



Communicating Diversity: A Quranic Discourse Analysis of Interreligious Engagement and Theological Pluralism

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Abstract

The present study is an analysis of the textual and communicative strategies of the Qur'an in relation to religious pluralism and interreligious dialog. Contemporary conversations about religious diversity tend to swing between a hard exclusivism that interprets any and all Qur'anic references to the religious "Other" thru the prism of the so-called verses of the sword (*āyāt al-sayf*), and a secular relativism that erases all theological difference. Neither extreme does justice to the communicative architecture of the Qur'an itself. This paper adopts a qualitative research design that incorporates Tafsīr-based hermeneutics and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) to examine a purposively chosen corpus of Meccan and Medinan verses to explore the construction, addressing and negotiation of religious alterity in Qur'anic discourse. The analysis identifies four main communicative registers *Al-Jidāl al-Aḥsan* (reasoned, courteous argumentation), the inclusive scriptural address to *Ahl al-Kitāb*, the universalist salvific address, and the civic-justice register of *al-Qisṭ wa al-Birr* and situates each within its occasion of revelation (*asbāb al-nuzūl*) to provide an account for its relation to more confrontational, martially framed verses rather than merely setting the latter aside. The findings suggest that Qur'anic discourse does not erase theological difference nor does it endorse indiscriminate coercion but rather develops a register-sensitive communicative methodology that dissociates doctrinal disagreement from social hostility, defers ultimate theological judgment to the Eschaton, and channels difference into moral competition (*al-istibāq fī al-khayrāt*). Finally, the article converts this communicative model into concrete recommendations for interfaith pedagogy, constitutional governance in Muslim-majority states, and dialog methodology. It claims that the Qur'an offers not only a doctrine of tolerance, but also a textually grounded discourse ethics of pluralism.

Keywords: Quranic Discourse, , *Asbāb al-Nuzūl*, Interfaith Dialogue, Religious Pluralism, Interreligious Communication, *Al-Jidāl al-Aḥsan*, Critical Discourse Analysis

1. Introduction

1.1 Background of the Study

Managing religious diversity is a key challenge to social cohesion, international relations and communal harmony in an increasingly interconnected yet fragmented global landscape.¹ Throughout history, religion has been a double-edged sword: at once a source of moral cohesion and existential purpose, and a center of gravity for identity-based conflict.² Unprecedented population movement, instantaneous digital communication, and religiously diverse metropolitan environments that bring formerly geographically remote communities into regular, frequently unmediated touch are other characteristics of the modern world.³ The question of how the Qur'an, the primary textual source of Islam, conceptualizes and communicates with the religious "Other" is crucial to theologians, social scientists, and policymakers in

¹Katherine Marshall, *Global Institutions of Religion: Ancient Movers, Modern Shakers* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2014).

Jonathan Sacks, *The Persistence of Faith: Religion, Morality and Society in a Secular Age* (London: Bloomsbury ² Continuum, 2025).

Lester R. Kurtz, *Gods in the Global Village: The World's Religions in Sociological Perspective*, 4th ed. (Thousand ³ Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2016), <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781483399119>.



this globalized matrix. It is not an antiquarian exercise, but rather a current issue that affects constitutional design, minority rights, and the prevention of religiously coded violence.

In the religiously diverse setting of Late Antique Arabia, the revelation of the Qur'an took place over the course of twenty-three years (610–632 CE). During this time, the Peninsula was a complex patchwork of Zoroastrians (Majūs), polytheists (Mushrikūn), several Jewish tribes (Yahūd), and Christian communities of various confessional persuasions, including Nestorian, Monophysite, and Byzantine Orthodox (Naṣārā).⁴ As a result, the Qur'anic corpus is intrinsically dialogical: it is a text that, throughout its 114 sūrahs, argues, appeals, warns, and negotiates with both named and unnamed interlocutors, moving thru registers that range from theological debate and moral encouragement to legal recognition, civic regulation, and, in certain and historically limited circumstances, martial confrontation. Any realistic explanation of what the text implies about religious difference must thus take into consideration the underlying logic that controls the Qur'an's choice of register, which explains why a particular section argues rather than commands and welcomes rather than excludes.

