Conclusion

Religious pluralism is a complex concept accommodating a multiplicity of definitions, each containing considerable discrepancy between them in terms of their themes, scope, and areas of contention. Inability to distinguish between the different types of religious pluralism and to adopt hence a relevant approach corresponding to its appropriate type pave the way for misleading conclusions to be drawn which can impact how we perceive, tolerate, and co-exist with different Others. One of the results of this inability has been the emergence of mutually exclusive theories concerning interfaith relations.

Yet for Muslims religious pluralism and interfaith relations is nothing new. In fact, being the final Revelation, the Qur'an encompassed earlier religious traditions, centuries ahead of its time, giving precise guidance on not only how to live with the Other, including those of other faiths, but also how to conduct discourse with intelligence and respect. It was unique in doing so. A cardinal principle has been to establish and maintain peace, after all as the Qur'an itself states we have been created to "know" each other, not fight or cause turmoil and oppression. "O mankind, indeed We have created you from a male and a female and made you peoples and tribes that you may know one another. Indeed, the most noble of you in the sight of Allah is the most righteous of you. Indeed, Allah is Knowing and Acquainted" (Qur'an 49:13).

This sense of community, of shared humanity, is so integral to the Muslim sense of itself, and of its non-Muslim neighbors, that it forms a crucial part of how Muslims approach the social, cultural, religious and geographical boundaries of the Other and interact on the basis of a shared humanity and shared values.

Even animals are referred to in the Qur'an as living in communities, such is the importance of the concept. What is to be borne in mind is that religious pluralism can be interpreted in a number of ways and in the Islamic context we need to be clear as to the requirements of the Qur'an interpreting its injunctions correctly. In reference to the Qur'an, religious pluralism has largely been historically challenged by two factors: socio-political context and the hermeneutical process. The relationship between the two is inseparable and has created different exegetical paradigms with respect to religious pluralism one of which is pure exclusivism and a reluctance to interact with those outside our religious boundaries.

This persistent exclusivist attitude seems to have been shaped by historical circumstance, forming the specific historical context in which exegetical literature was produced. It is no coincidence that the socio-political context and formative period of this literature – and thus the most influential part of it – coincided with a time of religious conflict, persecution and warfare, which commenced during the time of the Prophet and peaked during the Crusades. For instance, key exegetes such as al-Zamakhsharī, Ibn ʿAṭiyyah, al-Rāzī, Ibn ʿArabī, al-Qurṭubī, etc. spent their entire lives in the context of the first Crusades and hence witnessed interfaith relations from that particular backdrop of religiously motivated war.

As a consequence, Qur'anic hermeneutics came to be negatively affected in the shape of two claims. The first was abrogation of those Qur'anic verses prescribing a positive attitude towards non-Muslims. The second was to specify the general sense of verses relating positively to non-Muslims, and hence restrict their meaning exclusively only to Muslims. Embedded in the atomistic approach to Qur'anic exegesis, which naturally prevents crystallisation of understanding based on thematic coherence of a topic, the two claims have left little chance for the humanistic view to flourish in Qur'anic exegesis.

As a result, Qur'anic guidance on self-defence in the context of war and oppression has been emphasised and given greater

precedence over its message of peace and universal ethical teachings. The repercussion being that religious exclusivism has failed to distinguish between the Qur'an's theological view on the beliefs of others and its ethical view on the followers of other beliefs. The natural result of this failure was the division of people into believers and unbelievers, which is tantamount to the territories of peace and war, respectively. Or in a better case scenario, it resulted in a definition of the relationship between Muslims and non-Muslims as being based on *da'wah*, which would appear as a strategy of embrace.

There exist different types of pluralisms as mentioned earlier. Normative Religious Pluralism, Soteriological Religious Pluralism, Epistemological Religious Pluralism, and Alethic Religious Pluralism. For Muslims, and with regards to the Qur'an, confusion about soteriological, alethic, and normative religious pluralism has led to the emergence of an exclusivist approach. This position developed as a theological stance firstly historically against the backdrop of conflict constantly necessitating Muslim defence and secondly, through using an atomistic approach in Qur'anic exegesis. Misleading *theological*, note *not Qur'anic* as is the contention of this study, conclusions emerged which were radical or hardline in nature, claiming that Muslims had no obligations towards non-Muslims. Moreover, claims that non-Muslims should be deprived of their rights, have their dignity violated, their property taken, and even their blood shed often appear in *tafsīr* literature. In other words Muslims closed ranks in reaction to constant hostility.

However – and given the current civilisational context of diversity – adopting a thematic approach to understanding Qur'anic texts we note fundamental differences between its findings and those of the exclusivists, the primary being that there is ample room for accommodation of normative religious pluralism. Unlike soteriological and alethic pluralism, whose issues are inherently irreconcilable for Muslims as they concern core aspects of religious truth and salvation which Muslims cannot concede to, normative religious pluralism concentrates on

terrestrial dimensions and ramifications allowing for a genuine discourse whose objective is understanding and peacebuilding.

