

Structural Elements of Normative Religious Pluralism in the Qur'an

Based on its Qur'anic ethical foundations, as analysed in the previous chapter, the process of normative religious pluralism requires careful consideration for its structural elements, namely commonality, diversity, and constructive conversation. In fact, these elements constitute the dialectical structure of normative religious pluralism, since the implementation of commonality and diversity in a balanced way, despite their contradictory nature, indicates the effectiveness of religious pluralism. So, an exploration of the Qur'anic attitude towards these elements is important in order to evaluate critically both the claims of religious exclusivism and religious relativism. The former disregards religious commonalities, whereas the latter ignores religious particularities.

Obviously in the case of both, religious exclusivism and religious relativism, any constructive conversation is devoid of meaning, since one of the main functions of constructive conversation is to strike a correct balance between commonalities and particularities respectively.

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Commonality

Commonality is one of the elements forming the dialectical structure of normative religious pluralism. By commonality, we mean the feeling of unity emerging from common features shared by different religious subjects taking part in the process of religious pluralism. Thus, the main function of commonality is to lay common ground upon which religious diversity and particularities can interact and flourish.

Commonality is an essential element of normative religious pluralism, for without it religious coexistence is impossible. Amarah expresses this thus: "There is neither meaning nor wisdom of diversity not based on commonality."¹ In fact, the importance of commonality can be found in Ibn Khaldūn's writings where "the concept of *ʿaṣabiyyah* seems to be the core of the Khaldunian social theory."² *ʿAṣabiyyah* is derived from the Arabic root *ʿa-ṣ-b* meaning to bind,³ i.e. to bind people into a group in order to unite them. In his translation of *The Muqaddimah* Franz Rosenthal translates *ʿaṣabiyyah* as "group feeling," whereas according to Baali, among the translations of *ʿaṣabiyyah* are "feeling of unity" and "collective consciousness."⁴ Considering Baali's conclusion that *ʿaṣabiyyah* is neither confined to Arab people nor necessarily based on blood relationships,⁵ it would appear that Ibn Khaldūn's theory of *ʿaṣabiyyah* does not emphasise a certain type of unity, but rather emphasises the power of the collective will. Accordingly, the theory of *ʿaṣabiyyah* can be considered as one of the earliest Muslim theories emphasising the importance of the element of commonality in a constructive way.

Commonality is an important element of normative religious pluralism and the Qur'an has its own perspective concerning it. It is necessary therefore to examine the Qur'anic position as well as detail some of the methods it outlines to emphasise the feeling of unity among people. To commence we need to analyse three

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basic types of commonality found in the Qur'an: environmental commonality, moral commonality, and spiritual commonality.

Environmental Commonality in the Qur'an

The Qur'an creates a feeling of unity among all people on the basis of common responsibility towards the environment. Thus, the environmental sphere forms a broad common ground, where the adherents of different religions can participate and contribute together. In fact, the universality of the environment as an element of commonality in respect of normative religious pluralism emerges from a number of common features between the universe and human beings. In the case of the Qur'an, these common features can be divided into three main aspects: commonality between the universe and human beings in terms of their origin; commonality between the universe and human beings in terms of their character of obedience towards God's order; commonality between the universe and human beings in terms of their terrestrial demise.

With regard to the first aspect (environmental commonality), the commonality between the universe and human beings in terms of their origin, the Qur'an traces three major, common stages of creation. In respect of the first stage, the Qur'an states that everything in the universe was initially joined together, as one unit of creation, in a common form of gaseous mass or galactic dust:⁶

Do not the Unbelievers see that the heavens and the earth were joined together (as one unit of creation), before we clove them asunder? We made from water every living thing. Will they not then believe? (Qur'an *al-Anbiya'* 21:30)

According to Ibn Ashur, it is possible that the Arabic word *ratqan*, one unit of creation, means that everything in the universe existed before the creation in the form of one substance, which God divided later into countless forms having their own

distinguishing characteristics.⁷ Thus, the enormous environmental diversity of creation initially emerged from one common element, namely gaseous mass or galactic dust.

In the second stage concerning creation every living thing emerges again from one common substance, water. The Qur'an states: "We made from water every living thing (Qur'an *al-Anbiyā'* 21:30). Of course, the Arabic verb *ja'alnā* in the verse means "we created."⁸ Therefore, according to the verse, the creation of human beings as well as the whole environment of living diversity is based on one common element, which is water.

Finally, the third stage of creation defined by the Qur'an is the creation of man from clay: "Man We did create from a quintessence (of clay)" (Qur'an *al-Mu'minūn* 23:12).

Al-Rāghib al-Aṣfahānī is of the opinion, that "the combination of dust and water is called clay (*tīn*).⁹ At this point, it becomes clear that the Qur'an determines the creation of man as emerging from the combination of two foundational elements, dust and water, on the basis of which the universe has been created. In this way, the Qur'anic doctrine of the common origin of the universe and man is likely to create a universal feeling of unity among people in an environmental sense.

As for the second aspect of environmental commonality, which concerns the commonality between the universe and human beings in terms of their character of obedience towards God's order, the Qur'an clearly states that:

Do they seek for other than the Religion of Allah – while all creatures in the heavens and on earth have, willing or unwilling, bowed to His Will (accepted Islam), and to Him shall they all be brought back. (Qur'an *Āl 'Imrān* 3:83)

Both the universe and man are bound by the natural laws of creation to obey God's will. In this respect, al-Rāzī remarks that this verse indicates that everything in the universe belongs to one common source of existence and follows inescapably its order.¹⁰ Thus, the common dependence of man and the universe on

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God's order creates again a feeling of unity among people on an environmental basis.

Turning to the third aspect of environmental commonality, which pertains to the commonality between the universe and human beings in terms of their terrestrial demise (that is their ceasing to exist), the Qur'an states: "Everything (that exists) will perish except His own Face" (Qur'an *al-Qaṣaṣ* 28:88). This conveys the idea that man and the universe are mortal creatures moving towards their common end. Accordingly, the verse reveals that "the whole phenomenal world is subject to flux and change and will pass away, but He [God] will endure forever."¹¹ So, both the universe and human beings share the same destiny of temporary existence.

In sum, from the discussion on environmental commonality, it becomes clear that the universe and human beings are God's creatures and none of them is master of the other. Moreover, the existence of both the universe and human beings has been directed for the achievement of mutual benefit and complementarity.¹² As such this relationship (between the universe and human beings) is seen in the Qur'an as one of unity and by no means as one of enmity, which in turn provides a vast common ground for the promotion of normative religious pluralism on the basis of preserving as well as developing the environment.

Moral Commonality in the Qur'an

The Qur'an offers another broad common ground which once again gives scope for normative religious pluralism to flourish. This is moral commonality which creates a feeling of unity and brotherhood among all people. A great deal of data can be found on moral commonality in the Qur'an but following careful and accurate observation, it appears that there are two chief principles: human brotherhood and human nature.