Both Muslim-majority nations and international organizations are still debating how to balance the constitutional guaranties of civic equality, freedom of conscience, and peaceful coexistence with traditional theological truth claims. Therefore, examining the Qur'an's own communicative paradigms provides a hermeneutical link between historical revelation and modern pluralistic practice that neither requires Muslim communities to renounce their scriptural beliefs nor allows those beliefs to be selectively and out of context incorporated into an exclusionary program.

2. Literature Review

Scholarship on Qur'anic pluralism can be organized into three broad, partially overlapping strands, each of which this study draws upon while identifying the specific gap it addresses.

2.1 The Apologetic-Pluralist Strand

A substantial body of scholarship has sought to recover and systematize the Qur'an's pluralist content, largely in response to both internal exclusivist currents and external Orientalist polemic. Farid Esack's work on liberation and pluralism reads the Qur'an through the interpretive key of solidarity among the oppressed, arguing that Qur'anic address to religious communities is structured less by fixed doctrinal category than by ethical alignment against injustice.⁵ In a similar vein, Asghar Ali Engineer highlights that the Qur'an's acceptance of religious diversity is consistent with interfaith communication rather than in opposition to it.⁶ Abdulaziz Sachedina expands this argument into political theory, arguing that rather than requiring its importation from secular liberal theory, the Qur'an's recognition of religious plurality provides native textual foundations for democratic pluralism.⁷ For the purposes of this study, its limitation is that it tends to treat pluralism primarily as a set of doctrinal or political conclusions rather than as a communicative practice embedded in particular rhetorical registers. Nevertheless, this strand has been essential in proving that pluralist readings are textually defensible, not just apologetically convenient.

2.2 The Historical-Legal and Cautionary Strand

A second strand, associated with scholars such as Yohanan Friedmann, examines how classical Muslim jurists actually applied Qur'anic material on religious difference, and complicates any straightforwardly irenic reading. Friedmann demonstrates that the principle of non-compulsion in Qur'an 2:256 coexisted, in classical fiqh, with legal doctrines permitting coercion in specific and narrowly defined circumstances for

Hishomudin Ahmad and Norfarhana Ahmad Ghafar, "Qur'anic Arabic as Sacred Discourse: Rhetoric, Theology, and Identity," *Muallim Journal of Social Science and Humanities*, January 2, 2026, 140, <https://doi.org/10.33306/mjssh/390>.

Esack, *Qur'an, Liberation and Pluralism*, 112-115.⁵

Asghar Ali Engineer, "The Quran, Pluralism and Interfaith Dialogue," *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 42, no. 2 (2006): 199.

Abdulaziz Sachedina, *The Islamic Roots of Democratic Pluralism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), ⁷ <https://doi.org/10.1093/0195139917.001.0001>.



example against certain categories of apostates or, in some juristic opinions, against Arabian polytheists specifically.⁸ Abdullah Saeed and Hassan Saeed likewise document the gap between the Qur'anic non-coercion principle and later legal elaborations of apostasy law, arguing that much of the punitive apparatus associated with apostasy reflects early Islamic state-formation concerns rather than direct Qur'anic mandate.⁹ This strand is crucial to the current study because it defies the urge to simplify historical complexity in the name of a neat pluralist narrative; it is taken seriously rather than bracketed here, especially in Section 6, where the confrontational verses are analyzed independently.

2.3 The Discourse-Analytic and Stylistic Strand

A third and comparatively thinner strand applies linguistic and rhetorical methods to Qur'anic material. Muhammad Abdel Haleem's stylistic analysis identifies recurring argumentative patterns in the Qur'an's treatment of contested themes, including its address to religious difference, and demonstrates how apparently inconsistent statements often resolve once their addressee and rhetorical function are specified.¹⁰ Jane Dammen McAuliffe's extended study of classical and modern exegesis of Qur'anic passages on Christians shows that even textually "positive" verses about Ahl al-Kitāb have been read by exegetes in sharply divergent ways across ten centuries of commentary, cautioning against treating any single verse as self-interpreting.¹¹ More recently, work applying rhetorical and discourse-analytic frameworks to Qur'anic Arabic as sacred discourse has begun to formalize the study of how theological content is encoded in register, address form, and argumentative structure.¹² Outside Qur'anic studies, Norman Fairclough's foundational model of Critical Discourse Analysis which examines texts along three interacting dimensions of textual form, discursive practice, and social practice provides the general linguistic apparatus this study adapts for religious-textual analysis.¹³

The gap that emerges across these three strands is specific: no existing study systematically combines (a) a discourse-analytic account of the Qur'an's pluralist registers, (b) sustained, non-evasive engagement with the historically and legally contested martial verses, and (c) an *asbāb al-nuzūl*-based reconciliation of the two. This study is designed to occupy precisely that intersection.

