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A Humanistic and Naturalistic Approach to the Dialogue Between Heavenly Monotheistic Religions

Humanistični in naturalistični pristop k dialogu med monoteističnimi religijami

Abstract: The earlier encounter of three monotheistic religions (Christianity, Judaism and Islam) dates back to the first quarter of the 7th century AC when the Qurʾān was revealed to Muḥammad, the prophet of Islam, so that he could warn the polytheistic tribes and the people of the book who had allegedly corrupted Abraham's belief system. In the understanding of this new religion that is based on the same religious and cultural roots as the previous two religions (Christianity, Judaism), Qurʾānic theological perspective and narrative are final revisions made by God and revealed to the prophet Muḥammad. So, the first meetings between them began under the shadow of these sorts of challenges. These encounters caused a contention as to which side has more coherent, reasonable and divine understanding of God, rather than providing agreeable, inclusive and egalitarian dialogue. Therefore, in this article, we will firstly examine the role played by the Qur'ānic verses and major exegetes who have represented the interpretative tradition in Islamic culture for centuries. Secondly, with the concept of the human-centrism, we will bring a new approach to the God-centred dialogue which was almost restricted to the theological competition, to sort out the challenges caused by this contention.

Keywords: dialogue, religion, Bible, Qur'ān, humanity

Izvleček: *Zgodnje srečanje treh monoteističnih religij (krščanstva, judovstva in islama) sega v prvo četrtino 7. stoletja po Kr., ko je bil Koran razkrit islamskemu preroku Mohamedu, da bi posvaril politeistična plemena in kristjane, ki so domnevno izmaličili Abrahamov sistem verovanja. V tej novi veri, ki izhaja iz istih verskih in kulturnih temeljev kot prejšnji dve (krščanstvo, judovstvo), sta koranska teološka perspektiva in pripoved razumljeni kot končna, popravljena različica, ki jo je ustvaril Bog in razkril prerok Mohamed. V senci teh sprememb so se torej začela prva srečanja treh religij, ki pa so kmalu prerasla v prepir o tem, katera stran premore bolj koherentno, smiselno in božansko razumevanje Boga, namesto da bi omogočila strpen, složen in enakopraven dialog. Zato v tem članku najprej preučimo vlogo nekaterih verzov Korana in glavnih eksegetov, ki so skozi stoletja predstavljali interpretativno izročilo v islamski kulturi. Nato s konceptom, ki poudarja človeka in humanost, predlagamo nov pristop k medverskemu dialogu, ki se je že skoraj sprevrgel v tekmovanje med verstvi, da bi rešili težave, ki jih povzroča ta spor.*

1   The short history of the encounter and the introduction to exegesis of relevant verses

In the Islamic sources, the relationship between Islam and other beliefs (Christianity and Judaism) began at very early times. The scriptures contain a number of accounts of argumentative conversations between the Islam and the other religious groups (Ibn Kathīr 1997, 2:47; Trimingham 1979, 305–306; Öztürk, 83–88). Early Islamic hadith corpus and history texts incorporate the speeches made by rival religious authorities and the prophet Muḥammad (al-Buḫārī 2002, *Kitāb al-Maġāzī* 72; Muslim 2006, *Kitāb al-Ādāb* 29; Ibn Hishām 1936, 1:573–576). In the scope of these ancient works, Muslim historians determined certain groups of pagans in Makka, Christians and Jews in Madīna who mostly stood against his recitations and rejected their sacred origin. These rival devout groups who had already completed their religious formation too much earlier than Islam, neither admitted prophecy of the messenger Muḥammad nor recognized his divine authority (Ibn Isḥāq 1963, 5:372–412; Ibn Kathīr 1997, 5:55; al-Balāḏurī 1901, 75).

The Islamic sources encapsulate a dozen of evidences picturing argumentative cases between Islam and other groups. Many verses in the Qur'ān pull the reader into the ongoing polemic between Islam and other groups (Q 3:59; al-Buḫārī 2002, *Kitāb al-Maġāzī*, 72; Zebiri 2004, 4: 114). The main claims of the Islam are that the messenger Muḥammad tells truth, he was assigned by God to guide people to the righteousness and happiness, and the Qur'ān is a holy book correcting the monotheistic belief falsified by Christian and Jewish clergymen (*aḫbār* and *ruhbān*) and confirming the holy books, Torah and Gospel, sent down before (Q 3:3.69.98; 4:171). The people who rejected these claims were Jews and Christians that had been principal owners of this Semitic and holy monotheistic culture for hundreds of years. They also did not submit to Muḥammad's prophecy and Islamic concept of belief by implying that he was far from being a prophet (Kermani 2006, 109; Berg 2006, 191; Zebiri 2006, 274).

They alluded that the reciter's message is a fraudulence, consisting of old stories, or fabrication of the imagination (Q 6:89; 3:99). The Qur'ān replied

that the Christians and Jews denied the monotheism (*al-tawḥīd*) by taking the Jesus and Ezra as a Lord, thus intending to accuse them of being polytheistic. This attitude of the Qur'ān eliminated them from being among monotheistic religions, and made itself the only monotheistic religion that is worth believing in. And also, The Qur'ān particularly impeached Christian and Jewish religious leaders (Rabbis and priests) for manipulating the divine words (Q 9:30). On the other hand, the Qur'ān also mentioned similar solemn figures and divine stories found in Bible, thus it has sought to indicate that Qur'ān came from the same provenance as Torah and Gospel did (Q 4:159).

It seems that Qur'ān's rejection of other heavenly religions' concept of deity by positioning Islam at the highest stage of divinity on the one hand and confirming them with similar figures and stories on the other hand, reveals that the Qur'ānic discourse is, to some extent, allusive and elliptical (Q 3:19; Wansbrough 1977, 57). Many Qur'ānic passages mention common ancestors and prophets such as Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob, Moses and Jesus, and some others deal with the joint houses of worship and the holy book stories between heavenly monotheistic religions, which play such a crucial role in the creation of common religious background. Consider the following examples:

> We said: »O Adam! dwell thou and thy wife in the Garden; and eat of the bountiful things therein as (where and when) ye will; but approach not this tree, or ye run into harm and transgression.« (Q 2:35)

> Glory to (Allah) Who did take His servant for a Journey by night from the Sacred Mosque to the Farthest Mosque (*al-masjid al-aqsā*), whose precincts We did bless, in order that We might show him some of Our Signs (Q 17:1).

So, the Qur'ān dictates Muslims to believe in those holy books (Torah and Gospel) descended long before itself, in which these stories exist, and in prophets who are the precursor of monotheistic religions (Q 3:84). It appears that this kind of approach served Islam in obtaining a legitimate ground among the older religions.

2   The exegesis of the relevant verses

The first verse we will examine here is *al-Māʾida* 5:51. Taking into consideration the meaning of the verse, the classical Muslim scholars seem to be convinced that taking the people of books for their friends, and being in a close relationship with them is not convenient for a Muslim. Because, in their view, the people of the book seem to be a friend, but they are actually not, as they try to convert Muslims from Islam, making concealed agreements against Muslims, hoping the prophet to be failed, breaking the deals when they have a chance, and being in an effort to change the provenance of the monotheistic religion (al-Rāzī 1981, 12:17; al-Bayḍāwī 1998, 2:131; Ibn ʿAṭiyya 2007, 3:195). For instance, Al-Bayḍāwī writes:

> This verse means never count on them, interacting socially and living together by establishing a society or communication with them. Since, they are different community with regard to their religion, and which is why, they only rely on each other. The phrase in the verse »And he amongst you that turns to them (for friendship) is of them« refers to the ultimate necessity of keeping away from them as the hadith of prophet suggests »(be so away that) you shall not see their fire (house) they set«. (1998, 3:131)

Conveying the prophet's hadith that instructs Muslims to avoid making contact and living in close proximity to them, Al-Bayḍāwī implies that dialogue between both sides is not advised by Sunnah nor by the Qur'ānic verses (1998, 2:131).

In his description of the verse, Ibn ʿAṭiyya noted that the verse forbade friendship and neighbourliness with the people of the book, for it may result in cooperation and mixture with them. Citing the story of prophet Muḥammad's lending his armour to a Jewish person, he said that the official businesses, like economic and cultural relationships, other than companionship, however, are permitted by The Qurʾān (2007, 3:195).

