translated as “dealing kindly.” This again proves the complexity of the word in terms of its translation from Arabic. However, observing the Qur’anic definition of *birr* in verse 2:177, we see that the Qur’an begins definition of *birr* by a process of elimination. The verse states that the meaning of *birr* is not that people turn their faces towards East and West, but *birr* is that people remain true and sincere towards God, themselves, and their fellow-men. In this respect, Asad remarks that in the verse “the Qur’an stresses the principle that mere compliance with outward forms does not fulfil the requirements of piety.”<sup>86</sup> Therefore, according to the verse, *birr* is a notion based on the inward dimensions of humanity’s dealing with God, people, themselves, and others. Thus, *birr* requires that any action should proceed from truthfulness and integrity. Accordingly, *birr* loses its true meaning if implemented on the basis of formalism.

In the Qur’an’s second definition of *birr* (correcting the wrong perception some had adopted concerning it at the time of the Prophet) it points out:

...It is no virtue (*birr*) if ye enter your houses from the back: It is virtue (*birr*) if ye fear Allah. Enter houses through the proper doors: And fear Allah. That ye may prosper. (Qur’an *al-Baqarah* 2:189)

*Birr* here is translated into English as “virtue.” What is more important, however, is the fact that the Qur’an underlines again the meaning of *birr* in terms of its inward dimensions. The historical background of the verse makes known that some people

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at the time of the Prophet had a perception that it was unlawful to enter their houses from the front and proper door after performing pilgrimage and this tradition or rather superstition was regarded as a sort of *birr*. Thus, they insisted on having special entrances at the back of their houses, from where pilgrims could enter.<sup>87</sup> However, the Qur'an corrects this wrong perception by emphasizing the meaning of *birr* to be not about the method of entering houses, but about fearing God. In this way, the Qur'an once again stipulates that *birr* cannot be restricted to the outwards dimensions of certain actions.

The root *b-r-r* exists also in the form of an adjective in two verses of surah Maryam:

And kind (*barran*) to his parents, and he was not overbearing or rebellious.  
(Qur'an *Maryam* 19:14)

“(He) hath made me kind (*barran*) to my mother, and not overbearing or miserable.” (Qur'an *Maryam* 19:32)

*Barran* in both verses has been translated as “kind” and is mentioned in relation to the prophets Yaḥyā (John) and Jesus, respectively. Both prophets are described as *barran* in terms of their dealing with their parents. In this case, *barran* indicates a sincere and respectful way of dealing with parents. For this reason, it is known among Arabs that the expression *birru al-wālidayn* (commonly used by them) indicates a sincere and respectful relationship between children and their parents. The Qur'an uses the adjective *barran* to describe prophets Jesus and Yaḥyā's sincere and respectful behavior towards their parents. Semantically thus the meaning of *barran* conveyed is not one of double standards or formalism, meaning in turn that this latter type of behavior towards non-Muslims, who are peaceful to us, is not accepted.

As mentioned earlier the adjective of *barra* is *barrun*, and the plural of this is *abrār* which is used as a description of the inhabitants of Paradise: “As for the Righteous (*abrār*), they will be in

bliss” (Qur’an *al-Infīṭār* 82:13). The inhabitants of Paradise are described as *abrār* due to their sincere and truthful compliance with God’s commands.

In the same way, Angels are described as *bararah*, which is a second plural form of *b-r-r*: “Honourable and Pious and Just” (Qur’an *‘Abasa* 80:16). *Bararah* has been translated here as “pious and just.” The description of Angels as *bararah* is due to their sincere and truthful worshiping of God.

Therefore, the root morpheme *b-r-r* in its different grammatical forms has been translated into English as: “dealing kindly,” “kind,” “righteousness,” “righteous,” “virtue,” “pious and just.” However, as the analysis has shown the Qur’anic usage of *b-r-r* indicates also honesty and truthfulness in actions. Conversely, the Qur’anic usage of *b-r-r* has also shown that the meaning of this word cannot accommodate double standards, hypocrisy, and false diplomacy in terms of relationships. Correspondingly, the lexicographer Ibn Fāris confirms that one of the meanings of *b-r-r* is truthfulness, *ṣidq*, as well as honesty in love.<sup>88</sup>

In sum analysis of verse 60:8 has demonstrated that its status is *muḥkam* (not abrogated) and that it is inclusive in terms of human relationships. Thus, the verse prescribes an ethical norm of treating peaceful people on the basis of love and integrity. Moreover, the occurrence of the word *tabarrūhum* in the verse excludes any dishonest, manipulative, and false diplomatic behavior to be enacted towards other people, reaching its culmination at the end of the verse, wherein the treatment of religiously different people on the basis of integrity is defined as a way of gaining Gods’ love.

#### [4]

### The Prohibition of Reviling What is Sacred to Others

To revile and to critique are two different things especially as concerns establishing the Qur’an’s fundamental message of the Oneness of God. It is crucially important that an accurate

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distinction be made between Qur'anic descriptive and prescriptive data, particularly while deriving from the Qur'an conceptions of interfaith relations. This is because the Qur'an describes the issue of unbelief and unbelievers for the purpose of providing guidance by revealing the difference between belief and unbelief, but does not prescribe harmful actions towards these people and their belief system, except in the context of oppression and war. In the same way, the Qur'an, with the aim of guidance, repeatedly describes idols and gods other than Allah as not having any power and influence over people's life, but does not prescribe violent action against them, except when belief in these idols or gods is oppressively imposed on people, as in the case of prophet Moses' destruction of the statue of the calf. For this reason, although the Qur'an and Hadith descriptively inform us that Jesus was a human being and only one of God's prophets, and that he was not crucified, neither the Qur'an nor the Hadith prescribe destruction of the cross, which is regarded by Christians as a sacred symbol of their faith. In fact, Prophet Muhammad reveals that Jesus himself, with whom the cross is associated, will come to Earth to destroy it. In this regard Abū Hurayrah reports that the Prophet said:

The Hour will not be established until the son of Mary (i.e. Jesus) descends amongst you as a just ruler; he will break the cross, kill the pigs, and abolish the Jizya tax. Money will be in abundance so nobody will accept it (as charitable gifts).<sup>89</sup>

The question which might arise in this case is why did the Prophet then destroy the idols around the Ka'bah. In this respect, it should be mentioned that there exists not a single authentic piece of evidence proving that the Prophet took any action against Makkah's idols before conquering the city. Authentic evidence recorded by al-Bukhārī however shows 'Abdullāh ibn Mas'ūd reporting the following:

When the Prophet entered Makkah on the day of the Conquest, there were

360 idols around the Kaʿbah. The Prophet started striking them with a stick he had in his hand and was saying: “Truth has come and Falsehood will neither start nor will it reappear.”<sup>90</sup>