The principle of human brotherhood is considered by some scholars to be the broadest and most central sphere of the Qur'anic concept of human relations.¹³ In fact, the area of

human brotherhood in the Qur'an is entirely related to the moral aspect of human life. In this regard the Qur'an remarks that:

O mankind! Reverence your Guardian-Lord, Who created you from a single person, created, of like nature, his mate, and from them twain scattered (like seeds) countless men and women; – reverence Allah, through Whom ye demand your mutual (rights), and (reverence) the wombs (That bore you): for Allah ever watches over you. (Qur'an *al-Nisā'* 4:1)

This verse exists in the textual context of a discussion (verse 4:2 onwards) on morality towards orphans, children, and women, extremely vulnerable social groupings against whom human rights can easily be violated. It is important to note that the verse combines three key ideas with regards to morality towards vulnerable people: consciousness of God, human brotherhood, and protection of these people's rights. Actually, consciousness of God is advanced as the final goal of morality, while human brotherhood is considered an important means to realize this end. Muhammad Abdu expresses it thus in commenting on the verse:

Knowing that you [people] are so closely related to each other because of your common descent from a single person, you should be constantly conscious of God not to transgress the boundary of morality. So you have to be compassionate towards vulnerable people, like orphans who lost their parents, and protect their rights.¹⁴

Therefore, in mentioning God consciousness, morality, and human brotherhood together, the verse increases one's moral responsibility towards humankind, whilst simultaneously strengthening people's feelings of compassion towards each other.¹⁵

The Qur'an's recognition of this broadest sphere in the field of human relations, human brotherhood, makes ample accommodation for normative religious pluralism on the basis of human moral commonalities. This is largely because the

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Qur'anic concept of human brotherhood is oriented towards realizing modesty and sincere morality among people and to thereby reduce feelings of arrogance and domination.¹⁶

The second Qur'anic principle endorsing moral commonality is human nature. Note the Qur'an significantly states that every single human being who enters this world does so in a state of original purity and innocence:

It is He Who brought you forth from the wombs of your mothers when ye knew nothing; and He gave you hearing and sight and intelligence and affections: that ye may give thanks (to Allah). (Qur'an *al-Nahl* 16:78)

One reason for the original purity and innocence of human nature is largely due to humans being born in a state of complete ignorance. This full negation of human knowledge at birth implies that humanity comes into this world without any knowledge of evil, which incidentally also implies that human beings are not held accountable at this stage of their life. Of course we need to distinguish between this initial state of original purity and the concept of free will, humanity's innate ability to distinguish between good and evil and act upon this. Failure to distinguish between the two can lead to a conclusion that the Qur'an supports the Christian theory of original sin, as would appear to be the case in Lewis Scudder's study *The Qur'an's Evaluation of Human Nature*.

More strikingly, the Qur'an underlines the pure and innocent nature of a human being:

So set thou thy face steadily and truly to the Faith: (establish) Allah's handiwork according to the pattern on which He has made mankind: no change (let there be) in the work (wrought) by Allah: that is the standard Religion: but most among mankind understand not. (Qur'an *al-Rūm* 30:30)

Ḥanīf is the key word in the verse to understanding the Qur'an's concept of the original purity and innocence of human nature. The literal meaning of the root morpheme *ḥ-n-f* is to lean

or to incline (*mayl*).¹⁷ However, “the most common use of *ḥanīf* is related to the meaning of being inclined to avoid evil.”¹⁸ Another point to be considered here is the syntactic position of the expression *fiṭratallāh* used in the verse. According to Ibn Ashur, “it is a substitute, *badal*, of *ḥanīf*.”¹⁹ In other words, it means that the original pattern on which God has made mankind, is one in which man is inclined to avoid evil.

Therefore, the Qur’anic concept of the original purity and innocence of human beings creates in man a positive outlook towards his moral world. It also shows that the original state of each and every human being pertains to the enjoinder of all that is good and the avoidance of all that is evil. This, in turn, makes it entirely possible for all mankind to be united under the auspices of a moral common ground in the process of normative religious pluralism.

Another feature of human nature or psychology, which the Qur’an constantly emphasises, is the ability of human beings to discern good from evil, right from wrong, and the useful from the harmful:

By the Soul, and the proportion and order given to it; And its enlightenment as to its wrong and its right; – Truly he succeeds that purifies it, And he fails that corrupts it! (Qur’an *al-Shams* 91:7-10)

Commenting on these verses Ali notes:

He [God] breathes into it [the soul of human being] an understanding of what is sin, impiety, wrongdoing and what is piety and right conduct, in the special circumstances in which it may be placed. This is the most precious gift of all to man, the faculty of distinguishing between right and wrong.²⁰

It is important to clarify that man only has a potential ability to discern between good and evil, the choice of whether to live life according to a moral pattern being left to human free will. Nevertheless, regardless of the different moral senses that people possess, the idea of morality itself is common to human

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psychology, deeply rooted in human nature. This common moral point is universally acknowledged in different ways. Ali refers to it as “the faculty of distinguishing between right and wrong;”²¹ St. Paul defines it as “a law written on the heart;”²² Budziszewski determines it as “natural law.”²³ Yet, all these expressions are confirmed in the Qur'an:

Nay, man will be evidence against himself, even though he were to put up his excuses. (Qur'an *al-Qiyāmah* 75:14-15)

Here the Qur'an points out that despite any outward immoral behavior human beings are in fact within themselves aware of their wrongdoing. In this respect, Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī states: “A person who behaves immorally and supports the wrong, and rejects the right, knows in his heart what is actually wrong and what is right.”²⁴ So this innate human faculty to discern good from evil, right from wrong, the useful from the harmful, provides common moral ground for humanity, motivating positive moral development whilst reducing the potential influence of the very real darker side of human nature.

In sum discussion has shown that the Qur'an indicates the existence of a moral commonality within and among human beings which forms the basis of human brotherhood and human nature. Furthermore, the Qur'an's recognition of these two principles creates a universal feeling of moral unity among all people, thus forming a vast area for the promotion of normative religious pluralism as one possible solution to save the world from its moral crisis.

Spiritual Commonality in the Qur'an

Another type of commonality, which the Qur'an vividly underscores, is spiritual commonality between all human beings. This can be traced through three major doctrines in the Qur'an, those of one God, one religion, and one complete cycle of prophethood. As far as the first doctrine is concerned, the Qur'an

informs us that there is only One absolute God for all human beings. This is a fundamental article of faith. The Qur'an also depicts all human souls, before their existence in the terrestrial world, as one harmonious body obeying the commands of one God:

When thy Lord drew forth from the Children of Adam – from their loins – their descendants, and made them testify concerning themselves, (saying): “Am I not your Lord (who cherishes and sustains you)?” – They said: “Yea! We do testify!” (This), lest ye should say on the Day of Judgment: “Of this we were never mindful.” (Qur'an *al-A'raf* 7:172)

The verse affects human consciousness positively in respect of spiritual commonality by illustrating the whole humanity as being one spiritual unit bowing before the One God. Commenting on the verse, Henry Corbin remarkably concludes that:

The religious consciousness of Islam is centered not on a historical fact, but on a fact which is *meta-historical*, not post-historical, but trans-historical. This primordial fact, anterior to our empirical history, is expressed in the divine question which the human Spirits were required to answer before they were placed in the terrestrial world: “Am I not your Lord?” (Quran 7:172). The shout of joy which greeted this question concluded an eternal pact of fidelity; and from epoch to epoch, all the prophets whose succession forms the “cycle of prophecy” have come to remind men of their fidelity to this pact.²⁵

This trans-historical pledge given to the One God prior to their birth by all human souls to obey Him creates a universal feeling of spiritual unity among all people. Having borne witness and testified to the fact, it also puts the onus of responsibility on mankind for belief in and worship of the One God.