In his commentary on the verse, al-Ṭabarī suggested something more interesting:

> This verse refers to that some Christians and Jews are helpful to one another and cooperated against those who dissent their faith and worship. God informs Muslims that those who take them as a companion are counted among them, and as they take against you (Muslims), you take against them /.../ if one took them for a friend, that explicitly means they waged war against Islam (*li ahli īmān*) and was away from Muslims. (1969, 395)

It seems that in al-Ṭabarī's thinking, taking someone for a friend implies backing them up, keeping their secrets and helping them in tough times like war. Furthermore, whoever takes them for a friend and helps them in any way, is considered as being among them and believing in their faith. The formulation in his mind concerning the verse is »Lā yatawallā mutawallin aḥadan illā wa huwa bihi wa dīnihi wa mā huwa alayhi rāḍin. Wa iḏā raḍiyahu wa raḍiya dīnahu faqad ʿādā mā ḫālafahu wa saḥiṭahu wa sāra ḥukmuhu ḥukmahu« that refers to:

> Whoever takes someone for a friend they are considered to be with them and believe in their religion. They agree what their friend agrees and oppose what their friend opposes, thus their friend's religious law becomes their own law. (1969, 396)

In support of his argument, al-Ṭabarī mentions the common practical law between Banū Taġlib Christians and some Jewish communions. As he recounts in his commentary, the judges decided on Banī Taġlib Christians about marriage and animal sacrifice by the Jewish law, because Banī Taġlib agreed with Banī Israīl's law beside helping them and taking them for a friend, though their religions' doctrines are substantially different. After firstly presenting the immediately preceding passages, secondly al-Ṭabarī passed on to the status of the one taking the others as a friend: »After Islam's coming, those who convert to another religion (by making a friend from that religion) are permitted to be killed for leaving (*li riddatihi*) the religion of truth.« Thirdly, connecting the beginning of the verse with the end, al-Ṭabarī wrote that taking them for a friend, in spite of their hostility to the prophet and Allah, means waging war on prophet and all Muslims. (1969, 395–402)

The commentary passages described above evidently display the negative attitude of Islamic commentators towards the experience of living in proximity, helping each other and taking companions believing in another religion, most likely for fear of the inclination of Muslims towards other religions through making friend and living together. In addition to this sort of alienation and separation between both communities, some Muslims wearing clothes similar to other religions' adherents were accused of looking like others or being an unbeliever by conservative religious groups with classical Islamic understanding (Scholar Committee 2015, 1:321–325; al-Sanūsī 1976, 122–124). As far as the classical Islamic law corpuses (*al-Kutub al-Fıqhiyyah*) offer, judiciaries agreed that resembling others by wearing similar clothes like hat (*burnīṭa, qalanisuwa, zunnār, ṭuriṭūr*) or acting like them, either leads to denying their own faith (Islam) or committing something forbidden by religion (*ḥarām*) (Kuwait Scholar Committee 1983, 12:5–10; Indian Scholar Committee 1991, 2:276; al-Mawsilī 2015, 4:150; al-Azharī 1960, 2:278). They narrate the tradition attributed to ʿAbdallah b. ʿOmar, »Whoever imitates a people is one of them« (Abū Dāwūd 2009, *Libās*, 4:4031) as an evidence endorsing their challenge. If one imitates them by wearing the dress specific to Christians and Jews with the intention of loving, approving, venerating and praising it, they are considered as an unbeliever or apostatized by all of Islamic scholars; but, if they do it without honouring and praising it, there are two views; first one: by certain Ḥanafīs and Mālikīs they are seen as apostatized, because there is the tradition transmitted from the prophet, »Whoever imitates a people is one of them (*Man tashabbaha bi qawmin fahuwa minhum*)«; second one: by the other Ḥanafīs, Mālikīs, Shāfiʾīs and Ḥanbalīs, they become a sinner committed the one forbidden by religion (*ḥarām*) (Kuwait Scholar Committee 1983, 12:5–10).

Also, some prominent scholars appear to be concerned about the difference between living in the people of the book's land and in the Islamic land. As a Ḥanafī jurist lived in Palestine in 18th century, Aḥmad al-Ramlī challenged that imitating the other religious adherents in Islamic lands by wearing their particular dresses like *burnīṭa* and *qailansuwa* surely results in abjuration (Kuwait Scholar Committee 1983, 12:6–7; al-Anṣārī 2012, 4:11; al-Tamīmī 1928, 266). Born in the last period of ʿAbbāsī Empire in the North Syria and studied in Damascus, one of the most outstanding scholar Ibn Taymiyyah argued that imitating them in action, word and behaviour

causes to be apostatized. He, however, still permits it under certain conditions like in the cases of protecting your family from foreigners' ill actions, deceiving the people of the book and snitching on them by disguising yourself or confronting your body by protecting your head and body from excessive heat and cold. In other words, Ibn Taymiyyah allows Muslims to wear dress resembling theirs on condition of benefiting the Muslim community or being at a push (Kuwait Scholar Committee 1983, 7:6). Additionally, a number of Tunisian scholars like Muḥammad Ḥasan al-Najjār, Muḥammad al-Ḥanafiyyah and Muḥammad b. ʿUṯmān al-Sanūsī claimed that wearing *burnīṭa* may lead Muslims to be apostatized. In his book *al-Rihla al-Hijāziyyah*, al-Sanūsī wrote:

> We receive news that most of the prominent Muslims go to unbelievers' lands, wearing *burnīṭa* there and mixing with their society. I seek refuge in Allah from such a mistake. However, I have not seen any Christians entering the Islamic land and walking around the streets in turbans, this is one of the reasons Europeans despise Muslims. (1976, 122–124; Halil 2021, 38)

The pioneers of Islamic tradition who were not content with it attempted to remove any factor and possibility leading to socio-cultural interaction, intercourse and similarity between the two societies. Running through the classical *fiqh* books we observe a range of actions prohibited by Islamic jurisprudence to reduce the similarity and interchange which naturally occurs between the two communities. For example, for fear of being similar to the people of the book, they forbid giving any gift or candle to anybody or invitation to their festivity like Christmas day (Kuwait Scholar Committee 1983, 12:8; Ibn al-Hāj 2007, 2:47). Ibn Qāsım Mālikī said:

> It is an abominable thing for a Muslim to give a present for a Christian in their feast and honour them venerating their festival. (Ibn al-Hāj 2007, 2:47; al-Jawziyya 1997, 2:725)

On the other hand, the people of the books are required to keep their social and physical distance from Muslims to be able to construct their churches and practice their religion. For that some conditions are set, for instance, the people of the book will never carve the rings or seals by embellishing them with the Arabic letters, imitating Muslims' weapons and

carrying them, fastening their belts as Muslims do, engaging in the business of packsaddle, taking Muslims' nicknames, speaking like them, combing their hair as they do, getting on Muslims' boat and carriages, performing their religious ceremony loudly, ringing their bell noisily and showing their cross on Muslim streets (al-Subkī, 4:174; Ismāʿīl al-Anṣārī 2005, 1:16).

Ultimately, it seems that Muslim scholars have, for many centuries, basically pushed both sides away from each other regarding a wide range of issues with reference to the following verse:

> O ye who believe! take not the Jews and the Christians for your friends and protectors. (Q 5:51)

and the hadith:

> Whoever imitates a people is one of them. (Abū Dāwūd 2009, *Libās*, 4:4031)

In this circumstance, when both societies have been separated from each other over the centuries and the perception of the fact that they are fairly different societies and cultures has been etched into their identities, it has been quite difficult to build an experience of living together. However, we will attempt to display it is still fairly possible under certain conditions in the titles *Recent Approaches to the Dialogue* and *My Reflections on the Possibility of Dialogue*.

The second verse we will examine here is *al-Tawba* 9:29:

> Fight those who believe not in Allah nor the Last Day, nor hold that forbidden which hath been forbidden by Allah and His Messenger, nor acknowledge the religion of Truth, (even if they are) of the People of the Book, until they pay the *Jizyah* with willing submission, and feel themselves subdued.