3. Theoretical and Methodological Framework

3.1 Theoretical Framework

This study adopts an interdisciplinary framework combining Tafsīr-based hermeneutics with Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). Classical and contemporary *Uṣūl al-Tafsīr* including attention to *asbāb al-nuzūl*, Meccan/Medinan chronology, and the classical exegetical tradition (*al-Ṭabarī*, *al-Rāzī*, *Ibn Kathīr*) alongside modern exegesis anchors the analysis in contextual and linguistic fidelity to the source text. Fairclough's CDA supplies the analytic vocabulary for examining how identity, power, and relational positioning are enacted through specific lexical and rhetorical choices register, address form, evaluative vocabulary, and argument structure rather than treating verses as isolated propositional statements.¹⁴

3.2 Research Design

The research employs a qualitative, hermeneutical-textual approach that is more exploratory than confirmatory. Instead of testing a preconceived notion on Qur'anic plurality, it develops an inductive typology of communicative registers thru careful examination of the chosen corpus,

Yohanan Friedmann, *Tolerance and Coercion in Islam: Interfaith Relations in the Muslim Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 34-54.

Abdullah Saeed and Hassan Saeed, *Freedom of Religion, Apostasy and Islam* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), 51-70.⁹

Muhammad Abdel Haleem, *Understanding the Qur'an: Themes and Style* (London: I. B. Tauris, 1999), 51-67.¹⁰

¹¹McAuliffe, *Qur'anic Christians*, 45-52.

¹²Ahmad and Ghafar, "Qur'anic Arabic as Sacred Discourse," 142.

¹³Norman Fairclough, *Critical Discourse Analysis: The Critical Study of Language* (London: Longman, 1995), 9-16.

¹⁴Fairclough, *Critical Discourse Analysis*, 96-98.



which is then compared to both classical and contemporary exegetical literature to prevent interpretative projection.

3.3 Corpus and Sampling Criteria

The primary corpus was assembled through purposive rather than random sampling, a method appropriate to qualitative textual analysis where representativeness is judged by thematic saturation rather than statistical distribution. Verses were included if they met at least one of three criteria: (a) explicit address to a named non-Muslim community (Yahūd, Naṣārā, Mushrikūn, Ahl al-Kitāb, Majūs); (b) explicit thematization of religious or human diversity as such (for example Q. 11:118, Q. 49:13); or (c) classification within the classical exegetical tradition as relevant to interfaith conduct, including the contested martial verses (Q. 9:5, Q. 9:29) and the civic-justice verses (Q. 60:8–9). The final corpus spans both Meccan and Medinan material to allow chronological and contextual contrast. Arabic source text was cross-checked against the English renderings of Muhammad Asad and M. A. S. Abdel Haleem to control for translation-specific bias; where their renderings diverged in theologically consequential ways, both are noted.¹⁵

3.4 Analytical Procedure

Analysis proceeded in three stages. First, each corpus verse was coded for communicative register dialogical-persuasive, scriptural-inclusive, universalist-salvific, civic-justice, or martial-contextual based on lexical markers (imperative versus indicative mood, evaluative vocabulary, address form) following Fairclough's textual-analysis dimension. Second, each verse was situated within its *sabab al-nuzūl* and Meccan/Medinan chronological position using classical exegetical sources, corresponding to Fairclough's discursive-practice dimension, which examines how a text's production context shapes its meaning. Third, register patterns were synthesized across the corpus to identify the functional relationships between them in particular, whether the martial-contextual register operates as a general rule or as a context-bound exception to the dominant dialogical register corresponding to the social-practice dimension of the model.