With regard to the second doctrine concerning spiritual commonality, the Qur'an states that God has revealed one religion to mankind throughout human history:

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The same religion has He established for you as that which He enjoined on Noah – that which We have sent by inspiration to thee – and that which We enjoined on Abraham, Moses, and Jesus: Namely, that ye should remain steadfast in religion, and make no divisions therein. (Qur'an *al-Shūrā* 42:13)

The religion that God has established for the whole of mankind is *al-Islām*. The name of *al-Islām* is related to the central idea of God's religion which means "surrender" as well as the peace that issues from our surrender to God. Therefore, the Qur'an considers all authentic religions to have been revealed on the basis of the Oneness of God. Thus, *al-Islām* refers not only to the religion revealed through the Qur'an to the Prophet Muhammad, but also to all authentic religions revealed before this specified Islam. For this reason, the Qur'an refers to the prophets Abraham and Ishmael, and the followers of the prophet Jesus, as Muslims.²⁶ Through such a perception of religion being one during human existence, the Qur'an lays a common spiritual ground fostering the process of normative religious pluralism.

The third Qur'anic doctrine creating a universal feeling of human spiritual unity is the integrity of the prophetic cycle. The Qur'an states:

Not a messenger did We send before thee without this inspiration sent by Us to him: that there is no god but I; therefore worship and serve Me. (Qur'an *al-Anbiyā'* 21:25)

The meaning of this verse is confirmed by the Prophet himself who states that:

Both in this world and in the Hereafter, I am the nearest of all people to Jesus, the son of Mary. The prophets are paternal brothers; their mothers are different, but their religion is one.^{27/28}

According to this hadith, all prophets are brothers, but the

Prophet Muhammad, to whom the whole Muslim world belongs, is the nearest among people to the prophet Jesus, to whom the entire Christian world belongs. The spiritual implications of this prophetic brotherhood, and in particular the closeness of the bond between the prophets Muhammad and Jesus, provide a firm common ground for interfaith relations.

To exemplify the common spiritual feeling emerging from the atmosphere of prophetic brotherhood, it is worth quoting Nasr who states:

Like countless Muslims, when I read the names of the prophets of old in the Qur'an or in the traditional prayers, I experience them as living realities in the Islamic universe, while being fully conscious of the fact that they are revered figures in Judaism and Christianity. I also remain fully aware that they are all speaking of the same God Who is One and not of some other deity.²⁹

In the light of this analysis of spiritual commonality, it appears that the Qur'an does not aim at creating an exclusive spiritual feeling among Muslims towards others. Rather, through the doctrines discussed it leaves ample room for establishing a firm spiritual common ground for preserving the common spiritual wealth.

To summarise, an examination of the Qur'anic perspective on commonality, as an essential part of the structure of normative religious pluralism, shows that the Qur'an not only endorses the element of commonality, but more importantly, regards this element as something inherent in the universe, human nature, and the human soul. Consequently, the Qur'an goes further to recognise commonality as a perpetual divine law. Thus, the approach of the exclusivists, which refuses to acknowledge any obligations toward others, seems to be irreconcilable with the Qur'anic message of the existence of environmental, moral, and spiritual commonalities between all people.

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Diversity

As discussed previously, commonality is an essential element of normative religious pluralism. However, worth noting is that if the element of commonality is given considerable precedence over differences, it could lead to a religious relativism which erodes religious commitment. An outcome no person of religious commitment can allow to happen, either to themselves or their religion. Due to this fact, Altwajri remarks that religious pluralism “does not mean at all a dilution of positions or a manipulation of ideas, or fusion of creeds into the same mould, may it even be an indubitably humanitarian mould as claimed.”³⁰ Similarly, Jonathan Sacks argues that “the proposition of the heart of monotheism is not what it has traditionally been taken to be: one God, therefore one faith, one truth, one way. To the contrary, it is that unity creates diversity.”³¹ In fact, the root of this modern concept of religious pluralism embodied in the phrase “unity creates diversity” can be discovered in the works of Abū Ḥayyān al-Tawḥīdī who lived ten centuries ago. In his *Al-Muqābasāt* al-Tawḥīdī points out that: “It is a typical feature of human nature, that despite their differences humans are united, and despite their unity they are different. Moreover, people despite their differences love each other, and despite their mutual love they are different.”³² Therefore the element of commonality must also be balanced with a significant consideration for diversity. In this section I therefore discuss the Qur’anic view on diversity and its impact on the dignity of people.

Generally speaking, the Qur’an advances diversity as a natural law existing in the universe: “And of everything We have created pairs: That ye may receive instruction” (Qur’an *al-Dhāriyāt* 51:49).

According to this verse, aside from God, everything else in the universe is based on dichotomy. The dichotomic nature of the universe suggests on the one hand that “one individual is complementary to another”³³ whilst on the other that one individual

is best known and understood in light of its opposite. Thus, a reciprocal relationship is set in motion (the dichotomic nature of the universe) by which we can derive the meaning that the more people know about the different other, the more they will know about themselves. In this way, in addition to being a natural law, diversity also appears as a source of knowledge, since “each of us has something someone else lacks, and we each lack something someone else has, we gain by interaction.”³⁴

Given the essential importance of diversity, it is vital to explore and understand the Qur’anic view on this important element of the structure of normative religious pluralism. We do so on two major levels, environmental diversity and religious diversity, going on to develop a theology of diversity. As Sacks remarks: “We need not only a theology of commonality but also a theology of difference,”³⁵ because the tension between religions mostly arises from differences.

Environmental Diversity in the Qur’an

The existence of countless forms having their own distinctive peculiarities in the universe is an undeniable fact. Accordingly, the Qur’an defines diversity as a fact of nature and maintains that God has created the whole universe with diversity.³⁶ To further explore this fact it would seem pertinent to look into three environmental spheres mentioned in the Qur’an: plants, animals, and water.

Beginning with the first environmental sphere representing the diverse world of plants, it is interesting to note that almost 22 identifiable plants belonging to 17 plant families are cited in the Qur’an.³⁷ They all differ from each other in shape, color, smell, and taste and in the same way, are all distinguished by their peculiarities. The Qur’an states:

And in the earth are tracts (diverse though) neighbouring, and gardens of vines and fields sown with corn, and palm trees – growing out of single roots or otherwise: watered with the same water, yet some of them We

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make more excellent than others to eat. Behold, verily in these things there are signs for those who understand! (Qur'an *al-Ra'd* 13:4)

The element of natural diversity in the verse is recognised by al-Zamakhsharī. He observes that the diversity of plants is manifested in their growing out of one earth, watered with the same water, yet having different shapes, colours, tastes, and smells. Moreover, diversity is also found in the word *ṣinwān* used in the verse, which is the plural of *ṣinwu*, meaning different palms growing out of a single common root.³⁸ Similarly, Ibn Ashur maintains that the main purpose of this verse is to emphasise the diversity of plants as a sign of God's great power of creation.³⁹

It is important to explore at this juncture whether recognition of plant diversity as a sign of God's greatness has analogically led exegetes to view human intellectual diversity also as a sign of God's greatness. In this respect, al-Ṭabarī points out that al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī interpreted the verse's reference to the diversity of plants as an allegory for human hearts. So, allegorically speaking, just as one substance (water) causes a diversity of plants to emerge from the earth, the same can be said for God's revelation to mankind which results in a diversity of attitudes being adopted by human hearts towards that revelation.⁴⁰ Al-Ṭabarī draws a similar allegory to al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī's with regards to the verse, stating that the Creator of diversity among plants is the same Creator of diversity among humanity. Analogically, if God had so willed He could have created all people and plants to be the same, but He did not. Therefore, diversity as a fact of nature provides clear signs for those who understand.⁴¹

Further confirmation of this analogy of diversity between plants and human beings as a sign of God's greatness is expressed in other Qur'anic verses as follows:

Seest thou not that Allah sends down rain from the sky? With it We then bring out produce of various colours. And in the mountains are tracts white and red, of various shades of colour, and black intense in hue. And so amongst men and crawling creatures and cattle, are they of various

colours. Those truly fear Allah, among His Servants, who have knowledge: for Allah is Exalted in Might, Oft-Forgiving. (Qur'an *Fāṭir* 35:27-28)

The textual context in which these verses appear concern discussion on the diversity of attitudes adopted by people towards God's revelation. The verses in their historical context address the Prophet's mental as well as spiritual suffering which emerged as a result of the polytheists' negative attitude to the Qur'an. Thus, their purpose, as Ibn Ashur observes, was to show through the visual diversity of nature's colors, that human intellectual diversity was analogously diverse. And because diversity is a natural law on the basis of which God created everything in this world, human intellectual diversity is in effect simply a reflection of this natural law.⁴²

Hence, God's great creative power is revealed in the Qur'an on one level through the diversity of plants as a source of beauty, from which we analogically conclude that human intellectual diversity should also be perceived as a sign of God's greatness.