This verse revolves around the term 'al-Jizya' which highlights that the people of the book are not equal to Muslims, and commands them to fight the people of the book until they pay the *jizya*. In his distinguished commentary *Mafātīh al-Ghayb*, the 12th-century exegete Faḫr al-Dīn al-Rāzī

(d. 1209/606) inferred from the cited verse that it is religiously obligatory for Muslims to fight them until they convert to Islam or pay the *jizya*, because of four reasons articulated in the verse, which are: »Believing not in God, nor the Last Day, nor holding that forbidden which had been forbidden by Allah and His Messenger, nor acknowledging the religion of Truth.« (1981, 16:28)

From his point of view, al-Rāzī expresses that the first reason basically just refers to their corrupted belief system of God. Accordingly, the first reason that actually requires Muslims to wage a war against them is nothing but their falsified concept of God's existence and unity. He suggested that the people of the book believe in God like *mushabbihas* and *mujassimas*, whose belief is that God entered into all beings, including human-being, thus conceiving the Human as a God (al-Rāzī 1981, 16:29–32). He wrote:

> As *mushabbihas* suggest, nothing can exist in the universe, but only the beings allow to be entered into themselves, in other words, a being can exist only if it can be penetrated by another being. However, as the Islamic sources (Qur᾽ān and hadith) and rational evidence prove that God does not exist as an object, perceptible by five senses and enter in any being, *mushabbihas* might be treated as deniers of the existence and oneness of God. Accordingly, as some Jews believe like *mushabbihas*, they are also counted as a denier. As for the case of the Christians, they firstly divided the godhood into three categories: the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, then argued God incarnated in the Jesus, that is, he has got a characteristic of godhood, so this kind of thinking completely constitutes polytheism and literally contradicts God's uniqueness. (28–33)

It seems that because al-Rāzī dealt with the people of the book's belief from Islamic theology's point of view, he argued that they perceived God in human form, and therefore, they disrupted one of the most essential and unique attribute of God, which is his dissimilarity with the created entities (*muẖālafatun li al-ḥawādis*) (28).

According to al-Rāzī and most theologians in the Islamic world, the thinking of »al-tashbīh« (Strothmann 1936, 1) leads to his unity being disrupted,

because when God resembles human beings in their attributes and actions, he might turn into a kind of a human, thereby losing his godhood and divinity (Māturīdī, 75.111.118–120).

As for the second reason, al-Rāzī wrote:

> The people of the book tend to believe in the spiritual resurrection, refuting physical one. The Qur'ān, however, refers to the people doing some earthly actions such as eating, drinking, wandering, etc. in heaven, and being tortured and afflicted in hell. Accordingly, those who denies physical revival become disbeliever. (1981, 16:28)

Therefore, in his mind, the second reason is basically about their wrong understanding of the afterlife and resurrection (28–32).

For al-Rāzī, the third reason is about their corruption of the divine words and substitution of their own words for them. He claimed that the people of the book tended to distort their holy books (Gospel and Torah), instead of learning God's sacred orders and teaching them to others. Therefore, they permitted what their book forbade by changing and corrupting their divine scriptures (*lā yuḥarrimūna mā ḥarrama Allāhu*) (al-Rāzī 1981, 16:29–30).

The fourth reason in the cited verse is that they do not believe the Islam is a religion of truth and the Qur'ān was revealed by God (*lā yaʿtaqidūna fī siḥḥati dīn al-Islām*). They maintain that the Muḥammad cannot be a prophet, he is only a reciter of poem or sorcerer. They suggest that the reciter's message (the Qur'ān) is fraudulent, consisting of old stories, or a fabrication of the imagination. For al-Rāzī and other Islamic scholars, therefore, they are accepted as disbelievers (*kāfir*) and the verse instructs Muslims to fight against them until they convert to the truest and latest religion or pay the *jizya* (al-Rāzī 1981, 16:30–31).

Additionally, the way of paying *jizya* also humiliates the people of the book. According to the Islamic sources, the people of the book should have paid *jizya* under certain conditions, for example, they had to pay it by feeling themselves subdued, standing, not sitting, walking, not riding on a boat, in person, not through someone else, etc. (al-Rāzī 1981, 16:31–32).
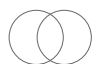
In other words, it seems that they were pushed to pay it as marginalized citizens throughout the Muslim sovereignty.

In that case, here we observe a challenging matter about paying the *jizya* in regard of modern common life standards between both sides, which is quite noteworthy. As it is seen from the immediately entire preceding context, when Muslims seize the power (democratically or with another way), according to the cited verse (9:29), the people of the book have to pay *jizya* or defend themselves against Muslims just because they believe in God in a different way. In other words, these two religious communities are not able to live side by side unless the people of the book convert to Islam or pay the *jizya* (*al-Islām* and *al-Jizya*) (al-Rāzī 1981, 16:28–32). Although today this is not applied practically, that does not mean it won't in be in the future, because it still exists in the holy scriptures (Q 9:29). So, the question is: can Muslims today learn to live together with others without performing the order of *jizya*, though the verse of jizya still stands in the Qur'ān? Accordingly, if Muslim society attempts to practice those norms in the modern communities as a religious requirement, the verse of *jizya*, that will most likely turn into a means of discrimination, humiliation, hostility and inequality for any country in which both sides might live in the modern age. Obviously, the verse of *jizya* can constitute a trouble that should be dealt with by both sides in order to establish a good dialogue or develop fruitful intercourse at the present time.

The third verse we will examine here is *Āl ʿImrān* 3:98-101:

> Say: »People of the Book! Why do you reject the signs of Allah when Allah is witness to all that you do?« Say: »People of the Book! Why do you hinder one who believes from the way of Allah, seeking that he follow a crooked way, even though you yourselves are witness to its being the right way?« Allah is not heedless of what you do. Believers! Were you to obey a party of those who were given the Book, they might cause you to renounce the Truth after you have attained to faith.

As al-Ṭabarī, al-Qurṭubī and al-Rāzī report, this verse revolves around the notorious traits of the people of the scripture such as their denying the proofs confirming the prophethood of the Muḥammad foretold in their

books and claiming that the Torah revealed to Moses was not abrogated, thus attempting to convert the Muslims to their religion by casting doubt on the evidences upholding Muhammad's prophecy. And also, according to the exegetical sources, those verses include some narrative accounts about their breaking the relationship between the tribes, al-Ḫazraj and al-ʾAws, by spreading gossip and secret. Certain major exegetes like al-Ṭabarī, al-Qurṭubī, al-Rāzī and al-Zamaḫsharī heavily excoriated and condemned them over their negative actions (al-Qurṭubī 2006, 5:233–240; al-Rāzī 1981, 8:170–181).

Blaming them as being talebearers, al-Zamaḫsharī narrated the story about a Jewish person, Shās b. Qays, which is attributed to Ibn Isḥāq:

> It is reported that an old and factious Jew named Shās b. Qays was fiercely hostile to Muslim believers, being extremely jealous of them and slandering them all the time. One day, when he saw the young people of two tribes, al-Ḫazraj and al-ʾAws, in a very sincere conversation, he was extremely disturbed. Concerned that this alliance between those two Muslim tribes would endanger their own existence, he summoned a Jewish youth and told him to remind both tribes about the past wars between them and the satirical poems that both sides recited against each other. Following his provoking of tribalism, they started quarrelling with one another, bragging about their victories, and thus inciting war by getting angry. That latest news reached the Prophet Muḥammad and he, along with some Muhājir (who emigrated from Mecca to Madinah accompanying Muḥammad) and ʾAnṣār (who helped muhajirs in Madinah) immediately came to them and said »You want the tradition of ignorance period (*al-Jāhiliyya*), pursuing the custom of it, while I am among you and God accustomed you to each other.« And finally, both sides figured out that this is a sort of whim that the devil drove and the trap he set for his enemies. They, then, put their guns down and hugged each other. (Al-Zamaḫsharī 1998, 597–603)

In his commentary on *Āl ʿImrān* 3:98, al-Zamaḫsharī insisted on reciting their intrigue and plot, claiming that they obstruct the people from the path of God by deceiving them with casting doubt on it (1998, 1:598), thereby seeking to make it crooked. To crystallize it, al-Zamaḫsharī gives

a number of examples of their noxious words and actions such as their suggesting that the Bible was not abrogated by God, seeking to change the signs in the Bible that indicate the prophethood of Muḥammad and keeping the truth under wraps because of their personal profits and desires. It is noteworthy that while the most prominent exegetes in the East and West like al-Ṭabarī, al-Qurṭubī, al-Rāzī, al-Zamaḫsharī, al-Tabarsī, etc. challenge one another in plenty of theological issues, here, they completely agree with one another, most likely because of the obvious verses, *Āl ʿImrān* 3:98-101, that expose the behaviours of the people of the book.