The Prophet’s destruction of these idols cannot be regarded as some sort of Islamic normative teaching which allows abuse of what is sacred to others, since on the day the idols were destroyed scarcely anyone remained in Makkah and its surrounding areas who held them as sacred. Thus they were no longer needed in this context. ʿAmr ibn Salimah reports that: “...When Mecca was conquered, then every tribe rushed to embrace Islam...”<sup>91</sup> Moreover, on this day of conquest the leader of Makkah’s pagans Abū Sufyān embraced Islam and proclaimed his loyalty to the Prophet Muhammad.<sup>92</sup> Al-Barāʾ reports that in the same year of the conquest of Makkah, during the battle of Ḥunayn: “...Abū Sufyan ibn al-Ḥārith was holding the white mule of the Prophet by the head, and the Prophet was saying: ‘I am the Prophet undoubtedly, I am the son of ʿAbd al-Muṭṭalib.’”<sup>93</sup>

Even if we want to assume that a number of pagans still remained, we should be aware of the fact that the main religious context in Makkah, after its conquest, was Islam and hence the Kaʿbah, which was not initially established as a sign of the Oneness of God by the prophets Abraham and Ishmael, was not a place for idols. Actually, it is even dubious whether the pagans of Makkah had ever perceived of their idols as being sacred but rather viewed them simply as a means to gain benefit. For instance, the Prophet revealed that Makkah’s pagans knew very well of the truth of the prophets Abraham and Ishmael. In this regard, Ibn ʿAbbās narrates the following:

When Allah’s Apostle arrived at Makkah, he refused to enter the Kaʿbah while there were idols in it. So he ordered that they be taken out. The pictures of (the Prophets) Abraham and Ishmael, holding arrows of divination in their hands, were carried out. The Prophet said: “May Allah ruin them (i.e. infidels) for they knew very well that they (i.e. Abraham and Ishmael) never drew lots by these (divination arrows)”...<sup>94</sup>

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William Watt reaches a similar conclusion with regards to the idols of Makkah not constituting anything sacred for the pagans: "The nomadic Arabs are said to have had many gods, but these do not seem to have meant much to them."<sup>95</sup>

Therefore, the Prophet's removal of the idols from the Ka'bah cannot be employed as legal evidence supporting the act of reviling what is sacred to non-Muslims, since once Makkah had been conquered, no pagans remained. Second, the Ka'bah was not initially built as a place for idols. Third, the Makkan idols do not seem to have been held as sacred in that context.

As for the Qur'anic account which informs us that Abraham destroyed the idols worshipped by the pagans of his tribe, such action also carries no legal implications for Muslims, since the story occurs before the prophethood of Abraham is established, at a time when he was a youth (see Qur'an 21:60).

Now, unlike the Qur'anic descriptive data pertaining to what is sacred to non-Muslims, the Qur'anic prescriptive ethical principles in this respect seem to go further to secure not only the dignity of religiously different people, but to secure also the dignity of what is regarded as sacred to them.<sup>96</sup> On this subject, the Qur'an prescribes to Muslims not to utter any abusive word or to take any insulting action towards what is sacred to others:

Revile not ye those whom they call upon besides Allah, lest they out of spite revile Allah in their ignorance. Thus have We made alluring to each people its own doings. In the end will they return to their Lord, and He shall then tell them the truth of all that they did. (Qur'an *al-An'ām* 6:108)

Interestingly, no abrogation claims have been made for this verse in the sources of Qur'anic exegesis, and the reason for this absence is understandable, since according to the verse, there is an interdependent relation between reviling what is sacred to others and the revilement of Allah. Therefore, it is clear that any abrogation claims would be insensitive to the possibility of Allah being reviled. Where the difficulty lies however is in the exegetical understanding, in some quarters, of the root cause of the prohibition forbidding the abuse of what is sacred to others.

Generally speaking, exegetes agree that verse 6:108 has not been abrogated and hence its ruling remains valid for all generations.<sup>97</sup> Consequently, this means that it is not permissible for a Muslim to abuse what is regarded as sacred to others. Yet, the motivation for the prohibition has been defined in a great number of Qur'anic exegesis sources as diplomacy, rather than as an unchangeable ethical value. For instance, al-Zamakhsharī regards the reviling of what is sacred to others basically as true behavior and even as a way of worshipping God, but since there is a fear that such behavior could lead to a revilement of Allah, it is prohibited.<sup>98</sup> In the same vein al-Rāzī observes:

If somebody asks: knowing that it is a principle of worshipping God, how the revilement of idols could be prohibited? The answer is that: although, this is a way of worshipping God, it is prohibited, since it results in reviling God and His Prophet, and results also in emerging many other evils.<sup>99</sup>

Moreover, al-Qurṭubī states:

Providing that unbelievers are strong and powerful, and thus it is feared that they would revile Islam, or the Prophet, or Allah, then it is not permissible for a Muslim to revile the religious symbols of unbelievers, their religion, or churches...In this way, the verse 6:108 serves as evidence that a possessor of a certain right should abandon his or her right, if it harms the religion.<sup>100</sup>

Another opinion has been strongly linked to the process of inviting people to Islam (*da'wah*). For example, Ibn Ashur assumes that the prohibition of reviling idols allows Muslims to fully engage in calling pagans to Islam, and thus to prove their paganism as wrong.<sup>101</sup> More vividly, al-Sharawi devotes his entire commentary on verse 6:108 to the process of calling people to Islam, arguing that the verse conveys a necessary method of *da'wah*. In other words, the reason for the prohibition, according to al-Sharawi, is accommodation to human nature in the interests of inviting others to Islam. He observes that encouraging others to embrace Islam is so extremely difficult a task that

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any additional behavior insulting those we are inviting would make it impossible.<sup>102</sup>

To summarise these opinions it would appear that reviling what is sacred to others is considered a Muslim's right, naturally true behavior, and a principle of worshipping Allah. The only reason it is avoided is to avert any reprisal in the form of revilement against Allah and to protect *da'wah* efforts from being affected negatively.

In other words this position is considered a diplomatic one rather than an unchangeable ethical value. The prohibition of reviling what is sacred to others contradicts in my opinion previously discussed foundations of normative religious pluralism, namely freedom of belief, human dignity and integrity. At this point, in order to judge whether the prohibition is based on a Qur'anic ethical value or diplomacy, it is important to explore verse 6:108 linguistically.