Turning to another aspect of environmental diversity, that is diversity of the animal kingdom, it can be seen again that the Qur'an recognises diversity as a natural law by drawing an analogy between the world of animals and that of humans in terms of their particularities. The Qur'an informs that:

There is not an animal (that lives) on the earth, nor a being that flies on its wings, but (forms part of) communities like you. Nothing have we omitted from the Book, and they (all) shall be gathered to their Lord in the end. (Qur'an *al-An'ām* 6:38)

The textual and historical contexts of this verse are similar to those previously discussed. Due to the Prophet's grief at the pagans' disbelief in the Qur'an, God revealed to him the fact that it is impossible to gather humanity to a single truth in this world. If we look at the verses which lead up to verse 38 we begin to appreciate the Qur'anic textual context for it:

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If their spurning is hard on thy mind, yet if thou wert able to seek a tunnel in the ground or a ladder to the skies and bring them a sign, – (what good?). If it were Allah's will, He could gather them together unto true guidance: so be not thou amongst those who are swayed by ignorance (and impatience)! (Qur'an *al-An'ām* 6:35)

It is methodologically important to mention that most of the classical sources of Qur'anic exegesis failed to recognise in this verse God's law of diversity. And it was largely due to this fact, that their attention became drawn into a historical theological dispute which concerned the issue of predestination and free will. This phenomenon demonstrates, once again, the close relationship between Qur'anic texts and an interpreter's mind, influenced in turn by specific socio-political circumstances. In the 20th century Ibn Ashur moved the focus of Qur'anic exegesis regarding the verse to an important point connected to the issue of diversity. He observed that the meaning of "If it were Allah's will, He could gather them together unto true guidance" (6:35), "is related to God's will of creation not to God's will of legal obligation *taklif*."⁴³ Ibn Ashur's point is crucial to understanding the nature of diversity. In other words, it is God's will to create people in a state of diversity of perceptions that makes the gathering of all people to a single truth impossible in this world.

Correspondingly, the verse representing the diversity of animals comes in the textual context of God's will of creating diversity of perceptions among humans:

There is not an animal (that lives) on the earth, nor a being that flies on its wings, but (forms part of) communities like you. Nothing have we omitted from the Book, and they (all) shall be gathered to their Lord in the end. (Qur'an *al-An'ām* 6:38)

The meaning of the verse, according to Ibn Ashur, is that "every group of animals has its distinguishing features and peculiarities like all human communities have their specific features and peculiarities."⁴⁴ Therefore, by applying the plural form of

the Arabic word *umam*, communities, in relation to both the animal as well as human worlds, the Qur'an recognises diversity as a fact of nature. Thus, it would appear as an act of ignorance to recognise diversity as a natural law in the animal world, but to disregard or ignore it in the world of human intellectual diversity.

Evidence for diversity as a fact of nature can also be found in Qur'anic topics discussing different types of wind and rain. However, it is more relevant to end our discussion on environmental diversity in the Qur'an with the following verse:

Nor are the two bodies of flowing water alike, – the one palatable, sweet, and pleasant to drink, and the other, salt and bitter. Yet from each (kind of water) do ye eat flesh fresh and tender, and ye extract ornaments to wear; and thou seest the ships therein that plough the waves, that ye may seek (thus) of the Bounty of Allah that ye may be grateful. (Qur'an *Fāṭir* 35:12)

Although this verse is clear in its own context as well as in its general textual context, a great Arabic linguist and exegete such as al-Zamakhsharī failed to derive from it a meaning in accordance with the overall context of the verse. Al-Zamakhsharī claims that the two different bodies of flowing water (*al-baḥrān*) are parable (*mathal*) of a believer and unbeliever, with the palatable, sweet, pleasant to drink water representing a believer, and the salt, bitter water representing an unbeliever, respectively.⁴⁵ It seems methodologically suspicious to see a scholar such as al-Zamakhsharī shifting interpretation from the literal meaning of *al-baḥrān* to a new figurative meaning, without reason. According to Qur'anic exegesis methodology, any departure from a literal to a figurative meaning being assigned to Qur'anic text must be done for a specific reason only and in accordance with the rules of the Arabic language.⁴⁶ More surprisingly, when al-Zamakhsharī came to interpret the rest of the verse, where God states that although *al-baḥrān* are different in terms of their taste, they have much in common: “Yet from each (kind of water) do ye eat flesh fresh and tender, and ye extract ornaments to wear” (35:12), at this point, al-Zamakhsharī controversially

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maintains that unlike the salt and bitter water, which benefits people, an unbeliever does not have any virtues in order to benefit others.⁴⁷

Al-Zamakhsharī's statement here is an example of the fact that a wrong methodology leads to a wrong conclusion. It, in turn, proves again that although classical sources of Qur'anic exegesis are valuable materials, they should not be taken for granted particularly in respect of interfaith relations. This is because consideration should always be paid to the reality of the time in which an interpreter lives or as Nursi states "time is a great interpreter."⁴⁸

Turning back to verse 35:12 (of the two different bodies of water), it appears that al-Rāzī was more observant than al-Zamakhsharī in respect of its textual context. Al-Rāzī points out that it is more relevant, in the light of the textual context, to interpret the verse as evidence of God's power to create two bodies of water visibly alike, but in fact different in terms of their contents. The power of God in the verse is presented in His ability to create similarities in different bodies and to create differences in similar bodies.⁴⁹ Al-Rāzī's interpretation of the verse was confirmed and developed by Ibn Ashur, who remarks that the verse reflects the divine wisdom of creating everything in accordance with the natural law of diversity, where the variety of peculiarities are based on common features and similarities.⁵⁰

In sum discussion has shown that the Qur'an introduces environmental diversity as a natural law on the basis of which two other points analogically are emphasised; the first point pertains to God's greatness and power of creation, whereas the second proves human intellectual diversity as a fact of nature, too. The lack of recognition with regards to the analogical relationship between environmental diversity and human intellectual diversity on the part of some sources of Qur'anic exegesis should be attributed to either methodological problems or the specific historical circumstances of the exegete in question.