For example, claiming that the people of the book prevent the others to believe in Islam, although they witnessed that the prophet was heralded in the Bible, al-Tabarsī understood the expression »O People of the Book! Why reject ye the Signs of Allah (*Lima takfurūna bi āyātillāhi*)« to signify the people of the book's refuting the miracles prophet displayed and his foretold characteristic signs in the Bible (al-Tabarsī 2006, 2:283–285).

The last verse we will deal with is *Āl ʿImrān* 3:64:

> Say: »People of the Book! Come to a word common between us and you: that we shall serve none but Allah and shall associate none with Him in His divinity and that some of us will not take others as lords beside Allah.« And if they turn their backs (from accepting this call), tell them: »Bear witness that we are the ones who have submitted ourselves exclusively to Allah.«

This verse has been one of the hotspots in the dialogue issue for both sides' recent researchers. Some of them have sought to find a common ground between the two sides by means of *Āl ʿImrān* 3:64 to bring them closer together. We will deal with their suggestions in the subchapter »Recent Approaches to the Dialogue«, but now we are going to look at the views about the phrase 'common word' in the related verse, which classical Islamic exegetes expressed. Firstly, we need to look at the occasion of revelation (*sabab al-nuzūl*) to comprehend the background of the verse. According to the Islamic history and exegetical sources, Muhammed called on the Najrānites to convert to Islam, sending them a letter with Muġira b. Shuʿba, which says:
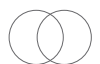
> In the name of the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob! This letter is from the Prophet and the Messenger of Allah, Muḥammad, to the people of Najrānite and their bishop! You are people of peace. I praise the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. From now on, I invite you to abandon the worship of the servants (humans) and to leave the guardianship of them and return to the guardianship of Allah. If you don't, then pay tribute. If you don't do that either, I declare war on you. (Ibn Kathīr 2002, 2:52; Ḥamīdullah 1987, 180–185)

When bishop received it, he immediately summoned certain wise people such as Shuraḥbīl b. Wadāʿa al-Hamadānī, ʿAbdullah b. Shuraḥbīl al-Aṣbāḥī and Jabbār b. Fayḍ al-Hārith to ask their opinions. They said, »You know that God promised prophethood to the descendants of Abraham and Ishmael, so this man may be that promised man, we do not know anything more than that.« After that, the bishop gathered Najrānite people in the church and discussed the letter with them, and at the end they decided to send a delegation to Madinah in order to meet Muḥammad and inquire into Islam (Ibn Kathīr 2002, 2:53–54). The delegation consisted of the fourteen most respected people of Najrān, as well as sixty guards. The delegation was led by ʿAbd al-Masīḥ al-ʿĀqib and their bishop, al-Ḥārith b. ʿAlqama (Ibn Hishām 1936, 2:223; Qurṭubī 2006, 5:159; Ibn Kathīr 2002, 2:50). The prophet Muḥammad recited *Āl ʿImrān* 3:64 to the delegation, calling on them to convert to Islam and believe in God (Ibn Hishām 1936, 2:225). They responded they already believed in God. In response to that the prophet said, »Because of your belief in Jesus as the son of God, in fact you are regarded as disbelievers« (al-Rāzī 1981, 8:95; Ibn Kathīr 2002, 2:51). »Say to us who is his father? Can you show us a man like Jesus raising the dead; healing the blind, the leper and the sick; reporting from the future, creating bird-shaped beings and animating them?« they replied. And then the prophet paused for a moment and said to them, »Today I have nothing to tell you, just wait here for me to let you know what God would reveal about Jesus' status and nature« (al-Rāzī 1981, 8:88).[1] After this argumentation, *Āl ʿImrān* 3:59-60 verses were sent to Muḥammad:

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1   As this background shows, the question of Jesus' nature was the main controversial issue between Muslims and Christians.

> Lo! the likeness of Jesus with Allah is as the likeness of Adam. He created him of dust, then He said unto him: Be! and he is.

They were not, however, convinced by those explanations and argued at length with him about his religious argument and its veracity. Muḥammad then revealed the following verse, calling on them to ceremony of *mubāhala* (Mazuz 2012, 44; Ibn Saʿd 1995, 1: 692–693):[2]

> And whoso disputeth with thee concerning him, after the knowledge which hath come unto thee, say (unto him): Come! We will summon our sons and your sons, and our women and your women, and ourselves and yourselves, then we will pray humbly (to our Lord) and (solemnly) invoke the curse of Allah upon those who lie.

According to the Islamic sources, the Najrānites' leader knew that he was telling the truth and could be a prophet heralded by God, and became frightened of the consequences of ceremony of *mubāhala*, thus deciding to remain at their religions and compromise by accepting a protégé status (*dhimma*) and paying the poll tax (*jizya*) (Ibn Kathīr 2002, 2:52).[3]

To attain a deeper understanding of the verse *Āl ʿImrān* 3:64, we shall look at the Islamic exegetes' attempt to understand its argumentative context. Faḫr al-Dīn al-Rāzī wrote that in *Āl ʿImrān* 3:64, Allah particularly mentioned three things stipulated by monotheistic belief: to serve only God, to associate nothing with Him and not to take each other as exclusive lords of God, however Christians breached them (al-Rāzī 1981, 8:95). He explained:

> They believe in someone other than Allah, that is the Messiah. They associate others with God, and that is because they maintain that

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2   According to the Islamic tradition, Allāh ordered Muḥammad to dare the Najrānites to undergo the ceremony of *mubāhala* (lit. mutual imprecation), in which two disagreeing parties take an oath in the name of God. The one on the side of justice stays alive and the other side is taken (i.e. killed) by God.

3   According to the tradition, ʿAbd al-Masīḥ al-ʿĀqib said to the delegation members, »If someone makes the ceremony of *mubāhala* against a prophet of God, they absolutely become incapable of producing offspring.«

God is three: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. They have asserted three beings are equal (*sawāʾ*), eternal (*qadīm*) and have holy personalities (*dhawāt*). We say they suggest three eternal personalities because they assert the hypostasis (*uqnūm*) of the Word armed itself (*tadarraʿa*) in the humanity (*nāsūt*) of the Messiah. The hypostasis of the Holy Spirit armed itself in the humanity of Mary. Had these two hypostases not been independent and separate, they could not have separated from the Father and armed themselves in Jesus and Mary. Thus, because they asserted three independent divine hypostases, they associated (*ashraka*) others with God. (95–99; Nickel 2009, 171)

There are some signals that indicate that they take the Rabbis and the Monks as lords, firstly, they obey the monks and the Rabbis in the halal (religious permission) and haram (religious prohibition), secondly, they lie prostrate in front of them, thirdly, as Abū Muslim report, they believe that when someone reached the highest point in praying and the service for God, the sign of divinity attributes' entry in their bodies shows up, and so they are allowed to raise the dead and heal the sick, the blind and the leper. Ultimately, even if the people of the scripture do not name them as lords (*Rabb*), they believe in them as lords. (95–99)

As seen above, al-Rāzī explicitly accused his religious counterparts of associating others with God. This kind of impeachment method, afterwards, was inherited by most traditionalistic scholars and influenced the Islamic theologians who are engaged in defending Islamic theology (*ʿIlm al-Kalām*) (al-Bayḍāwī 1998, 2:21–22; al-Nasafī 1998, 1:263).

In his commentary on Q. 3:64, Ibn Kathīr wrote that this revelation may encapsulate Najrānite Christians by quoting from Ibn Isḥāq, »From the beginning up to the eighty odd, this sūrah gave revelation about the Najrānite Christians«. He understood the 'kalima' to refer to meaningful sentences and 'sawāʾ' to refer to fair and just (*ʿadl* and *inṣāf*). Then, he said the common word (*kalima sawāʾ*) in the verse, which the people of the book were called on, requires them to serve only God, to associate nothing with Him and not to take the religious leaders as exclusive lords of God. In his understanding, all the prophets assigned by the God among the people

called upon them to believe in only one God and to associate nothing with Him (Ibn Kathīr 2002, 2:55–56).