The first thing to note is that the verse begins with a command to Muslims not to revile those whom people call upon besides Allah. The verb conveying this prohibition is in the imperative form – *lā tasubbū* – the meaning of which is not confined to revilement, but goes further to mean humiliation.<sup>103</sup> In fact, there is a clear difference between the act of criticising what is sacred to others on the basis of compelling arguments, and the act of humiliating what is regarded sacred through use of emotionally rude language and insulting words. Of course, it is the latter which is the focus of *lā tasubbū* and thus is prohibited by the Qur'an. So, the question arises how on earth can emotional humiliation of what is deemed sacred to others be regarded as a principle of worshipping God? The implication being that the Qur'an and the Prophet would otherwise allow Muslims to abuse what others hold sacred and thus knowingly insult and humiliate them. Obviously, statements of this kind contradict the overall Qur'anic context, Islamic ethics, and the behavior of the Prophet. For this reason, observing that the imperative of 6:108 is ethically not applicable to the Prophet because he would never have done so anyway, Ibn Ashur remarks that *lā tasubbū* is

directed at Muslims, not the Prophet, since his great character would never allow for the abuse and humiliation of others.<sup>104</sup>

Another core issue in terms of the linguistic analysis is the use of the relative clause “those whom,” *alladhīn*. It is commonly known that the relative clause *alladhīn* is used in the Arabic language to refer only to intellectual beings. However, in verse 6:108 *alladhīn* is used with reference to idols, which the Qur’an principally defines as having no intellectual power. Why has this been done? Ibn ‘Aṭīyyah was the first to partly answer this question, suggesting that *alladhīn* here is used to underscore the conviction of unbelievers that their idols have intellectual power when in fact they obviously don’t.<sup>105</sup> This subtle divine consideration for the convictions of others is important to note in the context of our discussion on the root cause of the prohibition. In other words if God Himself has shown consideration for the pagans’ conviction as regards their idols, then for humanity the motive force behind the prohibition of reviling the gods of others should surely be identified as an ethical parameter related to freedom of belief and human dignity. Hence, in the context of the prohibition of reviling idols, the divine usage of the relative clause *alladhīn* in respect of non-intellectual beings has clear ethical dimensions. Of course let us be clear reviling idols is one thing but engaging in constructive conversation about the nature of these effigies, or this form of worship is something entirely different and there should be no confusion between the two.

The next key linguistic aspect is the existence of the conjunction *fā’* attached to the verb *fayasubbū Allāh*. The English translation of this part reads “lest they out of spite revile Allah” (6:108). In fact, the existence of the letter *fā’*, meaning lest, attached to the verb *yasubbū*, revile, can be regarded as the main reason for adopting the diplomatic behavior argument in terms of the motivation behind the prohibition. This is largely due to the fact that one of the main functions of the letter *fā’* in the Arabic language is to express a cause and effect relationship, *fā’ al-sababiyyah*. Actually, in the case of verse 6:108 exegetes are

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unanimous that *fā'* expresses a relationship of cause and effect, meaning that if Muslims revile the idols/deities of others this would lead to a reciprocal revilement of Allah by the pagans, which in turn would affect negatively the call to Islam. This being seen as the root cause of the prohibition, what is understood from it is the view (held by the latter) that the act of reviling other people's deities/idols is a legal right, a way of worshipping Allah, and morally acceptable behavior, which is not to be put into practice however, because of the harmful consequences of Allah being reviled and *da'wah* being hindered.

This assumption and conclusion can be challenged. The conjunction *fā'*, seems to indicate the inevitability of negative ramifications emerging necessarily from the violation of freedoms of belief and human dignity. The following example gives a relevant understanding of the function of *fā'*: an imperative is directed to "Y" not to kill child "X," lest the father take revenge on "Y." It would be morally unacceptable to assume that the root cause for the prohibition of child "X's" killing is the fear of "Y" being killed in revenge. Obviously the reason for the prohibition is to maintain (and underscore) the sanctity of human life with revenge on "Y" being one of the adverse consequences emerging necessarily from the violation of the right of "X" to exist. Taking this understanding to verse 6:108, it is apparent that it is ethically more accurate to determine *fā'* as an indication of the inevitability of negative effects being caused by the violation of freedom of belief and human dignity, which should be regarded as the root motivation for the prohibition of reviling what is sacred to others.

Another argument in favor of this interpretation (that the root cause of the prohibition is freedom of belief and human dignity, is based on the second part of the verse 6:108: "Thus have We made alluring to each people its own doings" (6:108). The Arabic word *zayyannā*, which means "we made it appear alluring," reflects a certain feature of human nature to consider its own actions and beliefs as true. Commenting on this part of the verse Qutub states that "it is human nature that when a person

does something, whether good or bad, he thinks that he has done well and he defends his actions.”<sup>106</sup> Similarly, Asad points out that “Thus have We made alluring to each people its own doings” implies that:

It is in the nature of man to regard the beliefs which have been implanted in him from childhood, and which he now shares with his social environment, as the only true and possible ones, with the result that a polemic against those beliefs often tends to provoke a hostile psychological reaction.<sup>107</sup>

More strikingly, al-Tabatabai observes that verse 6:108 introduces a religious ethic, through which the dignity of anything that people hold as sacred is protected from humiliation. This is because human beings defend by nature the dignity of what they hold as sacred.<sup>108</sup>

Therefore, providing that beliefs are related to the intellectual nature of humans, the prohibition of reviling what is sacred to others should be seen as an unchangeable ethical parameter, regardless of whether or not there is a possibility that other people could revile Allah or they would not embrace Islam. Thus, there should be a clear-cut distinction between human rights, which are based on unchangeable ethics, and any strategy of embrace or diplomacy.

The textual context in which verse 6:108 exists, serves as additional evidence for the view that freedom of belief and dignity are the root cause for the prohibition of reviling what is sacred to others. Verse 6:107 immediately preceding the prohibition verse clearly attests the right to freedom of belief:

If it had been Allah’s plan, they would not have taken false gods: but We made thee not one to watch over their doings, nor art thou set over them to dispose of their affairs. (Qur’an *al-An’ām* 6:107)

In respect of this verse, Rida states that it “authenticates the right of freedom of belief in an unprecedented way.”<sup>109</sup> Furthermore, he points out that the textual context of the prohibition of

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reviling people's beliefs pertains to the fact that humans have been created on the basis of intellectual diversity. This means that it is impossible for them to agree upon one single religion. For this reason, God sent all His prophets to guide people, but not to impose on them a certain belief. In the same way, God did not allow any of His prophets to violate humanity's freedom of belief, since humans have been endowed with this right directly by God Himself, who if He had willed would have made all people believe in one single religion.<sup>110</sup> Therefore, the textual context of 6:108 also does not favor the opinion which holds the revilement of people's gods an Islamic principle, a way of worship, and a Muslim's right.

The final argument supporting the thesis of the prohibition being a perpetual ethical value set by the Qur'an, emerges from the historical context of the Prophet's life which serves as the best interpretation of Qur'anic texts. In this regard, al-Bukhārī and Muslim transmit features of the Prophet's character in direct relation to the historical argument mentioned above. Al-Bukhārī narrates from Anas ibn Mālik that:

Allah's Apostle was neither a Fahish (one who had a bad tongue) nor a Sabbaba (one who abuses others), and he used to say while admonishing somebody, "What is wrong with him? May dust be on his forehead!"<sup>111</sup>

In another description of the Prophet's character, Muslim narrates from Abū Hurayrah:

It was said to Allah's Messenger (may peace be upon him): Curse the polytheists, whereupon he said: "I have not been sent as curser, but I have been sent as a mercy."<sup>112</sup>

These features of the Prophet's character are attested by the Qur'an in which he is described as: "a mercy for all creatures" (21:107); standing "on an exalted standard of character" (68:4); and having "a beautiful pattern (of conduct)" (33:21). The Prophet is unanimously considered the best interpreter of the

Qur'an, he lived it and gave it a living meaning. Appealing to the reality of his own behavior therefore and knowing this to be best moral example set for mankind, any claim that the revilement of what is sacred to others is an Islamic norm is simply not justified by historical facts and hence rejected.