Religious Diversity Presented as an Earthly Fact in the Qur'an

It is important to note from the outset that although religious truth is one in God's knowledge, according to the perception of humankind it is multiple.⁵¹ This is due to the fact that man has been given freedom of choice in this earthly life. Consequently, the Qur'an recognises this fact and clearly states that it is impossible to gather people to a single religious truth:

If thy Lord had so willed, He could have made mankind one people: but they will not cease to dispute. Except those on whom thy Lord hath bestowed His Mercy: and for this did He create them: and the Word of thy Lord shall be fulfilled: "I will fill Hell with jinns and men all together."
(Qur'an *Hūd* 11:118-119)

The sources of Qur'anic exegesis are unanimous that "one people" (*ummah wāḥidah*) in the verse, means one religious people. In fact, it is methodologically limited to such an interpretation, since the verse ending points to the eschatological consequences of that religious diversity. However, in respect of religious diversity, there is need to clarify two significant issues which the Qur'an repeatedly underscores. The first is the fact, which the Qur'an undoubtedly underlines, that humans have always been and will remain forever religiously different in their earthly life. This fact emerges from God's will to create human beings with free will, which seems to relevantly account for the meaning of God's words: "and for this did He create them" (11:119). In other words, God has created human beings with the aim of being free in terms of their will. Yet, since the natural result of this free will is diversity, the Qur'an refers to the result itself as a purpose of creation by stating that God has created people to be religiously different.⁵²

The second issue which needs clarification here is that even though religious diversity is an earthly fact, in the hereafter people will be held responsible for their terrestrial beliefs and deeds.

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In this regard, it is vitally important for the parties participating in the process of normative religious pluralism to know that according to the Qur'an, the only time and place where the judgment on religious differences will take place is in the hereafter, on the Day of Judgment. On the other hand, it is only the one God Who will judge people on their beliefs and deeds on that day, when those on whom God has bestowed His mercy will be known.

Failure to distinguish between these two issues could result in many negative effects on the process of religious pluralism. For instance, the confusion between the earthly dimensions of religious diversity and its eschatological ones leads very often to a perception that certain religious people are authorised to judge the beliefs of others in this world.

To further explore the Qur'anic attitude on religious diversity and thus to support the foregoing arguments, it is relevant to examine the following Qur'anic verse:

To each among you have We prescribed a law and an open way. If Allah had so willed, He would have made you a single people, but (His plan is) to test you in what He hath given you: so strive as in a race in all virtues. The goal of you all is to Allah. It is He that will show you the truth of the matters in which ye dispute. (Qur'an *al-Mā'idah* 5:48)

The general context of surah *al-Mā'idah* is related to the People of the Book (*ahl al-kitāb*). More particularly, this verse exists in a textual context concerning the divine revelation given to three of God's prophets: Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad. For this reason, judging by the textual context of the verse, both al-Ṭabarī and al-Rāzī argue that those being addressed in the verse are Jews, Christians, and Muslims.⁵³ Accordingly, Qatādah suggests that in the context of Oneness (*tawḥīd*), God has created throughout history a diversity of ways leading to the Oneness of God.⁵⁴

Seen in terms of both its own Qur'anic context and that of today's universal values, the verse recognises religious diversity

as an existing fact in this world. It states that “to each among you”, that is Jews, Christians, and Muslims, God has revealed a specific way leading to Him. Even though, each succeeding revelation declared abrogation of its preceding one, people in general have continued to follow the tradition they are familiar/brought up with, their religious adherence remaining unchanged. Hence, the world’s major belief systems such as Judaism, Christianity, Buddhism, and Islam have always remained historically present in the world since their birth. Furthermore, they have also existed to some extent within certain geographical boundaries. The gift of free will has allowed this state of affairs to develop, for mankind is free to choose the way in which he chooses to worship and understand God, influenced by different circumstances.

Therefore, given human free will and the historical diversity of divine revelations, we are left with a number of belief systems across the world, and the verse seems to underline the existence of religious particularities in this world as an earthly fact. Formed on the basis of human free will, religious particularities are perceived by different groups as a source of their dignity. As for the eschatological ramifications of religious diversity emerging from human free will, the verse stipulates that these will be revealed by God in the hereafter. Of course, shaped by their specific historical context, many sources of Qur’anic exegesis instead of emphasising the terrestrial fact of religious diversity, as stated in the verse, emphasise the exclusive nature of Islam in terms of religious truth and salvation.

This existence of religious diversity as an unchangeable fact is more strikingly endorsed in the Qur’an when it refers to a theological issue concerning the direction of prayer, or the *Qiblah*:

Even if thou wert to bring to the people of the Book all the Signs (together), they would not follow Thy Qiblah; nor art thou going to follow their Qiblah; nor indeed will they follow each other’s Qiblah. If thou after the knowledge hath reached thee, Wert to follow their (vain) desires, – then wert thou Indeed (clearly) in the wrong. (Qur’an *al-Baqarah* 2:145)

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The verse exists in a textual context discussing change in the direction faced in salah. After having prayed toward Jerusalem as the *Qiblah* for sixteen months in Madinah, Muslims were now ordered to change this direction to the Ka'bah in Makkah.⁵⁵

The direction faced in prayers (*Qiblah*) may sound like a minor issue, but it is in fact religiously highly symbolic for it identifies different religious groups. Moreover, Qutub states that *Qiblah* is a feature that distinguishes Islam's whole outlook on life, its concerns and aims, and its identity.⁵⁶ Therefore, it can be stated that *Qiblah* is a symbol of religious identity, independence, and particularity.

In this respect, the verse endorses religious diversity by recognising every religious community to whom God revealed a book, as having its own *Qiblah*. The verse stipulates the people of the Book and Muslims as having their own particularities in terms of the *Qiblah*, and that one religious group would never follow the *Qiblah* of the other. The reason for the existence of religious particularities embodied in the concept of the *Qiblah* is revealed in another Qur'anic verse:

To each is a goal to which he turns;⁵⁷ then strive together (as in a race) towards all that is good. Wheresoever ye are, Allah will bring you together. For Allah hath power over all things. (Qur'an *al-Baqarah* 2:148)

Ibn Ashur claims that the meaning of the verse is that "in the process of seeking the truth, every group follows its own way of understanding."⁵⁸ Commenting more closely on the textual context of *Qiblah* in the verse, al-Rāzī remarks:

Every religious group of people has a direction *Qiblah*, which they face in their prayers in order to get closer to God. Thus, every group is satisfied with their own direction, *Qiblah*, which they will never change. Therefore, there is no way of gathering people on one single direction, *Qiblah*.⁵⁹

Recognising that *Qiblah* represents religious identity, independence, and particularity, it becomes clear that these verses

objectively define religious diversity as an unchangeable fact of this earthly plane. They also introduce a reasonable approach for dealing with this state of affairs. The Qur'anic approach suggests that given the reality of religious diversity each group should strive to do all that is good, and that as far as matters of theological difference are concerned, only God will provide the solution in the hereafter, for "It is He that will show you the truth of the matters in which ye dispute" (Qur'an *al-Mā'idah* 5:48).

Religious particularities are therefore an immutable fact of this world, determined by the Qur'an as natural law, and therefore cannot be subject to elimination or disregard. For this reason, again in the context of Qur'anic verses discussing the *Qiblah*, the Qur'an describes those who fail to understand the reality of religious particularities as fools. Indeed, anyone who tries to disregard religious particularities in this world and fails to understand that particularities are a terrestrial feature existing in every religious group, may seem foolish to do so:

The fools among the people will say: "What hath turned them from the Qiblah to which they were used?" Say: "To Allah belong both East and West: He guideth whom He will to a Way that is straight." (Qur'an *al-Baqarah* 2:142)

With Islam a new set of religious particularities had emerged and its followers would adhere to these, the new *Qiblah* was a sign of faith in the new religion.