From the phrase 'a common word' al-Ṭabarī understood a 'just' (ʿadl) word. He supported this view with further traditions, arguments from grammar, and cross-references from other occurrences of sawā' in the Qur'ān. Al-Ṭabarī also drew attention to a textual variant. He wrote that Ibn Maʿsūd understood the text to read kalima ʿadl in place of kalima sawā'. Al-Ṭabarī further cited a tradition which asserts that the 'common word' has a specific verbal content: 'no God except Allah' (al-Ṭabarī 1969, 6:483.487; Nickel 2009, 177).

He discussed the occasion of the revelation (sabab al-nuzūl), citing some traditions and narratives. He quoted from Qatāda and Ibn Ǧurayǧ that when prophet Muḥammad called on the Jews of Madinah to 'common word' they refuted it and argued with him, and that were the origins of that verse. On the other hand, according to his transmission from Suddī and lbn Zubayr, this verse originates from Najrānite Christians, which most of the scholars agree with. After that Al-Ṭabarī sought to crystallize the meaning of 'common word', citing from some scholars from Tābiʿīn (who followed the Companions of the Prophet Muhammad) such as Qatāde. He understood 'common word' as 'to believe in only one God' (an lā naʿbuda illā Allah) and 'to associate nothing with Him' (wa lā nushriq bihī shay'). And also, reporting from al-Muthannā and Abū al-Āliya, he understood it to refer to »there is no god but Allah (lā ilāha illā Allah)« (al-Ṭabarī 1969, 6:487–488).

In Āl ʿImrān 59-61 verses and their narrative setting, we hardly see any dialogue aimed at understanding others' concept of belief and cult, but rather an attempt to change it. The Qurʾān calls on Christians to abandon their belief that requires them to take Jesus as a God or the son of God, on which Christianity's principles of faith were built, thus seeming to ask them to change their belief at its very core. That appears to be the main obstacle to the intercourse between the two sides. In this context, Qur'ān's accusation of Jews and Christians of taking the Jesus and Ezra or Rabbis as exclusive lords of God is a main inhibiting factor in the interfaith dialogue, since that is a kind of a desacralizing attitude towards another side.
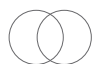
Besides, as Salime Leyla Gürkan stated in her article, the Qurʾān considered that the belief in the prophet Muḥammad is a necessary condition for salvation for the people of the scripture on one hand, while accusing them of claiming to have a monopoly on salvation on the other. Therefore, such Qurʾān's monopolistic attitude has also had a relatively negative effect on the intercourse (Gürkan 2016, 197).

In addition to that, inspired and encouraged by such Qurʾān's expressions, the representatives of Islamic interpretative tradition did not hesitate to go to extremes in invaliding Bible's law (*sharīʿa*). They suggested that Bible was corrupted by the people of the book, and therefore, God revealed the Qurʾān abrogating (*nash*) Torah and Gospel, though this issue is not clear enough in the Qurʾān (Q 3:3.50.93–94; 5:43).[4]

In this case, to avoid such negative judgement of dialogue partners' principles of faith and religious law (*sharīʿa*), we need a new platform where partners can discuss theological and juristic differences without attempting to change others' mind concerning the religious conviction and abrogate their divine law. We predict that the human-centred concept can be this new platform and meet its requirements. For us, the dialogue, on the basis of human love and happiness, allows partners to collaboratively discuss theological matters without dismissing others' religious practices and convictions, and understand how critical it is for people to feel peace in their beliefs and practices.

3   Recent approaches to the dialogue

Here, we are going to present some contemporary researchers' approaches to the issue, discussing them widely. Born in Vancouver and teaching in Canada, USA, Pakistan, Malaysia, and India, Gordon D. Nickel has dealt with the interaction between Islam and the Gospel, specifically the

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4   That is, even if Qurʾān asked the people of the book to change their belief system or some principles of faith, it still encouraged them to practice their own rituals related to moral, praying, social ethics, religious law, etc. It even excoriated them for not applying Bible's *sharīʿa* and of acting arbitrarily, because it brings the similar *sharīʿa* with similar stories, figures and rituals by confirming and correcting Bible. By extension, when we put aside its accusation against their concept of belief, the Qurʾān acted softly towards them and used soft statements about their *sharīʿa*.

Qur'ān and the New Testament. His PhD focused on the narratives of tampering in the earliest commentaries of the Qur'ān (Nickel 2020, 11).

His approach to the interfaith conversation and peaceful coexistence seems to be quite temperate and positive. Quoting from Tariq Ramadan, he pointed out that Muslims and their Christian counterparts need to be engaged in faith conversation and open discussions (Nickel 2009, 196). Nevertheless, he was aware of the fact that there are serious theological differences between the respective parties, thus it is hard for Muslim exegetes to understand »a common word« in 3:64 as a theological concept which Muslims, Christians and Jews have in common (Nickel 2009, 172). In his article *'A Common Word' in context toward the roots of polemics between Christians and Muslims in Early Islam* he said:

> A verse used today by some to argue that Muslims and Christians have theological understandings 'in common' Q3.64, was understood in the tradition as a polemical challenge to non-Muslims to accept the Muslim concept of deity. (2009, 167)

He is concerned about people of faith progressing from the theological disagreement to antipathy and violence. For him, there is no logical reason for that to happen, so the differences need not lead to violence. Accordingly, he suggests an urgent task for dialogue partners:

> Surely one of the most urgent tasks facing these two world communities is to make crystal clear that a link between theological difference and violence is not possible. (2009, 197)

Acknowledging that conversation partners have irreconcilable concept of deity and theological difference, Nickel tended to envisage a reasoned discussion in which theological differences are faced squarely, conversation partners do their best to challenge the thinking of the other through rational discourse and none of the partners holds physical power over the other. According to him, rational discourse and respect for each other in spite of their disagreements characterize the dialogue rather than fear of reprisal on the one hand or political dominance on the other. For him, the conversation should and will continue, and this necessary conversation can be one in which polemic will be a normal component. After

expressing that people who believe strongly in truth and falsehood will naturally make a case for their confessions, he highlighted that the polemic need not lead to acrimony but to rational discourse. (Nickel 2009, 195–196)

He argued against those who underestimate the polemic:

> A modernist or postmodern disdain for religious polemic can serve no useful purpose in contexts where people of firm faith need to talk through their differences. These differences of understanding will not be solved by the imposition of the philosophy of religious pluralism by those who may seek to manipulate the situation from the West. (2009, 196–197)

He based his standpoint about the polemic in the story concerning the Christians from Najrān which Muslim scholars narrated. He seemed to imply that given the fact that the strong disagreement over the deity of Jesus in this story did not end in violence and they returned to their home with their faith in Jesus' deity intact, peaceable coexistence and dialogue, hereafter, are possible for both sides (Nickel 2009, 197).

Looking into his arguments about dialogue partners' irreconcilable theological differences and principles of faith, they seem to have parallels with the point of view we have developed. Because we have also stressed the fact that both representatives of the Qur'ānic interpretative tradition and the Qur'ān itself claimed that the Islamic understanding of deity is true, and simply called false whatever differs from that concept (Nickel 2009, 185). Therefore, for both of us, it seems quite hard to compromise the dialogue partners in terms of theological assertions. However, he still maintained that religious polemic should continue in the theological discussions through rational discourses (Nickel 2009, 195). In response to his assertion, we ask: why shall we call the partners to a rational dialogue to question their faiths in terms of logic, even though we already know of their disagreement in the principles of faith? And also, how rational and logical can it be for the belief to be the subject of a rational discussion? We know that researchers working in the field of religion philosophy have not yet reached a clear conclusion on this matter (Pojman 1979, 159–172). Consequently, we would better have this theological dialogue in another platform in which more importance is attributed to the choice of belief

than to the way of defending it rationally. In other words, we suggest a new approach allow the participants to say, »I personally believe that way« without need to defend their beliefs with logical and theological arguments.