3.5 Limitations of the Study

Several limitations attend this design and are noted here rather than left implicit. First, textual-hermeneutical analysis of this kind is necessarily interpretive; while classical exegetical literature was consulted throughout to constrain subjective reading, the selection and weighting of exegetical opinion remains an authorial judgment. Second, the study is confined to the Qur'anic text itself and does not systematically incorporate the ḥadīth corpus or classical fiqh beyond what is necessary to contextualize specific rulings (as in Section 6); a fuller account of Islamic interfaith ethics would need to integrate that material. Third, the rhetorical force of the Arabic original cannot be entirely reproduced by translation, even when it is cross-checked against two known renderings. This is especially true when it comes to modal particles and address forms, which are clearly noted when they have a significant impact on the argument. Lastly, the sampling procedures in Section 3.3 were intended to maximize theme coverage rather than completeness, thus even tho the corpus is purposively large, it does not contain every Qur'anic verse that touches on religious differences.

4. Theological Foundations of Religious Pluralism in the Qur'an

4.1 Diversity as Divine Intentionality (*Irādah*)

A foundational premise of the Qur'anic worldview is that human diversity linguistic, ethnic, and religious is not an accidental flaw or a temporary trial to be eliminated, but a deliberate feature of divine creation.

“If your so Had your Lord so willed, He would have certainly made humanity one single community ‘of believers’, but they will always ‘choose to’ differ...”¹⁶

¹⁵Muhammad Asad, *The Message of the Qur'an* (Gibraltar: Dar al-Andalus, 1980), 204.

¹⁶



“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 has given you: so strive as in a race in all virtues¹⁷.”

Instead of being viewed as a regrettable consequence of prophetic plurality, legal and community multiplicity (Shir‘ah wa Minhāj) is directly linked to divine wisdom in Sūrah al-Mā'idah (5:48). This diversity's purported goal is educational, as it fosters moral competition (al-istibāq fī al-khayrāt) as opposed to a call for violent uniformization. According to Abdel Haleem, the verse's syntax the hypothetical "if Allah had so willed" followed by a clear assertion of purpose marks variety as deliberate rather than passively tolerated. This grammatical finding supports the theological interpretation.¹⁸

4.2 Inviolability of Human Agency and Conscience (Ikhtiyār)

An epistemological line is drawn in Qur'anic speech between the presentation of truth and the obligation to believe. Two textually different but complementary views approach human free will as an essential need for genuine moral accountability.

“There is no compulsion in religion...” (Lā ikrāha fī al-dīn, Qur'an 2:256)

“Your duty is only to convey the message...” (Innamā ‘alayka al-balāgh, Qur'an 13:40; cf. 88:21–22)

When taken as a whole, these words confine the Prophet's own role in communication to conveyance rather than compulsion. The Koran sets this restriction on its primary messenger before addressing anyone else. But it's crucial to remember that 2:256 did not resolve all following legal issues. According to Friedmann's research, while ancient jurists upheld the passage as a general principle, they also created more specific doctrines, such as those pertaining to apostasy, which seem to conflict with an unqualified interpretation of non-compulsion.¹⁹ Saeed and Saeed contend that the best historical explanation for this conflict is that apostasy law originated primarily as a political-security precaution against treason and desertion during the war in the early community. Its later codification, while important from a legal standpoint, is more of a distinct legal development superimposed on 2:256 than a direct exegesis of it.²⁰ In order to maintain the methodological integrity required by RQ1, the current study adheres to this contextualist interpretation while pointing out that the relationship between the Qur'anic non-coercion principle and classical apostasy jurisprudence is still a contentious issue in Islamic legal scholarship and cannot be settled by textual analysis of the Qur'an alone.

4.3 Ta‘āruf: Diversity as Epistemic and Social Encounter

Sūrah al-Ḥujurāt offers an additional, sometimes overlooked aspect of Qur'anic diversity.

“O mankind, indeed We have created you from male and female and made you peoples and tribes that you may know one another (li-ta‘ārafū)...” (Qur'an 49:13)

In Arabic morphology, the verbal form ta‘ārafū (“that you may come to know one another”) is reciprocal, indicating reciprocal rather than one-way recognition. The verse grounds human plurality peoples and tribes, shu‘ūban wa qabā'il not merely in toleration but in an epistemic function: difference exists so that communities might encounter and come to understand one another, with the verse's closing clause locating the only legitimate hierarchy among human beings in piety (taqwā) rather than lineage, tribe, or, by extension, religious community of origin. This reframes pluralism as constitutive of moral knowledge rather than as an obstacle to be managed.