Thus, have We made of you an Ummat justly balanced, that ye might be witnesses over the nations, and the Messenger a witness over yourselves; and We appointed the Qibla to which thou wast used, only to test those who followed the Messenger from those who would turn on their heels (From the Faith). Indeed it was (A change) momentous, except to those guided by Allah. And never would Allah Make your faith of no effect. For Allah is to all people Most surely full of kindness, Most Merciful. (Qur'an *al-Baqarah* 2:143)

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In fact, the element of religious diversity, represented by religious particularities, seems to be a real challenge and test for the intellectual level of human beings. On the other hand, since religious particularities form a source of dignity, the element of religious diversity becomes the genuine dimension through which the achievement of normative religious pluralism should be evaluated. Due to this importance of particularities, the Qur'an goes further to declare them as a fact inherent in all levels of human life: social, intellectual, cultural and religious:

Say: "Everyone acts according to his own disposition: But your Lord knows best who it is that is best guided on the Way." (Qur'an *al-Isrā'* 17:84)

The Arabic word *shākilah* in the verse has been interpreted as a "side," "nature" and "religion."⁶⁰ It also has been given the meaning of a "doctrine" or a "way."⁶¹ Furthermore, Ibn Ashur defines *shākilah* as a way and life on the basis of which a person has grown up.⁶²

Considering these definitions it appears that the verse underscores a basic fact concerning particularities in respect of every single individual, which is that everyone has a particular way of acting, *shākilah*. This particular way of acting is formed in each individual due to a variety of factors which are not identical to all people. As for the question of whose acting is best guided, the verse remarks that only God is fully aware of the answer.

Therefore, our analysis of the Qur'anic view on diversity shows that the Qur'an attaches considerable importance to the issue of particularities in all aspects of life. Considered as a phenomenon inherent in the universe and human nature and thus determined as immutable terrestrial law and fact, particularities form a source of dignity and knowledge. Moreover being directly related to religious identity, religious particularities cannot become subject to disregard or elimination. Hence, any approach which seeks to undermine the existence of religious particularities in the process of normative religious pluralism or

seeks to blend them into one common belief system, seems untenable in the light of Qur'anic teachings.

[3]

Constructive Conversation

The complexity of interaction between commonalities and particularities in the process of normative religious pluralism requires the existence of another element, namely constructive conversation. The importance of this third element is seen in its function to act as a mode of reconciliation between commonalities and particularities. In fact, in attempting to establish a right balance between commonalities and particularities, constructive conversation tends to prevent normative religious pluralism from going to extremes, as exclusivism and relativism have done. Due to the significant role constructive conversation plays in the process of religious pluralism, it is essential to explore the Qur'anic attitude towards it and clarify the Qur'anic position. To do this we first examine the importance of constructive conversation in the Qur'an, and second, focus on the Qur'anic principles constructing the conversation.

The Importance of Constructive Conversation in the Qur'an

It would seem relevant to initially reflect briefly on the notion of conversation. Generally speaking, conversation is normally perceived as a spoken exchange of thoughts, opinions, and feelings. Verbal communication is conducted largely by spoken words emerging from different parties taking part in a conversation. Therefore, one significant way to explore the importance of constructive conversation in the Qur'an is to observe linguistically the Arabic root *q-w-l*,⁶³ which means "to utter words" and which thus indicates the dynamics of conversation.

According to al-Idrisi, the root morpheme *q-w-l* is repeated in the Qur'an 1722 times, appearing in 49 different morphological

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forms.⁶⁴ The morphological diversity of *q-w-l* referring to the variety of physically as well as ideologically different persons, suggests that the Qur'an leaves ample room for thoughts, opinions, and feelings to be presented, listened to, discussed, and critically evaluated. In addition, the multiple distribution of the root morpheme *q-w-l* in the Qur'an, on the one hand emphasises the value of constructive conversation, whilst on the other poses a great challenge to those who assume that it is God who has allowed such vast space for discussing different opinions in the Qur'an.

Another way of exploring the importance of constructive conversation is to look into the Qur'anic method of employing words as a powerful tool for communication. In fact, although it is not clear for some scholars as to what exactly makes the text of the Qur'an superhuman or miraculous, the traditionally held Islamic view assumes that the miracle exists in the Qur'anic words themselves.⁶⁵ Thus, the scriptural text often advances the idea that words have the ability and power to change. For instance, the Qur'an states that God ordered Moses and Aaron to initiate a polite conversation with Pharaoh with the aim of discussing the release of the Israelites who were suffering terribly under his yoke:

“...Go, both of you, to Pharaoh, for he has indeed transgressed all bounds;
But speak to him mildly; perchance he may take warning or fear (Allah).”
(Qur'an *Ṭā Hā* 20:43-44)

Note, even to a tyrant of such magnitude who had “transgressed all bounds” both are astonishingly told to speak mildly. This fact did not escape Muslim scholars of course, but how they chose to understand the order to do so is interesting. Methodologically speaking, it is fact that classical sources of Qur'anic exegesis did not formulate any theories on constructive conversation derived from this verse. Even a rationalist like al-Rāzī did not recognise in the instruction to converse mildly the existence of a powerful ethico-humanistic approach and its potential. Al-

Rāzī asks: “Why did God command Moses to be polite and mild with an ungrateful unbeliever?”⁶⁶ The first answer he gives is that Pharaoh used to look after Moses when he was a little child and therefore was like a father to him. For this reason Moses was ordered to speak mildly to him.⁶⁷ The second answer he gives is that the nature of titans (*jabābirah*) is such that they must be spoken to mildly, with politeness, otherwise their arrogance surfaces and the objectives desired are unlikely to be gained.⁶⁸

Now the fact that al-Rāzī even chooses to pose the question as to why God commanded Moses to address this ungrateful unbeliever with politeness raises ethico-humanistic concerns. Similarly the limited reasons al-Rāzī gives for this as being mere parental respect on the one hand or insincere diplomacy on the other is indicative, for it suggests that the possibility of it being a humanistic approach with a view to reconciliation was not entirely present in his mind. Note, al-Rāzī calls Pharaoh an “ungrateful unbeliever,” whereas God Himself mentions him merely by his political title “Pharaoh.” This difference in discourse, between the pure text of the Qur’an and that of an interpreter, could occur under pressure of negative socio-political circumstances. For instance, al-Rāzī’s entire life was spent under the shadow of the Crusades which would explain his own line of reasoning. In other words he was unlikely to have witnessed any practical constructive conversations taking place with regard to interfaith relations, with a humanistic interpretation of the verse for him therefore, in all likelihood, becoming lost in the context of interfaith conflict.

To determine whether verses 20:43-44 serve as evidence for the importance of constructive conversation, a number of different contexts need to be outlined. The first is textual context. The verses appear in surah *Ṭā Hā*, the content of which is linked to a variety of different types of conversation. The second is the context of revelation. In this respect, the verses were revealed in Makkah when the Muslims were suffering under pagan oppression.⁶⁹ The role of the Prophet during the Makkan phase was to act as warner and to call to Islam, in other words conversation.

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As for the context of real historical action, this concerns God's command to Moses and Aaron to face Pharaoh. In fact, one of the aims was to warn Pharaoh against committing transgression. The sentence "for he has indeed transgressed all bounds" (Qur'an *Tā Hā* 20:43), functions as a reason for God's command to send Moses and Aaron to Pharaoh.⁷⁰ However, realisation of this purpose was to be conducted through words, note not mere words, but polite and mild words. To reiterate, God orders Moses and Aaron to speak to one of the most evil people mentioned in the Qur'an, mildly. To speak mildly (*qawlan layyinān*) to someone means to show respect for their opinions, neither to disregard them nor to make a mockery of them.⁷¹ It is vital to understand that even though God knew that Pharaoh was never going to change, nevertheless He still orders a speech based on *qawlan layyinān*. Moreover, by using the word *la'all*, which indicates possibility, God gives Moses and Aaron the hope of Pharaoh perhaps changing. The question is why? One answer is that a principle is elucidated, not confined to its own historical setting, but rather established for future application. The principle holds that we must engage in constructive communication, or constructive conversation, the underlying implication being that words have the power to change.