In brief, the arguments presented throughout this section suggest that the Qur'an prohibits the revilement of what is sacred to others on the basis of an unchangeable ethical value emerging from basic human rights, namely freedom of belief and dignity. Thus, the Qur'an sets an important ethical principle aiming to secure not only the dignity of religiously different people, but also what is sacred to them. As for any act of abusive behavior towards people's beliefs and gods, it cannot, by any means, be perceived as a Muslim legal right, Islamic principle, or way of worshipping Allah. Such perceptions, found in a large number of Qur'anic exegesis sources, are more likely to have emerged from specific historical circumstances of Muslim history as well as lack of distinguishing between Qur'anic descriptive and prescriptive data in relation to non-Muslims and their beliefs.

[5]

### Forgiveness

Even though previously examined Qur'anic ethical principles provide solid evidence for the Qur'an's recognition of normative religious pluralism as a value system, it is important to examine the Qur'an's stance towards forgiveness which is another ethical element. The importance of forgiveness in the process of religious pluralism arises from the fact that human relationships often suffer from levels of transgression. In situations such as these it is the ethical norm of forgiveness that reconciles otherwise broken relationships serving as a healing factor to restore things to their right path. Many Qur'anic exegetical sources however limit the scope of forgiveness only to Muslims. The main argument in defence of this interpretation is again based on either abrogation claims or the issue of specification with

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regards to the general sense of Qur'anic words without recourse to reason.

To analyse these claims I will examine three main Qur'anic aspects concerning the issue of forgiveness. The first is related to an exploration of those Qur'anic words expressing the meaning of the English noun forgiveness. The second is linked to the Qur'anic application of forgiveness to non-Muslim groups in society, while the third concerns elucidating the dialectical relationship between human forgiveness, God's forgiveness, and righteousness.

### Qur'anic Words Expressing the Meaning of Forgiveness: *gh-f-r*, *'a-f-ā*, *ṣ-f-ḥ*

With regard to aspect one, the first thing to mention is that the Qur'an contains different words to convey the meaning of forgiveness. Secondly it is important to note that one of the most commonly words used to convey forgiveness (*s-m-ḥ*) in the Arabic language today exists nowhere in the entire Qur'an (which incidentally must not be taken as reason to incorrectly conclude that the Qur'an ignores the issue of forgiveness). In fact the Qur'an uses other terms which express the meaning of forgiveness in a more accurate and more sensitive way, these being: *gh-f-r*, *'a-f-ā*, *ṣ-f-ḥ*, and *'a-ṣ-r-d*. As the latter (*'a-ṣ-r-d*) is used figuratively as a metonymy for forgiveness in some places in the Qur'an examination of this is beyond the scope of this work.

According to Ibn Fāris the first Qur'anic linguistic root *gh-f-r*, conveys the meaning of cover, *ṣatr*.<sup>113</sup> Further explanation is given by al-Aṣḥānī, who states that *gh-f-r* means to cover something in order to protect it from becoming contaminated.<sup>114</sup> More importantly, al-Aṣḥānī distinguishes between *gh-f-r* the doer of which is God, and *gh-f-r* the doer of which is a human being. In respect of the former, the meaning is that God protects His servants from punishment, whereas in terms of the latter, this means merely to excuse.<sup>115</sup>

As far as the second Qur'anic root *ʿa-f-ā* is concerned, Ibn Fāris defines it as either “to leave something or to seek it.”<sup>116</sup> According to al-Aṣfahānī, however, it is to turn away with the aim of removing a person's guilt.<sup>117</sup>

With regard to the third Qur'anic word *ṣ-f-ḥ*, Ibn Fāris considers its accurate and precise meaning to be breadth, *ʿard*,<sup>118</sup> while al-Aṣfahānī defines it as both not to cast reproach on a person and to show positive behavior in response to an offensive action. In this way, *ṣ-f-ḥ* is considered as having a higher ethical level than *ʿa-f-ā*.<sup>119</sup>

Therefore, semantic analysis demonstrates that Qur'anic words used to express forgiveness are not limited to the visible act of reconciliation, but rather penetrate to its inward dimensions giving the action depth of meaning. In this way, the Qur'anic concept of forgiveness is seen as directed not only towards reconciliation between conflicting parties, but also to their mutual development and improvement.

### **The Qur'anic Application of the Notion of Forgiveness to Non-Muslims**

Examining next the Qur'anic ethical application of forgiveness to non-Muslim groups I focus on the following two main groups: the polytheists and the People of the Book. Concerning the polytheists the Qur'an states the following:

Tell those who believe, to forgive those who do not look forward to the Days of Allah. It is for Him to recompense (for good or ill) each People according to what they have earned. (Qur'an *al-Jāthiyah* 45:14)

The verse contains an imperative command ordering believers to forgive those who do not believe in God. Its revelation in the Makkan historical context together with the content of the surah in which it occurs (*al-Jāthiyah*) would seem to provide tenable reason for limiting the scope of this forgiveness to polytheists only. However, the general description following the

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relative pronoun – “who do not look forward to the Days of Allah” – allows for all people identified by that description, including atheists, to be accommodated.

Therefore, the verse generally conveys that believers are ordered to forgive those who do not have a hope in God. The Qur'anic word used for forgiveness in this instance is *gh-f-r*. According to semantic analysis, it implies that believers should excuse those who do not have a hope in God and cover with patience any offensive behavior emerging from their side. In doing this, believers are promised they will be rewarded by God for their forgiveness.

Now, it is worth quoting al-Ṭabarī's comment on the verse, in which he makes the following claim: “The verse [45:14] is abrogated by God's command to believers to kill pagans. In fact, we state that the verse is abrogated, since there is a consensus among exegetes on this matter.”<sup>120</sup> Looking at the comment, it becomes clear that al-Ṭabarī is in fact making two claims: abrogation of the verse as well as a consensus of exegetes on the abrogation. The implication of al-Ṭabarī's statement is that the ethical norm of forgiveness towards pagans has been substituted by the imperative of fighting them. In the following discussion I will, therefore, critically examine al-Ṭabarī's statement as well as the consensus claimed.

To begin with there exists no authentic occasion of revelation<sup>121</sup> for verse 45:14 nor an authentic comment from the first generation exegetes, in particular Ibn ʿAbbās.<sup>122</sup> Thus the absence of authentic evidence attributed to the Prophet makes the claim of abrogation null and void.