4.4 The Non-Negotiable Boundary: Tawhīd and the Limits of Pluralism

It would misrepresent the Qur'anic material to describe its pluralism as indifferentist. The text's civility toward religious difference operates alongside, not instead of, an uncompromising monotheistic truth-claim

¹⁷ (Qur'an 5:48)

¹⁸ Abdel Haleem, *Understanding the Qur'an*, 61-63.

¹⁹ Friedmann, *Tolerance and Coercion in Islam*, 97-103.

²⁰ Saeed and Saeed, *Freedom of Religion, Apostasy and Islam*, 82-88.



and explicit critique of doctrines it regards as theologically mistaken, including trinitarian formulations it reads as compromising divine unity (Q. 5:73) and associationism (shirk) more generally. Esack's distinction between religious pluralism as a sociological and ethical fact the Qur'an affirms, and theological pluralism as the claim that all religions are equally salvifically valid a claim the Qur'an does not straightforwardly make is useful here.²¹ The Qur'anic model, in other words, is best described as a civil and epistemic pluralism combined with a theological particularism: it mandates courteous, non-coercive engagement with religious difference while continuing to assert the truth of its own message. Recognizing this boundary is necessary to avoid the second extreme identified in Section 1.2, in which pluralist readings quietly convert the Qur'an's discourse ethics into a doctrinal relativism the text does not contain.

5. Qur'anic Ways of Speaking with the Religious "Other"

Using the coding process outlined in Section 3.4, this section categorizes the particular communication registers the Qur'an uses for non-Muslim interlocutors, building on the theological underpinnings provided in Section 4.

5.1 *Al-Jidāl al-Aḥsan: Courteous Argumentation*

Sūrah al-Naḥl contains the main guidelines for theological or ideological discussion.

Qur'an 16:125 states, "Invite to the way of your Lord with wisdom and good instruction, and argue with them in a way that is best (wa jādilhum bi-llatī hiya aḥsan)."

An ethical and stylistic restriction is imposed by the comparative superlative aḥsan, which means "that which is most excellent, most courteous." It necessitates three things: first, epistemic respect, which acknowledges the interlocutor's dignity and capacity for reason; second, the use of coherent reasoning (ḥikmah) instead of emotional manipulation; and third, a clear ban on despising the sacred figures or objects of veneration of other traditions, as stated explicitly in Q. 6:108. According to Abdel Haleem, the term "jādil," which is derived from a root associated with intense disagreement, is purposefully combined with the superlative "aḥsan" to transform what could be an adversarial argument into a bounded, morally disciplined exchange. The Qur'an does not ask its audience to avoid disagreement, but rather to conduct it without cruelty.²² A closely related instruction appears at Q. 29:46, which extends the same courteous register specifically to Ahl al-Kitāb and adds the qualification "except those of them who do wrong," marking the register as conditioned on reciprocal civility rather than unconditional in every circumstance.

5.2 Inclusive Nomenclature: Ahl al-Kitāb (People of the Book)

According to Abdel Haleem, the term "jādil," which is derived from a root associated with intense disagreement, is purposefully combined with the superlative "aḥsan" to transform what could be an adversarial argument into a bounded, morally disciplined exchange. The Qur'an does not ask its audience to avoid disagreement, but rather to conduct it without cruelty.²³ The inclusive register functions as a legitimate and textually grounded mode of address, but it is not the same as unconditional doctrinal endorsement, and treating it as such, as some apologetic literature does, overstates the textual evidence. This exegetical nuance is important for the current analysis.

Communicative Register	Qur'anic Terminology	Epistemic Function	Target Audience
Shared Monotheistic Call	Kalimatīn Sawā' (Common Terms)	Finding common ground and shared ethical values	Ahl al-Kitāb (Jews & Christians)
Civil Rights & Justice	Al-Qiṣṭ wa al-Birr	Mandating justice, kindness, and social equity	Non-belligerent non-Muslims
Ethical Dialogue	Al-Jidāl al-Aḥsan	Rational, courteous theological engagement	All religious interlocutors
Universalist Address	Alladhīna Āmanū... wa al-Ṣābi'īn	Cross-communal criterion of faith and righteous action	Named non-Muslim communities collectively

²¹Esack, Qur'an, Liberation and Pluralism, 88-91.