Additionally, he argued »theological difference need not lead to violence«, namely, he asked dialogue partners to continue the polite polemic in religious issues and respect each others' theological differences without turning to violence. In support of his argument, he suggested »the strong disagreement over the deity of Jesus in the story of Najrān did not end in violence« (Nickel 2009, 197). For us, it is, however, obvious in the context that the reason why it did not end in violence is not that they learned to respect others' theological differences, but rather that Christians from Najrān submitted to paying the poll tax (*al-Jizya*). According to Islamic sources and the Qur'ān, three options are offered to the people of the book: fight (*al-Qitāl*), conversion to Islam (*al-Islām*) and the paying imposition of the poll tax (*al-Jizya*) (al-Rāzī 1981, 16:31). Accordingly, as the Qur'ān evidently specified, if the imposition of *jizya* is not practiced, then Muslims have to go to war and violence against non-Muslims (Q 9:29). Also, it is quite hard to wane this sort of clear Qur'ānic sentence through commentary. That is because most of major Islamic exegetes have gone for the prevailed and traditionalistic view without much need for specification of a different view (al-Rāzī 1981, 5:24; al-Zamaḫsharī 1998, 3:37; al-Qurṭubī 2006, 8:45).

That is where we argue that the classical polemic way in which conversation partners' holy scriptures and religious traditions fundamentally refuse each other's theological argument can place a serious obstacle in the way of peaceable coexistence and respect of differences (Admirand 2018, 157). So, it seems that it is not a fruitful polemic that both sides approach positively to each other and honour counterpart's conventional belief. That is most likely why the relationship between Muslims and non-Muslims have shown no sign of progression in the years (Nickel 2015, 1–10). Therefore, we need to continue this polemic in another platform calling for humanistic values. We can compare this platform to the citizenship in the country whose boundaries were defined by the law requiring citizens to respect each other, no matter where they come and what their belief is. Similarly, we think that the humanistic approach can provide the partners with a similar ground where they are not pushed to rationalize their belief and none of them holds physical power over the other.
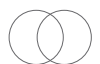
A typical characteristic of Qurʾānic discourse is to refute the non-Muslims' argumentation regarding critical theological issues as a consequence of their denying the Islamic concept of deity and the Qurʾānic narrative about Jesus, and thus becoming perpetrators of corruption (*mufsidūn*) of God's Word. The text of *al-Baqara* 2:139 reads:

> Say (unto the People of the Scripture): Will ye dispute with us about Allah, seeing that He is our Lord and your Lord.

As al-Rāzī and al-Zamaḫsharī wrote, this revelation refuses non-Muslims' some assertions such as »None shall enter Paradise unless he be a Jew or a Christian« (al-Rāzī 1981, 1:80; al-Zamaḫsharī 1998, 1:337; Q 2:111), »We are sons of Allah and His loved ones« (Q 5:18) and »we are more deserving of the prophethood vocation than he is« (al-Rāzī 1981, 1:80).

It could be noted that the Qurʾānic method in such discussions is to give definite answers and take a clear stand against the people of the scripture, which all Muslims have to maintain and be contented with. This method goes as follows: when some non-Muslims come to the prophet to discuss a religious matter or ask a challenging question, God suddenly reveals the answer to his prophet. The text of *al-Māʾida* 5:17 exemplifies this Qurʾānic method:

> In blasphemy indeed are those that say that Allah is Christ the son of Mary. Say: »Who then hath the least power against Allah, if His will were to destroy Christ the son of Mary, his mother, and all every – one that is on the earth?« (Q 5:17)

Besides, Islamic culture, books and narrative setting also corroborate such Qurʾānic routine and clichéd answers with rational commentaries (al-Rāzī 1981, 2:91; Q 4:171). Thus, it is understood that Muslims have some holy, definite and stereotyped answers in advance, and therefore having a productive and creative interfaith dialogue can be a bit of a challenge. Accordingly, the question is as to whether the new generation of Muslims, be they conservative Islamist or modernists, is able to let go of such clichéd attitude and break the vicious cycle or not. This question can also address the people of scriptures' modern representatives in their stereotyped actions, words and theological defence.

Considering such clichéd and conventional attitudes, determined by the religion and its tradition, it could be relatively reasonable for both partners to set another course to actualize religious and cultural dialogue goal, focusing on human nature and needs, and emphasizing on human values. Accepting that all religious systems are valuable and contribute to the spiritual salvation of the humanity, the new path can create a common identity for the people within the conversations concerning the religious issues. Those holding to that kind of humanistic sense tend not to insist that their religious concept and theological doctrines are the absolute truth, but instead to confirm that the partners have spiritual experiences as well as rational arguments which are not superior to each other.

To go back to recent theologians' contribution, Salime Leyla Gürkan implicatively criticizes the Qur'ān's concept about salvation, which accuses the people of the book of having a monopoly on salvation. While the Qur'ān accuses them of claiming, »None shall enter Paradise unless he be a Jew or a Christian« (Q 2:111) on the one hand, it considers the belief in Muḥammad to be a condition for salvation on the other. She wrote:

> When belief in the Prophet Muḥammad is always considered to be a necessary condition for salvation, even in the case of those who did not have direct or correct contact with the message of the Prophet, such a condition would undermine the Qurʾān's own accusation against Jews and Christians that they claim to have a monopoly on salvation. (2016, 197)

This is a good find with regard to heavenly religions' claim of monopoly on salvation, which can affect the dialogue in a negative way.

Haggai Mazuz from Bar-Ilan University examined the Christians in the Qur'ān. In his article, he highlighted the negative approach of the Qur'ānic exegetes to the people of the scripture who do not submit to the Islamic concept of belief, with expressing that »those who did not accept Muḥammad and Islam, thus remaining Christian, were condemned. However, those who acknowledged Muḥammad as a prophet and accepted Islam were therefore not Christians, but Muslims, and were praised.« (Mazuz 2012, 51) We think this is a kind of exclusionary approach against

other religious groups and it can badly affect interreligious and intercultural dialogue.

On the basis of the document *A Common Word* (ACW), the authors of the dialogue appear to show quite optimistic approach to the issue, while skimming over the fundamental differences between conversation partners (Snyder 2018, 124). Although Joseph Lumbard says, »(ACW)'s participants in this initiative have even taken pains to emphasize the need for recognizing the fundamental differences between the two traditions« (Valkenberg 2018, 201), we do not quite see that. For instance, Evangelicals and mainline Protestants do not appear to accept the presupposition of the common ground between dialogue partners by taking theological differences into consideration (203). That is why some authors of the open letter suggested three kinds of objections to the idea of a common ground between the two sides: a practical, a procedural and a theological objection (202). The third objection is to the presupposition that Muslims and Christians worship the same God. For us, as noted previously, even though they have got similar heritage, feelings and some practices, their concept of deity greatly differs. The ultimate God may be one (Madigan 2018, 188), but the point is how to understand him, what attributes are given to him and to what extent the adherents and religious leaders, whose frame of mind is defined by classical theological disputes, can converge and respect each other. Most probably, that is why none of the major signatories of the document was from Diyanet (Directorate of Religious Affairs in Turkey) (Böhm 2018, 258). They were probably worried about that convergence, thinking that embarking on such an attempt could put their own theological defence at risk, therefore they took a vague view of that kind of dialogue.

As a corroborating statement of our argument, the following quotation from Pim Valkenberg is notable:

> A dialogue between Muslims and Christians centres on matters of peace and justice rather than on dogmatic statements. I know that dialogues on social justice are often more fruitful than theological dialogues. (2018, 202)

This statement shows that the dialogue in which theological and religious questions are on the agenda is not quite promising for the whole human family. This is probably because, as noted previously, three heavenly religions attempt to maintain their presence with the dismissive attitude towards others. My suggestion is not to hinder the dialogue or discussion of the theological matters, but rather just continue it in another form, humanistic and naturalistic, in order to look at the theological matters under the humanity umbrella without judging others' religious convictions. In this form, we can compare each belief to the families that everyone adheres to and gets spiritual support. Just as families are not superior to each other in terms of giving spiritual support to its members, religions are not superior either.