More particularly, al-Ṭabarī's main argument for abrogation is the following narration attributed to Ibn ʿAbbās:

I [al-Ṭabarī] was told, *ḥaddathanī*, by Muḥammad ibn Saʿd, who said: I was told by my father, who said: I was told by my uncle, who said: I was told by my father who narrated from his father, who narrated from Ibn ʿAbbās his comment on the verse “Tell those who believe, to forgive those who do not look forward to the Days of Allah. It is for Him to recompense

(for good or ill) each People according to what they have earned” (Qur’an *al-Jāthiyah* 45:14). [Ibn ‘Abbās] said: the Prophet – peace be upon him – was facing the pagans’ offensive treatment towards him with forgiveness. Then, God commanded his Prophet to fight all pagans. In this way the verse [45:14] was abrogated.<sup>123</sup>

This narration serves as major evidence for the abrogation statement with regards to verse 45:14. Following expert research of the narration’s chain, Ahmad Shakir however concludes:

This is one of the most common chains of transmission found in al-Ṭabarī’s *tafsīr*. This chain of transmission consists of weak and not trustworthy transmitters coming from one family. The chain is known among exegetes as *tafsīr al-‘awfi* because the transmitter narrating from Ibn ‘Abbās is called ‘Aṭīyah al-‘Awfi.<sup>124</sup>

So the abrogation claim is not justified given that the chain of transmission used in its defence is weak and identified as inauthentic. So it cannot be used as evidence for substituting the ethical norm of forgiveness with that of the imperative to fight the pagans.

Another argument against al-Ṭabarī’s abrogation statement can be found in the exegetical materials succeeding his work. For example, al-Zamakhsharī states in an uncertain way that: “It was said that the verse [45:14] was revealed before the verse of combat and then was abrogated.”<sup>125</sup> Al-Zamakhsharī’s expression “it was said” does not support al-Ṭabarī’s claim of consensus on the abrogation of verse 45:14. More explicitly, al-Rāzī remarks that “it is more acceptable to understand the verse [45:14] as a prescription of facing any offensive actions with forgiveness and leaving insignificant disputes.”<sup>126</sup> It is obvious how al-Rāzī relates the verse to the issue of morality and good deeds and thus treats the abrogation claim with skepticism. In a similar way, Ibn Ashur and al-Tabatabai connect the verse to the ethical norm of forgiveness, and correspondingly do not mention anything pertaining to its abrogation.<sup>127</sup>

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On the basis of these arguments, al-Ṭabarī's statement of abrogation, and the consensus claimed for it, appear untenable. The arguments are in fact in favor of those identifying the verse (45:14) as conveying an ethical norm of forgiveness towards non-Muslims, which cannot be subject to abrogation. Thus, the only way to reconcile al-Ṭabarī's view with the latter perspective is to consider the term abrogation as a synonym of specifying rather than substituting. In this case, al-Ṭabarī's statement would mean that the scope of forgiveness is limited to those who are peaceful among the pagans (polytheists), whereas forgiveness is excluded from those who wage war against Muslims. In fact, this understanding of the verse is the consensus opinion among exegetes. However, al-Ṭabarī's general statement, which lacks clarification, leaves ample room for confusion and speculation in terms of human relations. For this reason, there was need for a critical examination as well as clarification of al-Ṭabarī's claims, he is after all regarded as one of the most important and influential exegetes.

Another verse, revealed in the context of the polytheists at Makkah, orders the Prophet to adopt the virtue of forgiveness towards them:

We created not the heavens, the earth, and all between them, but for just ends. And the Hour is surely coming (when this will be manifest). So overlook (*faṣṣah*) (any human faults) with gracious forgiveness (*al-ṣafḥ*).  
(Qur'an *al-Hijr* 15:85)

On the background of God's promise to recompense justly everyone in the hereafter, the Prophet is commanded to forgive polytheists. The Qur'anic word used for forgiveness here is *ṣ-f-ḥ*, which exists in two different grammatical forms in the verse. The first form is the imperative *faṣṣah*, whereas the second is the noun *al-ṣafḥ* described as beautiful, *al-jamīl*. The literal translation of the Qur'anic expression thus reads *faṣṣah al-ṣafḥ al-jamīl*, "so forgive with the beautiful forgiveness." Thus, the verse conveys that the Prophet was ordered to leave the offensive behavior

of the polytheists to God, Who is just, and to face them with beautiful forgiveness instead.

We next examine the historical aspect of verse 15:85 to further assess the claims of those who choose to interpret its call to forgiveness in a more restricted and negative way. In this regard, al-Ṭabarī transmits from Qatādah, al-Ḍaḥḥāk, Mujāhid, and Sufyān ibn ʿUyaynah that verse 15:85 was abrogated, meaning thus that the imperative to forgive polytheists was substituted with the imperative to fight them.<sup>128</sup>

Critiquing this argument the first thing to note is that the abrogation claim only emerges from the second generation of exegetes and hence is neither attributed to the Prophet nor to his Companions. This fact alone is sufficient evidence to reject assertions of abrogation since the act of determining a certain verse as abrogated cannot be based on reasoning.<sup>129</sup> Even so, it is not enough as Mujāhid is an important exegete who revised the entire Qurʾan thirty times in front of Ibn ʿAbbās,<sup>130</sup> and as such the claim attributed to him needs to be examined.

The chain of transmission through which the claim of abrogation is attributed to Mujāhid is as follows:

[Al-Ṭabarī says:] We were told by, *ḥaddathanā*, Ibn Wakī<sup>c</sup>,<sup>131</sup> who said: we were told by my father, who narrated from Isrāʾīl, who narrated from Jābir, who narrated from Mujāhid, who said: “*Faṣṣaḥ al-ṣaḥḥ al-jamīl*,” “so forgive with the beautiful forgiveness,” it was before the combat, *al-qitāl*.<sup>132</sup>

With reference to Ibn Wakī<sup>c</sup>, the person from whom al-Ṭabarī receives the information concerning Mujāhid’s claim of verse 15:85’s abrogation, al-Dhahabī remarks in his *Mīzān al-ʾItidāl fī Naqd al-Rijāl*, that Sufyān ibn Wakī<sup>c</sup> used to be a reliable transmitter until his clerk began intentionally to change some of his words. At this point because of the inability to distinguish between Ibn Wakī<sup>c</sup>’s own words and those the clerk had written, Ibn Wakī<sup>c</sup> was defined as an unreliable transmitter. For this reason, al-Bukhārī was skeptical about Ibn Wakī<sup>c</sup>’s narration, and

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Abū Zur'ah states that he was accused of lying.<sup>133</sup> In the same way, Ibn Ḥajar al-ʿAsqalānī states that al-Nisā'ī defined Ibn Wakī' as an untrustworthy transmitter, and sometimes even as “a nothing.” Likewise, Abū Dāwūd refused to narrate anything from Ibn Wakī'.<sup>134</sup>

Another important fact to be taken into consideration is that al-Ṭabarī met Ibn Wakī' in Baghdad approximately six years before Ibn Wakī's death in the year 247 AH,<sup>135</sup> while al-Ṭabarī's first arrival in Baghdad was approximately 241 AH.<sup>136</sup> This means that al-Ṭabarī heard of Mujāhid's verse 15:85 abrogation claim from Ibn Wakī' late in his life, when the corruption of his narrations had already occurred.

Under these circumstances the claim of abrogation attributed to Mujāhid cannot be accepted as evidence to validate the substitution of forgiveness with the imperative to fight. It also might be the reason why Abu al-Nail in his work *Tafsīr al-Imām Mujāhid Ibn Jabr* did not include the abrogation claims as Mujāhid's interpretation of the verse.