²²Abdel Haleem, Understanding the Qur'an, 55.

²³McAuliffe, Qur'anic Christians, 210-215.



5.3 Appeal to Common Ground: Kalimatın Sawā'

A dialogical approach based on growing concentric circles of agreement is described in Sūrah Āl 'Imrān (3:64).

"Say, 'O People of the Scripture, come to a word that is equitable between us and you - that we will not worship except Allah and not associate anything with Him and not take one another as lords instead of Allah...'²⁴"

Prioritizing convergence over divergence, this approach establishes common theological and ethical premises, such as exclusive worship of the one God, rejection of intracommunal hierarchy as a substitute for divine authority as the beginning point for discourse, and deferring rather than leading from points of dogmatic departure. According to the *aḥsan* register established in Section 5.1, the imperative *qul* ("say") in the verse frames the entire encounter as an invitation rather than a demand.

5.4 The Universalist Salvific Address

Two closely connected passages that address designated religious groupings collectively rather than specifically targeting Muslims have a unique and theologically significant register.

"Those who believed and those who were Jews, Christians, or Sabeans [prior to Prophet Muhammad] who did righteousness and believed in Allah and the Last Day will have their reward with their Lord, and there will be no fear or grief concerning them."²⁵

This "universalist address" is highlighted in the study's abstract and research questions, but it has not been analytically developed in previous analyzes of this material; its interpretation is genuinely contested rather than settled, and part of what this study seeks to model is being honest about that contestation. A significant strand of classical and modern exegesis reads the verse as abrogated (*mansukh*) by the later, more particularist Q. 3:85 ("Whoever desires other than Islam as religion - never will it be accepted from him"), on the theory that 2:62 addressed communities prior to the finality of Muhammad's prophethood and cannot be extended to those who reject that message after having received it.²⁶ A second, minority but textually serious strand associated with figures such as Sachedina and, in a more explicitly liberationist idiom, Esack - rejects the abrogation reading on methodological grounds, arguing that 2:62 and 3:85 address different questions (soteriological standing before God versus the normative religious path Muslims are commanded to follow) and are therefore not in logical contradiction requiring resolution by *naskh*.²⁷ This study does not adjudicate between these positions, which turn on disputed questions of *tafsīr* methodology beyond its scope; what the discourse-analytic method can establish is that the verse's register is distinct from both the dialogical-persuasive mode of 5.1 and the scriptural-inclusive mode of 5.2 - it addresses outcomes rather than argumentative method, and does so in inclusive rather than exclusive grammatical terms, which is itself significant for how the Qur'an constructs its audience.

5.5 Civic-Justice Register: Al-Qiṣṭ wa al-Birr

A final register governs civic conduct toward non-Muslims as such, independent of theological agreement.

"Allah does not forbid you from those who do not fight you because of religion and do not expel you from your homes - from being righteous toward them and acting justly toward them. Indeed, Allah loves those who act justly." (Qur'an 60:8)

The verse's two key terms - *birr* (righteousness, active kindness) and *qiṣṭ* (justice, equity) - are civic and behavioral rather than doctrinal categories, and the verse explicitly conditions the obligation on the conduct of the other party (non-belligerence) rather than on their theological status. Kamali reads this passage, together with Q. 5:8's command to justice "even against those you hate," as establishing a juristic floor for

²⁴ (Qur'an 3:64)

²⁵ (Qur'an 2:62; see also 5:69).

²⁶ Sachedina, *Islamic Roots of Democratic Pluralism*, 51.

²⁷ Esack, *Qur'an, Liberation and Pluralism*, 158-160.



the treatment of religious minorities that operates independently of, and prior to, any question of doctrinal disagreement.²⁸

6. The Contested Register: Confrontational Verses and the Hermeneutics of Context

No account of Qur'anic communication with the religious "Other" can claim completeness or scholarly credibility without direct engagement with the verses most frequently cited to contest the pluralist reading developed above. This section addresses that requirement directly rather than deferring or minimizing it, in keeping with RQ3 and Objective 3.

6.1 The So-Called "Verses of the Sword"

Two verses in particular anchor exclusivist readings of the Qur'an's posture toward non-Muslims.