This point of view can provide partners with empathy, allowing them to see themselves through the others' eyes, and therefore to understand the fact that it is part of being human to embrace any belief, no matter whether it is rational or not, and to resort to it in tough times; and it is not that easy to question deep-rooted religious beliefs and traditional rituals. After gaining this sort of empathy, humanist participants can learn to keep their bigoted and conservative identity of religion in the background. Instead, they can respect others and wish them happiness without despising their principles of faith and depriving them of hope of salvation. So, the partners who embraced humanist and naturalist philosophy in the conversation can show sensitivity to the natural needs of the humanity, such as belief in a powerful creator, messenger and a holy book (Reker 1987, 48; Chan 2019, 457–458).[5] Humanist partners can even respect others regardless of their beliefs and pray for their peace, happiness and salvation. Consequently, when they enter into a dialogue, they can be aware of the fact that it is kind of unhumanitarian to suggest that their own theology

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5   We see that belief in a sacred being (like God) and veracity of his revelation is a kind of natural thing like breathing, eating, sleeping, etc. Human beings psychologically fear sinking into existential vacuum and being pointlessly lost in annihilation, and they are also worried about the present and afterlife uncertainty. Therefore, they are willing to live their life for the sake of a venerable purpose provided by their belief in order for their life and death to have a point. As it is pointed out in the article *Meaning and Purpose in Life and Well-being: a Life-span Perspective*, meaning and purpose in life are associated with positive feelings of mental and physical health; lack of meaning and purpose predicts perceived psychological and physical discomforts (e.g., suicide is strongly influenced by the lack of meaning and purpose in life). Another significant article written by three authors (Chan, Michalak & Ybarra) highlights the importance of having purpose in life, i.e., »having both purpose and meaning contributes to a host of positive health outcomes«.

is the most perfect one and the revelation sent down to them is the last word, and to claim to have a monopoly on salvation.

Our humanistic approach requires treating all types of theology equally, because their main objective is to spiritually and psychologically make people happier and enable them to live all together in peace and comfort. Is that not what all religions are supposed to aim at? Accordingly, it could turn out inhumane to dismiss any other religion and claim that their believers will go to the hell. Thus, humanist participants wish for others what they wish fof themselves by feeling empathy to them. On the other hand, humanist partners should know that the thing separating humanity from other beings is the difference between them, and that therefore it is quite natural for humans to produce different beliefs. So, the theological difference is a necessary result of this diversity. As it is seen, humanistic sense is able to constitute a common reasonable platform on which the dialogue and pluralist philosophy can be consonantly built.

To return to our discussion, Michael Louis Fitzgerald, who supported ACW document with his article *A Common Word Leading to Uncommon Dialogue* reported something important concerning ACW's recent impact in the Eastern and Western worlds:

> I do not think that too much importance should be attributed to this document. It has not revolutionised Christian–Muslim dialogue ... In fact, it could be said that the impact of the ACW has been somewhat limited. It would seem to me that this impact has been felt more within the English-speaking world than elsewhere. Although the document was published in both Arabic and English, and many of its signatories are Arabic-speaking Muslims, it would seem to have had little echo in the Arabic-speaking world. The feeling I had was that the ACW initiative was really designed for the Western World. (2018, 57)

Sarah Snyder seems to inadvertently state the reason why not much attention is given to the ACW initiative in the Arabic-speaking World:

> A number of Christian commentators on ACW have maintained that the Qur'ān is proclaiming a different God from the one known
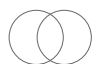
in Jesus Christ, and that therefore ACW's call to Christians to affirm along with Muslims belief in the one God is either nonsensical or perhaps disingenuous. (Madigan 2018, 188)

It seems that the main reason for thinking of this ACW initiative as nonsensical can be their follow up of the methodology. The authors of ACW have understood the phrase 'a common word' as a common ground where Islamic and Christian reflections on theological issues might converge, however, as already mentioned, this phrase does not signify the common ground but rather the difference between their principles of faith (al-Rāzī 1981, 2:76; al-Zamaẖsharī 1998, 1:568; al-Qurṭubī 2006, 4:100; al-Bayḍāwī 1998, 2:21). So, the point where ACW falters is that the presupposition of the belief in the common ultimate God and of loving him can be good enough. From our perspective, it takes more than those conditions to make common ground where the participants can converge. For example, it entails a new platform where partners can discuss theological differences without attempting to change others' mind concerning religious conviction, and can gain some insight into others' concept of belief.

This understanding allows to build the dialogue not only on loving ultimate God, but also on loving and respecting humans, namely, theological matters should be discussed on the basis of human needs as well as of the God and his theological attributes. Accordingly, we envision the dialogue on the basis of human love and happiness, which allows partners to understand how crucial it is for people to feel blessed and noble when they believe what they have to believe in and practice their own rituals.

4   My reflections on the possibility of dialogue under the influence of tradition

When the information given above are taken into consideration, a crucial question arises: what is the likeliness for both sides to reach a peaceful agreement or respect one another's theological considerations? In order to be able to answer this question, I think we need to exhibit the difference between Qurān's stance and Islamic scholars who have represented the Islam and Islamic tradition for hundreds of centuries (Bonner 2011, 343–346).

The former (the Qurʾān) evidently asserts that the people of books' creed (especially Christians who perceive Jesus as a Lord) is false and they misunderstood the divine unity of God, thus becoming corrupters (*mufsidūn*) on earth (Q 3:63; Ibn ʿĀshūr 1997, 3:267–268; al-Bayḍāwī 1998, 2:21; Nickel 2009, 187), because taking a human-being as a God leads to an association with supreme one God, which is kind of a desanctification of God's holiness, majesty and uniqueness – that is called »maʿṣiya« in the Islamic exegesis tradition (Zaman 2006, 5:19) – and the people doing this are the worst of the creatures (Q 6:98). The Qur'ān never holds back from dishonouring and disdaining those people, and it immediately assails them severely at sūrah *Bayyina* 98:6:

> Those who reject (truth), among the People of the Book and among the Polytheists, will be in Hell-Fire, to dwell therein. They are the worst of creatures.

Christians who attempt to make a case for the deity of Jesus have been specifically charged with infraction of the principles of *tawḥīd* and with hosting of a polytheistic belief (al-Bayḍāwī 1998, 2:120.138). That, consequently, nearly equalized them with the polytheists with regard to their concept of deity. So, they have been partially exposed to the accusations made by Qur'ān against polytheists. Therefore, even though the Qur'ān does not straightforwardly take aim at them since they are the owners of the book, it implicitly and allusively states that punishments allocated to polytheists might be inflicted on them. Some punishments imposed on pagans are as follows: Muslims will never marry them, make them a partner or friend and allow them to go in their sanctuary – as they are filthy in the religious sense – though Kaʿaba was also their place of worship (Q 2:221; 4:144; 5:51; 9:28; al-Qaraḍāwī 1977, 245). But in certain verses, the Qur'ān explicitly impose sanctions on those who make friends with the people of book, warning them like that:

> O ye who believe! take not the Jews and the Christians for your friends and protectors: They are but friends and protectors to each other. And he amongst you that turns to them (for friendship) is of them. Verily Allah guideth not a people unjust. (Q 5:51)

And another verse which is quite dramatic and striking for those standing for the peaceful dialogue between religions, says:

> Fight against those who believe not in Allah, nor in the Last Day, nor forbid that which has been forbidden by Allah and His Messenger, and those who acknowledge not the religion of truth among the People of the Scripture, until they pay the *jizya* with willing submission, and feel themselves subdued. (Q 9:29)

After his long descriptions in the gloss of this verse, al-Razi wrote that:

> Christians denied the unity of God (*tawḥīd*) maintaining that God's word had penetrated into Jesus, though he is only a human being. This kind of discourse belongs to Mushabbiha wa al-Mujassima. So as a matter of fact, we need to declare they are unbelievers. (1981, 16:29–31)

He subsequently said:

> Whereas idolators have two options, either to fight or embrace the Islam, the people of scripture have three. They are allowed to keep their religion on the condition of paying *jizya*. If they had believed in the religion of truth (Islam) they would have been equal to Muslims (thus not paying tax of *jizya*). But they would rather have believed in their falsified religion than renounce it, that is why they were pushed to pay *jizya* in the way of feeling themselves subdued. (31)

So, it seems that an agreement or dialogue only carries out when one side obeys another, paying them a sort of a tax or some other economic value. It feels that there is no theological acknowledgement of each other's presence, but rather the political and financial acknowledgement. Similarly, in the case of the meeting between Muḥammad and the Christians from Najrān, it appears that there was no theological agreement or recognition of counterparts' creed but rather political and economic conversation and deal.