Another argument in favor of the universality of “beautiful” forgiveness is that exegetes after al-Ṭabarī did not support abrogation claims concerning it. For instance, al-Zamakhsharī states: “It was said that it [*faṣṣaḥ*, forgive, 15:85] is abrogated by the verse of the sword.<sup>137</sup> However, it is possible that the verse is related to the pattern of good character, in this case it [the verse] cannot be defined as abrogated.”<sup>138</sup> More explicitly, al-Rāzī states the following: “It was said that the verse [15:85] is abrogated, but it is far from being true, since the purpose of the verse is to encourage the model of good character and forgiveness. Then, how it could be abrogated?”<sup>139</sup>

Similarly, Ibn Ashur, al-Tabatabai, and al-Sharawi relate the verse to the achievement of good character, and consequently do not regard it as abrogated.<sup>140</sup>

Further arguments can be derived from the syntactic structure of the imperative *faṣṣaḥ*, forgive, followed by the noun “forgiveness” described as “beautiful,” *al-ṣaḥḥ al-jamīl*. In fact, the syntactic structure of the sentence *faṣṣaḥ al-ṣaḥḥ al-jamīl*, “so

forgive with the beautiful forgiveness,” relates the act of forgiveness to three main aspects, with none of them note in favor of the abrogation claim. These three are first that forgiveness is linked to the Islamic belief system through the letter *fā'*, meaning so, which is attached to the imperative *iṣfaḥ*, forgive. The letter *fā'* here indicates *tafri'*, branching. It means that the information preceding the letter *fā'* triggers the imperative succeeding it. Therefore, attached to the imperative verb *iṣfaḥ*, forgive, and succeeding God's promise of just recompense, the letter *fā'*, introduces a particular, psychological context in which the imperative of forgiveness should be conducted. In other words, *fā'* indicates that the response to any offensive behavior on the basis of forgiveness does not emerge from the inability to respond correspondingly, but it emerges from the belief in God's promise of just reward.

The second aspect determines the act of forgiveness as a virtue and ethical value through the description of forgiveness as beautiful, *jamīl*. Although, forgiveness in itself is regarded as a positive act, the Qur'an describes such an act as beautiful. The attachment of the adjective “beautiful,” to the act prescribed aims to underline forgiveness as a virtue and an ethical norm, and thus to distinguish it from any type of diplomatic and pragmatic behavior.

As for the third aspect, this relates forgiveness to human nature through the usage of the definite article *al* so we have *al-ṣafḥ al-jamīl*, the beautiful forgiveness. Actually, this is the only place in the entire Qur'an, that is in verse 15:85, where such an expression exists. The function of the definite article here is to indicate identification, *ʿahd*. In a practical sense, it means that the act of beautiful forgiveness is naturally identifiable to humans by their nature.

Therefore, on the basis of the arguments presented, the imperative of forgiveness cannot be considered as abrogated. On the contrary, forgiveness is prescribed inclusively to all people as an ethical value emerging from the Islamic belief system and standing in accordance with human nature.

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The Qur'anic prescription to forgive in the context of polytheists appears in a third instance which bears close affinity to the previous two cases:

But turn away from them, and say "Peace!" But soon shall they know!  
(Qur'an *al-Zukhruf* 43:89)

This verse was revealed in Makkah in the context of polytheists. The Qur'anic word used is again *ṣ-f-ḥ* (analysed previously) but here it is translated as "turn away from them," and does not seem to be in accordance with the second imperative to "say peace." The question is how to implement peace when turning away from those one is to bring peace to? In this regard, al-Ṭabarī seems to provide an explanation pointing out that the meaning is to turn away from their harm, and to say "peace."<sup>141</sup> Al-Ṭabarī's explanation corresponds to the semantic meaning of *ṣ-f-ḥ*, since to turn away from harm means not to respond to harm by harm, but to ignore it and say "peace," instead. In this case, the difference between turning away from people and turning away from their inappropriate behavior is obvious. In this way, the general meaning of the verse should be understood as: pardon them and turn away from their polemical disputes by saying "peace."

The word "peace," *salām*, is worthy of special attention in the context of forgiveness. Grammatically speaking, the natural grammatical state of the word "peace" (*salām*), in this verse should be in the objective (*manṣūb*) case since it occurs after the imperative verb "say." However, the word exists syntactically in a nominative (*marfūʿ*) state, *salāmun*. Knowing that one of the functions of the grammatical nominative state is to indicate a constant stability,<sup>142</sup> the shift from the objective to the nominative state for the word "peace," (*salām*), can be regarded as a sign of a constant, interdependent relationship between forgiveness and peace.

Therefore, verse 43:89 dialectically relates the act of forgiveness to two notions: the avoidance of harm and the realisation of

peace. Thus, the dialectical relationship between forgiveness, harm, and peace allows neither restricting the act of forgiveness exclusively to a certain party or determining such a value as subject to abrogation.

Turning from the homogeneous context of Makkah to the multicultural society of Madinah, we discover that despite the political power and dominance of Muslims in Madinah, forgiveness remained prescribed as a constant ethical value. In this respect, during the whole Madinan period, the Qur'an continued to emphasize the act of forgiveness towards all people, and particularly to the People of the Book. More impressively, in surah *al-Mā'idah*, the last chapter revealed in Madinah, the act of forgiveness is prescribed even towards those Children of Israel who had committed deceit and treachery. In this regard, the Qur'an states the following:

But because of their breach of their covenant, We cursed them, and made their hearts grow hard; they change the words from their (right) places and forget a good part of the message that was sent them, nor wilt thou cease to find them – barring a few – ever bent on (new) deceptions: but forgive them, and overlook (their misdeeds): for Allah loveth those who are kind.  
(Qur'an *al-Mā'idah* 5:13)

Revealed historically in the multicultural context of Madinah as well as in the textual context of interfaith issues, this verse orders the Prophet Muhammad to forgive even those Jews who had lost their honesty and loyalty to people and God Himself. The Qur'anic words used to express the meaning of forgiveness in the verse are *ʿa-f-ā* and *ṣ-f-ḥ*. In addition to what has already been discussed regarding the meaning of these words, the act of forgiveness in 5:13 is linked to the notion of *iḥsān*, kindness, the implementation of which leads to God's love. Thus, the verse imparts that forgiveness even towards the behavior of people of deceit and treachery is regarded by the Qur'an as *iḥsān*, kindness, and a way of gaining God's love, as long as such behavior does not turn into physical harm.