The legitimacy of normative religious pluralism in Islam largely emerges from the Qur'an's ethical system and in particular its recognition of the universality of freedom of belief and respect for human dignity. In this case, the Qur'anic ethical system cannot be regarded as subject to abrogation or restriction on the basis of religious affiliation. It's teachings of the universality of freedom of belief and respect for human dignity rejects the exclusive ethico-behavioral position. In fact, the ethical system repeatedly outlined in the Qur'an is inseparably related to belief in God and the Day of Judgement suggesting that the ethico-behavioral pattern prescribed for Muslims is not limited to its outward aspect only, but also penetrates to the inward dimensions of human behavior. Thus the principles of normative religious pluralism are not alien to Islam, and the Qur'an in fact sets the highest standards, rejecting any mutual understanding based on false diplomacy or hidden strategies of embrace.

Accordingly, the objectives of the human relationship universally prescribed in the Qur'an cannot be restricted exclusively to a particular religious group nor can they be directed to serve nefarious goals. However, since four of these universal objectives are mentioned in Madinan surahs (that is revealed in a multicultural society as well as in the textual context of religious diversity) they can be employed to serve as main objectives of normative religious pluralism. Arranged in the following ascending order: mutual understanding-*taʿāruf*; mutual engagement-*taʿāwun*; mutual contribution-*istibāq al-khayrāt*; and mutual support-*tadāfuʿ*, these objectives construct the axis of the peacebuilding process and encourage the achievement of universal righteousness and excellence in the context of diversity.

Furthermore, the two main, dialectical elements of normative religious pluralism, namely diversity and commonality, 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 light of

the Qur'an as a theory or mere idea, in fact such a process is advanced as a divine law emerging from God's creation of mankind with free will, the natural result of which is diversity. Consequently, both the exclusivist's approach, which refuses to accept the different other, and that of the relativists, which disregards particularities, contradict not only the Qur'anic worldview, but also natural laws and human nature. Moreover, prescribed by the Qur'an as an essential vehicle for communication between all people at every stage of the socio-political development of a society, constructive conversation is expected to strike a right balance between elements of religious commonality and those of particularity. This prevents their being employed as a means of religious dilution or seclusion, respectively. In other words, the function of constructive conversation is to keep the process of normative religious pluralism on an even path, away from extremes.

This Qur'anic conception of normative religious pluralism, an important facet of developing and promoting peacebuilding, has been seriously threatened by exclusive interpretations which seemingly contradict the overall message of the Qur'an, and which misinterpret Qur'anic prescriptions such as fighting non-Muslims and not taking them as friends (*awliyā'*), to lend scriptural credibility to this exclusivist position, when in reality they have failed to determine the root cause and scope of these prescriptions. For example, the basis for the imperative to fight is not rooted in the belief system of others, but their initiation of war on people of peace, meaning that the scope of the imperative falls only on people of war. The Qur'anic prescription of not taking the Jews and Christians as *awliyā'* is governed by two aspects. The first is purely theological, where the prohibition is related to Muslim reliance on Jews and Christians as sources of religious guidance aiming at religious fusion, and thus leading to apostasy. The basis for the prohibition in this case is rooted in preserving religious particularities, which constitute an essential element of the structure of religious pluralism. The second aspect relates to any involvement in partisanship with the Jews and

Christians against Islam. The reason for the prohibition being enmity and transgression. Thus the basis for the prohibition in this case is rooted in, and limited to, those Jews and Christians bent on transgression, aggression, and enmity towards Muslims. These two aspects aside, any kind of friendship with Jews and Christian based on love and affection, as well as any kind of alliance with them seeking to spread all that is good and fight all that is evil, is not subject to prohibition. Thus, providing that these Qur'anic prescriptions are related to issues such as aggression and transgression, but not to the belief systems of non-Muslims, it appears that the prescriptions can play an important role in preventing the process of the normative religious pluralism from suffering any corruption.

Finally, the Qur'anic conception of normative religious pluralism perfectly corresponds to both the prophetic ethico-behavioral pattern of dealing with non-Muslims and universal human values. In this way, the dynamic nature of the Qur'anic text establishes a right balance between authenticity and modernity. In doing so it thus, on the one hand, preserves human particularities as a source of dignity, and on the other provides a vast common ground for the promotion of normative religious pluralism as a value system on an environmental, moral, and spiritual basis.

Therefore, the real danger appears to be the substantial paradox of claiming to emulate the Prophet, claim the universality of Islam, yet threaten division by remaining committed to an exclusivist perspective which pays lip service to peaceful co-existence and respect of other faith traditions, of being created into "peoples and tribes that you may know one another" and which when all is said and done is based on only a few select verses of the Qur'an.