In sum all three contexts outlined above support the argument that verses 20:43-44 advance the issue of constructive conversation as an ethico-humanistic principle and means of communication and reconciliation.

The Qur'anic emphasis on the importance of constructive conversation can also be seen in other verses:

When it is said to them: "Come to what Allah hath revealed, and to the Messenger": Thou seest the Hypocrites avert their faces from thee in disgust. How then, when they are seized by misfortune, because of the deeds which their hands have sent forth? Then they come to thee, swearing by Allah. "We meant no more than good-will and conciliation!" Those men, – (Allah) knows what is in their hearts; so keep clear of them,⁷² but admonish⁷³ them, and speak to them a word to reach their very souls. (Qur'an *al-Nisā'* 4:61-63)

The Qur'anic textual context in which these verses occur, underlines the importance of referring to God's as well as the Prophet's judgement in the case of unmanageable disputes, *tanāzu*^c. In particular, the verses exemplify the negative attitude of the hypocrites towards referring to God's and the Prophet's judgement in the case of unmanageable disputes. Furthermore, the verses reveal that when hypocrites are seized by misfortune because of their refusal to accept just judgement, they do not draw useful lessons from the situation, but try instead to clarify their acceptance of wrong judgement by telling lies. In this context and under these circumstances, the Qur'an provides guidance on how Muslims should communicate with such people in such a situation.

The first guidance provided is the need to realise that God knows what is in people's hearts: "those men, – (Allah) knows what is in their hearts" (4:63). Consequently, the guidance implies that human interrelationships should be observed on the level of their actions and statements not intentions. Accordingly, Izutsu remarks that there are two kinds of relationships: horizontal relationships, which occur between humans; and vertical relationships which take place between God and human beings.⁷⁴ Therefore, in terms of horizontal relationships it is human statements that are taken into account. In contrast, with vertical relationships it is human intentions that will be judged by God in the hereafter. The lack of distinguishing between these relationships leads inevitably to tension among people.

The second Qur'anic guidance is derived from the words "*fa'a'rid^c anhum*" (4:63). Now, according to al-Rāzī the meaning of "*fa'a'rid^c anhum*" is either to turn away from these people without accepting their excuses or to turn away from them without disclosing their lies.⁷⁵ Both meanings given by al-Rāzī are built on the literal meaning of "*fa'a'rid^c*," which simply means turning a face away from something or somebody. However, Ibn Ashur argues that "*fa'a'rid^c anhum*" is used figuratively as a simile for forgiveness.⁷⁶

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The factor judging between al-Rāzī's and Ibn Ashur's opinions is the textual context. It is important to observe here that the textual context of "*fa'a'riḍ 'anhum*" provides an adequate reason for departing from the literal to the figurative meaning. This is because immediately following the command "*fa'a'riḍ 'anhum*" comes another command "*wa 'iḡhum*," that is, advise them (4:63). Naturally, it is forgiveness that creates a pathway for advice to enter human hearts. Otherwise, by turning away from those one is addressing it becomes impossible to advise them. For this reason, interpreting "*fa'a'riḍ 'anhum*" as being to forgive them is more appropriate, since it corresponds to the textual context, human nature, and God's description of the Prophet as a mercy to the worlds.

The third guidance the Qur'an provides concerning communication with the hypocrites is to offer advice with words conveying deep meaning touching their very hearts: "advise them, and speak to them a word to reach their very souls" (4:63). Classical interpretation of this however, once again seems to have been the product of socio-political pressure. For example, al-Zamakhsharī gives it a meaning as follows: "Speak to their evil souls a word threatening them to be destroyed and killed if their hypocrisy appears again. So, if it happens there will be no other solution except a sword."⁷⁷ Exactly the same meaning copied from al-Zamakhsharī, but not acknowledged, exists in al-Rāzī's *tafsīr*.⁷⁸ It is obvious how the interpretation of both scholars differs from the original Qur'anic discourse, which does not mention any such notions as "evil souls," intimidation, killing or swords.

What is the Qur'anic import? We see that constructive conversation appears in the verses in the context of reference to the hypocrites. We are informed that their intentions are only known to God. The role of Muslims is to forgive, advise, and speak meaningful words to them. The point being that the verses clearly indicate that conversation, in words communication, is the preferred Qur'anic means to effect reconciliation between people.

The Qur'an's emphasis on the power of words to change can also be seen in surah *Ibrāhīm*:

Art thou not aware how God sets forth the parable of a good word? [It is] like a good tree, firmly rooted, [reaching out] with its branches towards the sky, yielding its fruit at all times by its Sustainer's leave. And [thus it is that] God propounds parables unto men, so that they might bethink themselves [of the truth]. (Qur'an *Ibrāhīm* 14:24-25)

Classical sources of Qur'anic exegesis have held long discussion with extensive research on a) the kind of tree the good word parable refers to and b) the wider meaning of the term "good word"⁷⁹ burdening the purity of the verses with unnecessary polemics.

In fact leaving the words in their general sense leads the beauty of their meaning to emerge. Note both expressions, "good word" and "good tree" are a form of indefinite noun, *nakirah*, which indicates unspecified meaning. For this reason, the term "a good word" should be understood to mean in its broadest sense inclusively.

Keeping this view, the main focus of the verses would appear to be on the power, impact, and positive consequences of applying the principle of "a good word." The allegory to the "good tree" (the firm root, the branches reaching to the sky, the never ending fruit), denotes the enduring nature and benefit of this, leaving us with a clear picture that "a good word" is a firm means of communication, with lasting impact on human hearts and lives, always leading to positive results.

Brought together, these three elements demonstrate the power of "a good word" to change. As such in surah *Ibrāhīm*, (in which the verses occur), we see prophets applying this principle, engaged in conversation employing good constructive words as a means of communication.

In sum it has been shown that the Qur'an stresses the importance of constructive conversation as a means of communication and reconciliation between human beings. This is largely due to

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constructive words having the power to resolve problems and effect positive change. Moreover, the Qur'an prescribes that constructive conversation be implemented inclusively, that is with all members of society, the examples of Pharaoh and the hypocrites being a case in point. Similarly implementation of constructive conversation is prescribed for every stage of a society's socio-political development, since the Qur'an's emphasis on conversation is presented in both the Makkan and Madinan surahs, as shown in the case of surahs *Ṭā Hā* and *al-Nisā'*, respectively.

Qur'anic Principles of Constructing Conversation

Constructive communication is a two-way street. It requires the art of both communicating and listening. Mere conversation is not what is required in religious pluralism. Exchanging words with the aim of getting one's view across, or complaining without listening to the other side, achieves little or nothing, especially when it comes to religious pluralism. The religious conversation as it were is a delicate and nuanced affair, a vital function of which is to balance between commonalities and particularities. What is the best way to conduct it?

The Qur'an appears to delineate four principles to construct conversation and these are directly related to religious pluralism: a) purposeful conversation, b) objective conversation, c) non-judgmental conversation, and the principle of d) non-manipulative conversation.