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Nevertheless, there have been attempts aiming to invalidate this positive attitude to non-Muslims. For example, Qatādah states that verse 5:13 has been abrogated by verse 9:29.<sup>143</sup> However, al-Ṭabarī presents an argument against Qatādah's claim asserting:

If different Qur'anic verses contradict each other in a way that they cannot be understood together, the case of abrogation is clear and obvious. But, if there is any possible way of reconciling the meaning of those verses, the claim of abrogation must be proved by evidence from God or His Prophet. This is because there is no any other way of knowing whether or not a certain verse has been abrogated. In this manner, there is neither indication nor evidence that the verse 9:29 contradicts the act of forgiveness towards Jews, since the implementation of forgiveness to Jews in their deceit and treachery is permissible except in the case of war and issues surrounding it. Thus, there is no obligation [for Qatādah] to judge that 9:29 has abrogated 5:13.<sup>144</sup>

Although, al-Ṭabarī himself would appear to be inconsistent in applying his conditions of abrogation, the condition of providing evidence from God or His Prophet for any claim of abrogation can be considered as a golden rule for accepting such a dangerous issue. Yet, Qatādah did not attribute his claim to the Prophet nor to any of the Companions. As for the type of abrogation to which al-Ṭabarī refers as clear and obvious due to irreconcilable contradictions in terms of the meaning, Abū Zahrah alongside experts from al-Azhar University have concluded that this type does not exist in the entire Qur'an at all.<sup>145</sup>

Furthermore, a number of classical and modern exegetes affirm that the meaning of verse 5:13 should be confined to the pattern of good morality towards ill-behaved people.<sup>146</sup> The reason for good morality is to seek God's love. In this respect, al-Bayḍawī remarks that the ending of the verse "for Allah loves those who are kind" serves as a motive behind the imperative of forgiveness. He concludes that "forgiveness to a deceitful unbeliever is *iḥsān*, kindness, not to mention to others."<sup>147</sup>

Therefore, by relating dialectically the act of forgiveness to *iḥsān*, kindness, and hence to the love of God, the verse on the one hand attaches new ethico-religious dimensions to the value of forgiveness, and on the other rejects any possibility for claims of abrogation.

Another Madinan verse prescribing forgiveness towards both Jews and Christians occurs in surah *al-Baqarah*:

Quite a number of the People of the Book wish they could turn you (people) back to infidelity after ye have believed, from selfish envy, after the Truth hath become manifest unto them: But forgive and overlook, till Allah accomplish His purpose; for Allah Hath power over all things. (Qur'an *al-Baqarah* 2:109)

The verse exists in a textual context discussing different, unsubstantiated, and hence conflicting claims made by representatives of the People of the Book. In particular, the verse imparts that there is a large number among the People of the Book wishing they could turn the followers of the Prophet Muhammad back to unbelief. Their wish is not established on the basis of compelling arguments and logical reasons, but emerges from a negative human feature, namely selfish envy. In this context, the Qur'an prescribes Muslims to face the negative mental condition of those people with forgiveness. The Qur'anic words used to convey the meaning of forgiveness are *ʿa-f-ā* and *ṣ-f-ḥ*. Al-Sharawi points out that Arabs use *ʿa-f-ā* to say: "*ʿafat al-rīḥu al-athara*," meaning "after the wind had blown, traces printed on the desert sands disappeared." As for *ṣ-f-ḥ*, he states that it means *ṭay al-ṣafaḥāt*, meaning "to turn the page."<sup>148</sup> Thus, according to al-Sharawi's explanation, the forgiveness prescribed here is based on both moral as well as spiritual dimensions, since to "turn the page" merely concerns the moral aspect of forgiveness, whereas to clean all traces of provoked anger from the soul is a spiritual effort.

Now, unlike his position on verse 5:13, where he rejects the claim of abrogation, al-Ṭabarī asserts here that verse 2:109 has

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been abrogated by God's command to Muslims to fight unbelievers, except those who embrace Islam or agree to pay the *jizyah* tax.<sup>149</sup> It appears that al-Ṭabarī is inconsistent when it comes to his view on abrogation. The reasons for such inconsistency are various, but in this particular instance regarding verse 2:109, al-Ṭabarī relies on a narration attributed to Ibn ʿAbbās. In fact, this is the reason why al-Ṭabarī favors abrogation here. He transmits the following narration:

I was told by al-Muthannā, who said: We were told by Abū Ṣāliḥ, who said: I was told by Muʿāwiyah ibn Ṣāliḥ, who narrated from ʿAlī ibn Abī Ṭalḥah, who narrated from Ibn ʿAbbās that God's words – “But forgive and overlook, till Allah accomplishes His purpose: for Allah Hath power over all things” (Qur'an *al-Baqarah* 2:109) – have been abrogated by “Then fight and slay the Pagans wherever ye find them” (Qur'an *al-Tawbah* 9:5).<sup>150</sup>

Since this narration has been attributed to Ibn ʿAbbās, it requires careful examination. In this regard, the first point to attract attention is the terminological confusion between the verses which are claimed to have been abrogated and those they are seen to have been abrogated by. So verse 2:109 (referring to the People of the Book) is claimed to have been abrogated by verse 9:5 (referring to the pagans). Such terminological confusion contradicts the Qur'an's own terminological dictionary, which makes a clear distinction between the terms “People of the Book” (*Ahl al-Kitāb*) and “pagans” (*mushrikūn*).

Second, there is a problem with the narration's chain of transmission. This is found in the discontinuity between ʿAlī ibn Abī Ṭalḥah and Ibn ʿAbbās. In other words, there is a gap between these two persons, since ʿAlī ibn Abī Ṭalḥah never met Ibn ʿAbbās, and thus the former never heard anything from the latter. In this respect al-Khalīlī states that “it is unanimously agreed among all *Huffāẓ*, the memorisers of hadith, that ʿAlī ibn Abī Ṭalḥah did not hear any *tafsīr* from Ibn ʿAbbās.”<sup>151</sup> There is a claim, however, that ʿAlī ibn Abī Ṭalḥah heard Ibn ʿAbbās' *tafsīr* from his students like Mujāhid, Ibn Jubayr, and ʿIkrimah. Yet,

no evidence exists to support such a claim. On the contrary, al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī narrates that “Ṣāliḥ ibn Muḥammad was asked from who ‘Alī ibn Abī Ṭalḥah had heard the *tafsīr* he narrated? Ṣāliḥ ibn Muḥammad said: from none.”<sup>152</sup> Similarly, Ibn Manjuwayh al-Aṣbahānī in his *Rijāl Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim* asserts that “‘Alī ibn Abī Ṭalḥah’s *tafsīr* is not reliable due to discontinuity between him and Ibn ‘Abbās.”<sup>153</sup> Furthermore, apart from the problem of discontinuity, there exist a number of doubts surrounding the name of ‘Alī ibn Abī Ṭalḥah as a transmitter. For example, Ibn Ḥajar mentions that:

Al-Maymūnī transmitted from Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal that: “‘Alī ibn Abī Ṭalḥah narrates sometimes unacceptable information, *lahu ashbyā’ munkarāt*.” On the other hand, al-Ājurī transmitted from Abū Dāwūd that: “‘Alī ibn Abī Ṭalḥah in terms of hadith is right and correct, but he adopted the attitude of sword.” As for al-Nisā’ī, he said that: “‘Alī ibn Abī Ṭalḥah is acceptable in hadith, *laysa bihi ba’s*.” In contrast, Ya‘qūb ibn Sufyān said that: “‘Alī ibn Abī Ṭalḥah is weak and unacceptable in terms of hadith, and some of his opinion cannot be praised.” With reference to Ibn Ḥibbān, he mentions ‘Alī ibn Abī Ṭalḥah in the section of the authentic transmitters, *al-thiqāt*.<sup>154</sup>

Another point to mention in connection to ‘Alī ibn Abī Ṭalḥah is the fact that al-Bukhārī in his *Ṣaḥīḥ* narrates information transmitted through the above chain. However, al-Bukhārī narrates only information related to the linguistic explanation of some Qur’anic words, but not in relation to any issues concerning an Islamic ruling, or any sensitive and dangerous matters such as abrogation. Second, al-Bukhārī never mentions the name of ‘Alī ibn Abī Ṭalḥah.<sup>155</sup>

Therefore, the narration attributed to Ibn ‘Abbās as evidence for the abrogation of verse 2:109 cannot be accepted for the following reasons:

1. Terminological contradiction in the content.
2. Unanimous agreement among the scholars of hadith on the discontinuity between ‘Alī ibn Abī Ṭalḥah and Ibn ‘Abbās.