While Islam took aim at the rival religions, their representatives also attempted to undermine Islam, refuting its creed by questioning the provenance of the Qur'ān, and denying the prophecy of the Messenger (Q 2:23; 3:21.70; al-Ṭabarī 1969, 1:374). In his book *Tarih al-'Arab Qabl al-Islam*, Jawad Ali wrote that Christians in Najrān gathered an army against Muslim ruling in an effort to avoid paying *jizya* and to free themselves from the dominance of Muslims. That is why ʿOmar, the third Caliph, exiled them to Iraq for fear of dissemination of Christianity with Byzantine and Ḥabash's help (Jawād ʿAli 2011, 6:629–630; Fayda 1983, 60).

On the other hand, Islam sees the Jewish community as corrupters: »The Jews say: 'Allah's hand is fettered.' Their hands are fettered and they are accursed for saying so /.../ As often as they light a fire for war, Allah extinguishes it. Their effort is for corruption in the land, and Allah loveth not corrupters.« (Q 5:64), hostiles: »Thou wilt find the most vehement of mankind in hostility to those who believe (to be) the Jews and the idolaters« (Q 5:82), rebels or disobedient: »For those who followed the Jewish Law, We forbade every (animal) with undivided hoof, and We forbade them that fat of the ox /.../ This is recompense for their willful disobedience« (Q 6:146), and infringers of the divine law: »Therefore woe be unto those who write the Scripture with their hands anthem say, This is from Allah.« (Q 2:79)

In recompense for such Islam's negative and offending attitude towards Jews – that they were already suspicious about Qur'ān's origin – they perpetrated some unpleasant actions that breached Madina agreement. For instance, in an account related by Islamic sources, in the period of Muḥammad, Qaynuqa Jews were working in the jewellery business in a district of Madina. One of them attempted to harass a Muslim woman that came to a jewellery shop and embarrassed her, and thereon she cried out to ask for help. A Muslim man who watched the event killed the Jewish man, and then the Jews killed that man in return; therefore, the agreement was broken, and Muḥammad expelled them from Madina (al-Wākidī 1989, 1:166–169; al-Ṭabarī 2012, 2:48–50; Ibn al-Athīr 1987, 2:33–34). And also, before this case, some other problems happened and even clashes broke out between the two sides, which resulted in exiling the two other Jewish community, Banī Qurayza and Banī Nadīr, from Madina; and thus, their relationship became more and more tense (Ibn al-Athīr 1987, 2:30).

So, as can be seen from these early experiences of living together, both sides had some difficulty to understand and respect each other. No matter whether out of religious motives or not, it evidently appears that they did some disagreeable actions (scorn, insult, harassment and attack) to one another in the past encounters, not to mention their disdain of each other's concept of belief and theological argumentation. And it is obvious that their principles of faith – formed both by holy scriptures and the glosses (theological and juridical) dictated in the historical development of the religion – permit that kind of unpleasant actions (e.g., considering most of the Jews as enemies, which is evident from the preceding verses). In that case, it would not be appropriate to start the dialogue initiative on the theological doctrines or religious texts in which both sides are already quite strict, but instead we could design a new essential platform based on humanitarian values, needs and respect for each other's dignity, which allows the dialogue to start more tenderly and properly. That soft approach lets the dialogue partners hold to the thinking of human-centred, honouring human, and principally affirms that human needs another human to live a peaceful life. Those holding to that method of dialogue, consider respecting other religious communities beliefs as a virtue and show no sign of acrimony or violence (like in the past experiences) in the conversation. That allows a cultural, social and theological dialogue in an agreeable and peaceful environment.

To look into the second part (Islamic scholars' stance), first of all, we need to highlight that it is quite hard for scholars to maintain something different from or against their communities' common view that has been intertwined with religious tradition and beliefs for hundreds of centuries. Apart from a few modernist or post-modernist scholars, most of Islamic scholars whose views have been described above (e.g., al-Rāzī, al-Bayḍāwī, al-Qurṭubī, etc.), have followed, in this issue, the prevailing traditional way in order not to look like an opponent, as that might cause them to be ostracized from their societies. Even contemporary modernists allusively expressed their point of views concerning substantial Islamic issues, because they avoided their communities' backlash. The most outstanding figure, for me, is Muḥammad Ibn ʿĀshūr who was a disciple of major modernist Muḥammad Abduh. Because of his writings and articles backing up Muḥammad Abduh's fatwas that encapsulate modern perspective and contemporary Islamic point of view regarding the experience of living

together and the dialogue between Muslims and the people of the book (look at the *Transfāliyya Fatwa* of Muḥammad Abduh) (Rashid Rıḍā 1920, 6:3; al-Ġālī 1996, 134–137), Ibn ʿĀshūr was suspended many times from deanship at the University of Zaytuna and was targeted by conservative folks (Halil 2020, 134–137).

Therefore, there is no doubt that traditionalists, since the early centuries of Islam, have commanded the greatest authority among large blocks of Muslims in Muslim-majority societies. In this context, Andrew Rippin observes that »the traditionalist group holds to the full authority of the past« (2005, 192). However, the problem is that the so-called traditional way seems to be non-functional and unsuccessful throughout the history of interfaith dialogue. It mostly continued to dispute and engage in strict polemics with the people of the book (Q 3:65-66; al-Bayḍāwī 1998, 2:22; al-Zamaḫsharī 1998, 1:567–568).

For example, in his commentary on the contention about the question whether Abraham was Jew or Christian at 3:65, al-Zamaḫsharī wrote that »the verse explains that those who have disputed about that are foolish 'hamqā' and senseless 'qillat al-ʿukūl', since they have debated something neither Torah nor Gospel gives information on. So why would you quarrel (*tuḥājjūna*) with the people who did not have any knowledge about the issue.« Al-Nasafī and al-Bayḍāwī agreed with him and transmitted the same passages in their commentaries (al-Nasafī 1998, 1:263).

The scholars (commentators, theologians, jurists, etc.), no matter whether they are rationalists (*maʿqūlī*) or traditionalists (*manqūlī*), carried the banner for Islamic ideal and seemed to fail to break the status quo on the matter of the people of the book. Their standpoint is, therefore, restricted to the scholastic comments made by classical scholars in the much earlier period of Islam. Accordingly, they could not have developed a distinctive approach about the dialogue that is different from the earlier unpleasant experiences.

Conclusion

On the one hand, the verses and accounts described above apparently display that holy scriptures have some exclusionary concepts of »heathen« and »believer« or »infidel« and »faithful« that might lead to a sort of discrimination of people by their way of belief. Their exclusionary characteristics make the interfaith conversation more difficult for the partners, even if they seek the dialogue. By extension, it seems that the dialogue based on the exclusionary holy scriptures and theological challenges cannot be successful.

On the other hand, as classical Islamic scholars, specifically major commentators such as al-Rāzī, al-Zamaḫsharī, al-Qurṭubī, al-Nasafī, al-Bayḍāwī, heavily criticized their counterparts through an inspiration they had got from the Qur'ānic verses (holy scriptures), subsequent scholars have had very little chance to revise that understanding radically. That is why, over the past two centuries, the things have not been very different, most conservatives have followed their traditionalist ancestors' sacred way that is a sort of judgement of others for their different theological perspectives, and thus the representatives of Islam have dismissed others' theological argument throughout the history. This attitude has blocked the path of dialogue for centuries and polarized the partners by distancing them from each other. This separation has caused various religious conflicts, particularly in the medieval times, and ended up with a clash of religions. At the beginning of this century, the dialogue initiative appeared for reducing the ingrained tension escalated by political and religious disagreements, but because of the pro-dialogue people's not having a very reasonable method to overcome these theological disagreements, they have faced some serious challenges. Also, they have ignored heavenly religions' theological, historical and religious differences, just focusing on a common word, the loving God and the belief in ultimate God. In time, it has been understood these conditions are not good enough to wane the theological separation and have an agreeable conversation, so there is need for another form of dialogue which should be more humanistic, complying with the nature of human. Consequently, we suggested a new and humanistic platform requiring the human family to honour each other's theological differences by focusing on human happiness, peace and need, and to see the other concepts of belief as respective and precious convictions produced

by human diversity. The classical disputes in this context should be carried out in the human-centric form, so there might be a chance to build more sensible relationships and have respectful dialogues.

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