Purposeful Conversation

The Qur'an states:

Say: "O People of the Book! Come to common terms⁸⁰ as between us and you: That we worship none but Allah; that we associate no partners with Him; that we erect not, from among ourselves, lords and patrons other than Allah." If then they turn back, say ye: "Bear witness that we (at least) are Muslims (bowing to Allah's Will)". (Qur'an *Āl 'Imrān* 3:64)

The verse represents an invitation to the People of the Book to meet with Muslims and engage in conversation. Note, the nature of this conversation is not aimless but has clear purpose. To express this purpose, and the meaningful nature of the encounter, the Qur'an uses the singular form of the word *kalimah* (a word) while referring to the conversation.⁸¹ Moreover, this conversation is described as equitable, *kalimah sawā'*. This means that it should have a clear purpose likely to be achieved equally by people. In this respect, Ibn 'Atiyyah remarks that *kalimah sawā'* means a conversation based on themes equally accepted by all people.⁸² The Oneness of God is determined by the verse therefore as a clear purpose of the conversation.

Objective Conversation

The Qur'an states:

And they say: "None shall enter Paradise unless he be a Jew or a Christian."

Those are their (vain) desires. Say: "Produce your proof if ye are truthful."

(Qur'an *al-Baqarah* 2:111)

The verse demonstrates certain religious groups confidently discussing their entry into Paradise without any evidence to support their opinion. For this reason, the Qur'an defines these opinions and statements as "vain desires," *amānī*. It also requires those making these statements to produce proof of their veracity. Note in this context of speech the Qur'an links truth directly to evidence. So in the case of religious pluralism, conversation is to be based on real facts and evidence, not on bias and partiality, otherwise this could lead to what Hassan Hanafi calls "clerical diplomacy and brotherly hypocrisy."⁸³

The principle of objectivity for the construction of conversation is also stressed in the Qur'an through the personality of the prophet Abraham. The Qur'anic Abraham represents objectivity in seeking the truth. Triggered by this Abrahamic model of objectivity, Hanafi attempts to establish a framework of objective

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conversation. He suggests that religions should be examined through a hermeneutical process which includes three major sections: criticism, interpretation and realisation. The first is historical criticism of the text. This aims to determine the authenticity of Scripture in history. The second defines the meaning of the text and mainly deals with the language and historical circumstances from which the text originated. The third applies to the realisation of the meaning of the text in human life, which is the final goal of the Divine Word.⁸⁴ This suggested framework could be of great importance for religious pluralism in terms of its epistemological dimensions.

Non-judgmental Conversation

The third Qur'anic principle to develop constructive conversation is the principle of *non-judgmental conversation*. In fact, this principle distinguishes constructive conversation from mere debate, in which the purpose of criticism is to achieve victory or domination. In this regard, the Qur'an mentions how Jews and Christians were judgemental of each other, with each accusing the other of unbelief:

The Jews say: "The Christians have naught (to stand) upon"; and the Christians say: "The Jews have naught (To stand) upon." Yet they (Profess to) study the (same) Book. Like unto their word is what those say who know not; but Allah will judge between them in their quarrel on the Day of Judgment. (Qur'an *al-Baqarah* 2:113)

Al-Wāḥidī mentions the occasion of this revelation. The occasion is transmitted by Ibn ʿAbbās and defined as authentic by al-Humaidan, who states that "its chain of transmission is authentic."⁸⁵ Al-Wāḥidī states with regards to the verse:

This was revealed about the Jews of Madinah and the Christians of Najran. When the delegation of Najran came to the Messenger of Allah, Allah bless him and give him peace, the Jewish rabbis came to see them. They had a debate with each other and the debate got so heated that they shouted at

each other. The Jews said: “You are not following the true religion,” and declared their disbelief in Jesus and the Gospel. In response, the Christians said: “You are not following the true religion,” and declared their disbelief in Moses and the Torah. Allah therefore revealed this verse.⁸⁶

It is obvious from the historical context expressed by the occasion of the revelation as well as from its textual context that the verse disapproves of judgemental behavior during conversation. Moreover, it shows that when such judgemental behavior emerges from people who are heirs of a divine guidance, it is a clear sign that they have lost that guidance,⁸⁷ becoming equal to those who are ignorant. It is important to understand that even though Muslims are not directly mentioned in the verse they are nevertheless not immune from its description or application to them. For this reason using applicability al-Rāzī comments on the verse:

Know that exactly the same manifestation happened among the community of Muhammad – Allah bless him and give him peace – where each group is judgemental about the other by accusations of unbelief, while they all still read the same Qur’an.⁸⁸

Therefore, judgemental behavior during conversation prevents that conversation from achieving its real purpose. For this reason, when it comes to the issue of judgement with regards to people’s beliefs, the Qur’an repeatedly states that this is the right of God only, for only God can judge people and decide their place in Heaven or Hell. Of course, the Qur’an clearly describes the features of those belonging to the truth and likely to enter Paradise, as it clearly describes the features of those belonging to evil and likely to enter Hell. However, such descriptions serve as guidance for human beings, not as authorisation from God for people to judge each other.

Non-manipulative Conversation

As far as the fourth Qur’anic principle of constructive conversation is concerned, this is the principle of *non-manipulative*

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conversation. Constructive conversation should not be based on a hidden agenda, to drag people into one's beliefs and convictions. In fact, this is one of the most problematic issues if not dilemmas religious people struggle with. Very often, conversation is not used as a means to present compelling argument, listen to others, or understand their viewpoint, but rather as a medium for conversion to certain beliefs. For instance, Carl Rahner's theory of "*Anonymous Christians*" (1966) is an example of what a constructive conversation in the case of religious pluralism should not be. This is largely because Rahner's theory is based on a hidden agenda to convert people. And this understanding of inter-faith communication is not confined to Christianity but applicable to all religions.

The principle of non-manipulative conversation can be derived from the following Qur'anic verse:

They say: "Become Jews or Christians if ye would be guided (to salvation)." Say thou: "Nay! (I would rather) the Religion of Abraham the True and he joined not gods with Allah." (*al-Baqarah* 2:135)

Al-Ṭabarī mentions the occasion for this revelation as narrated by Ibn ʿAbbās:

ʿAbdullāh ibn Ṣūryā al-Aʿwar [a Jew] said to the Prophet Muhammad, may Allah bless him and give him peace: "There is no truth except ours, so if you [Muhammad] want to be guided you should follow us." And Christians said the same. Then, Allah revealed the verse.⁸⁹

As this shows both groups established an approach to communication based on religious exclusivism, which naturally leads to the idea of conversion. In contrast, verse 2:135 moves the discussion to the personality of prophet Abraham, who is presented in the Qur'an as a sign of objectivity in seeking the truth. Thus, the Qur'an disapproves adoption of any manipulative approach with respect to interfaith dialogue (conversation) prescribing instead an approach based on compelling evidence.

In sum as analysis in this section has shown the Qur'an attaches great importance to constructive conversation as a means of communication between all people at every level of the socio-political stages of society. According to the Qur'an, constructive conversation or communication must be a meaningful act whereby different views are intelligibly presented on the basis of compelling argument and evidence, and where each side makes an attempt to understand the other. Thus, the function of constructive conversation is to broaden the range of opinions and arguments and hence to attain a reasonable balance between differences and similarities.

[4]
Conclusion

The dialectical elements of commonality and diversity are presented in the Qur'an as a fact of nature and unchangeable law inherent in the universe and human nature. Thus, the process of normative religious pluralism cannot be regarded in the Qur'an as mere theory or idea. Rather it is advanced as a divine law emerging from the gift of free will given by God to humanity, the natural result of which is diversity. Consequently, both the exclusivist approach, which refuses to accept the different other, as well as the relativist approach, which disregards particularities, contradict Qur'anic guidance in this regard. This is because religious commonalties and particularities should not be employed as a means of religious dilution or seclusion, respectively. Rather, they should be balanced by way of a constructive conversation, which is endorsed by the Qur'an as an essential vehicle for communication between all people at every stage of the socio-political development of society.