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3. The absence of evidence proving that 'Alī ibn Abī Ṭalḥah heard anything related to *tafsīr* from Ibn 'Abbās' students.
4. Controversy surrounding the name of 'Alī ibn Abī Ṭalḥah as a transmitter.

Al-Bayḍāwī also favors this conclusion stating: “There is a doubt about what is transmitted from Ibn 'Abbās, that the verse of the sword<sup>156</sup> abrogated verse 2:109, since the command of the verse of the sword is not general.”<sup>157</sup> More vividly, al-Shanqiti states that: “After investigations, it has been proved that verse 2:109 is not abrogated.”<sup>158</sup> On the other hand, Ibn Ashur remarks that the imperative of forgiveness in this particular place aims to prevent possible inappropriate behavior from the Muslims' side as a response to the provocations of the People of the Book.<sup>159</sup> In this way, he relates the act of forgiveness to the ethical pattern of behavior, which cannot be subject to abrogation.

Therefore, there is no reason for determining verse 2:109 as abrogated. Instead, the act of forgiveness prescribed in the verse should be seen as emerging from the Qur'anic ethical paradigm of behavior. More particularly, by ordering Muslims to morally as well as spiritually forgive non-Muslims in the context of religious provocation, the verse introduces forgiveness as a universal value and typical feature of behavior in all situations.

### **The Dialectical Relationship Between Human Forgiveness, God's Forgiveness and Righteousness**

Now, to further elaborate on forgiveness towards non-Muslims as a universal ethical value, which cannot be abrogated nor be based on any hidden agendas, it is important to show how the Qur'an connects dialectically human forgiveness with God's forgiveness and righteousness. In this regard, the Qur'an states the following:

Be quick in the race for forgiveness from your Lord, and for a Garden

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whose width is that (of the whole) of the heavens and of the earth, prepared for the righteous – Those who spend (freely), whether in prosperity, or in adversity; who restrain anger, and pardon (all) men; – for Allah loves those who do good. (Qur'an *Āl 'Imrān* 3:133-134)

These verses show clearly a multiplicity of dialectical relationships. For instance, the verses impart that to restrain anger and forgive people is a feature of righteousness, which in turn leads to God's forgiveness for forgiving people, and thus to His Paradise. On the other hand, the verses relate those people who restrain anger and forgive to the virtue of kindness, *ihsān*, and thus to God's love. Moreover, the Qur'an's usage of the term *al-nās* which is a general word meaning people but defined by the definite article *al* in the verse indicating generalisation, shows that the act of forgiveness is not limited only to Muslims, but it is universally prescribed towards all people.

Another Qur'anic verse revealing explicitly the dialectical relationship between human forgiveness and God's forgiveness is the following:

Let not those among you who are endowed with grace and amplitude of means resolve by oath against helping their kinsmen, those in want, and those who have left their homes in Allah's cause: let them forgive and overlook, do you not wish that Allah should forgive you? For Allah is Oft-Forgiving, Most Merciful. (Qur'an *al-Nūr* 24:22)

The verse is historically related to a particular occasion. This being Abū Bakr's oath not to financially support a poor relative named Miṣṭaḥ who had involved himself in slandering Abū Bakr's daughter 'Ā'ishah who was also the wife of the Prophet. However, on hearing God's newly revealed words, "let them forgive and overlook, do you not wish that Allah should forgive you?" (24:22), Abū Bakr immediately forgave Miṣṭaḥ and resumed his financial support of him.<sup>160</sup> To reiterate because the verse conveys that human forgiveness leads to the forgiveness of God it is obvious that Abū Bakr forgave Miṣṭaḥ to gain God's forgiveness.

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Now although the verse's revelation is linked to this particular occasion this does not mean that it is to be restricted to it. On the contrary, the dialectical relationship between human forgiveness and God's forgiveness should be understood universally. This is due to the universality of the Qur'anic message, and also due to agreement among exegetes that particular occasions of revelation do not specify the general sense of Qur'anic words.<sup>161</sup> In this way, the occasions, reasons and causes for revelation, in response to certain events, whilst preserving the historical context of a revealed verse and hence enriching its meanings, do not restrict them. Thus, the generally expressed imperative to "let them forgive and overlook" (24:22), should be grasped as a timeless call to Muslims to forgive all people inclusively.

In sum, as analysis in this section demonstrates, regardless of the socio-political context, the Qur'an prescribes and evaluates the act of forgiveness as a perpetual universal ethic. In this respect, the diplomatic position which attempts to relate different ethico-behavioral patterns to each of the contexts of Makkah and Madinah, seems untenable. Moreover, the Qur'anic words expressing the idea of forgiveness do not confine its meaning to the outward aspect of human behavior only, but penetrate to its inward dimensions. This is because in the Qur'an forgiveness is firmly related to belief in God and the Day of Judgment. In this way, the ethical universality of forgiveness plays an important, reconciliatory role in keeping the process of normative religious pluralism on the right track.

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### Conclusion

Application of the universal, ethical system introduced by the Qur'an to a particular group of people or to mere diplomacy in a number of Qur'anic exegetical sources, has made that universality appear exclusive where it should be universal and reduced its scope. Those insisting on interpretations of exclusivity base their opinions on the assumption that universal ethical obligations to

non-Muslims have been abrogated, such that religiously different people and what they regard as sacred, are to be considered subjects for amoral treatment. Scattered throughout Islamic sources, opinions such as these pave the way for speculation and misleading conclusions to be presumed concerning the ethical system of Islam, thus negatively affecting the process of normative religious pluralism. However, as analysis throughout this chapter has shown, the Qur'an prescribes freedom of belief and respect for human dignity, as well as integrity and forgiveness, on a universal basis, relating this inseparably with belief in God and the Hereafter. In this way, the ethico-behavioral pattern it prescribes for Muslims with regards to non-Muslims is not limited to its outward aspect alone, but penetrates to the inner dimensions of human behavior. Thus, on one hand the Qur'an provides a feasible ethical ground on which the legitimacy of normative religious pluralism can be established, and on the other, rejects both the approach of exclusivists as well an ethico-behavioral model based on false diplomacy or any hidden strategies of embrace.