"And when the sacred months have passed, then kill the polytheists wherever you find them..." (Qur'an 9:5)

"Fight those who do not believe in Allah or the Last Day... from those who were given the Scripture [fight] until they give the jizyah willingly while they are humbled." (Qur'an 9:29)

Classical exegetes largely explained the relationship between these verses and the Qur'an's more conciliatory material through the doctrine of naskh (abrogation), holding that martial verses revealed later in the Medinan period superseded earlier calls to peaceful summons. Firestone's historical-critical study traces how this abrogation theory developed as jurists sought to systematize what they read as successive stages in the Muslim community's relationship to non-Muslims, moving from peaceful invitation, to permission for defensive warfare after the Hijra (Q. 22:39-40), to the more expansive martial verses of Sūrah al-Tawbah.²⁹ A substantial body of contemporary scholarship contests the abrogation reading on contextualist grounds. Abdullah Saeed argues that Q. 9:5 and 9:29 must be read within Sūrah al-Tawbah's own explicit occasion—the aftermath of specific treaty violations by particular Arabian tribes and confederations named earlier in the same sūrah (9:1-4), which explicitly exempts parties who honored their treaties—rather than as a general and permanent statement superseding the Qur'an's dialogical material.³⁰ On this contextualist reading, 9:5 and 9:29 are not abrogating verses of general scope but conditional, occasion-bound provisions addressed to an active state of armed conflict and treaty breach, comparable in legal logic to the general permission for defensive war already given in Q. 22:39-40 and Q. 2:190, the latter of which explicitly instructs, "fight in the way of Allah those who fight you but do not transgress."

6.2 Asbāb al-Nuzūl as a Barrier to Communication

This dispute has significant methodological implications. The entire communicative architecture reconstructed in Sections 4 and 5 becomes, at best, a historically superseded early phase of revelation rather than a standing normative model, the reading preferred by strict exclusivists, if the martial verses are interpreted as completely rejecting the dialogical register. The general civic-justice principle of Q. 60:8 discussed in Section 5.5, which explicitly conditions righteous treatment on non-belligerence and thus anticipates the martial exception rather than contradicting it, is not replaced by the martial verses if they are interpreted contextually, as this study's corpus analysis (Section 3.4) supports. Instead, they serve as a bounded exception addressed to a specific, historically documented condition of active hostility and treaty violation.³¹

It should be stated plainly that this is not a dispute this article can resolve by textual analysis alone; it is a live and substantive disagreement within Islamic legal and exegetical scholarship, turning on classical uṣūl al-fiqh questions about the scope and mechanics of naskh that lie beyond a discourse-analytic method. What

²⁸Kamali, *Freedom, Equality and Justice in Islam*, 88.

²⁹Firestone, *Jihad: The Origin of Holy War in Islam*, 49-52.

³⁰Saeed, *Interpreting the Qur'an*, 145.

³¹Firestone, *Jihad: The Origin of Holy War in Islam*, 118-123.



the present analysis can establish, and what it takes to be its contribution to this specific debate, is that the contextualist reading is at minimum textually defensible on the Qur'an's own terms given the explicit conditionality embedded in the surrounding verses of Sūrah al-Tawbah itself and that a responsible account of Qur'anic pluralism must present this contest rather than either ignoring the martial verses (the apologetic error) or treating them as though they settled the matter unconditionally (the exclusivist error).

6.3 A Discourse-Contextual Reconciliation Model

Synthesizing Sections 6.1 and 6.2, this study proposes a discourse-contextual model in which the Qur'an's default communicative register toward religious difference is dialogical, scriptural-inclusive, and civic-justice oriented (Sections 5.1, 5.2, 5.5), while the martial register is register-shifted and context-indexed rather than essence-indexed triggered specifically by conditions of active aggression or documented treaty breach, and textually bounded by the very verses that introduce it. On this model, the confrontational verses are not evidence against the pluralist architecture reconstructed above; they are a further register within it, governed by the same underlying principle identified across Sections 4 and 5 that the Qur'an's communicative posture is a function of context and conduct, not a fixed and undifferentiated stance toward religious identity as such.

7. Discussion: Synthesizing the Qur'anic Communicative Framework

7.1 Separating Social Enmity from Theological Disagreement

Doctrinal disagreement and social hostility are analytically and normatively distinct categories in Qur'anic ethics, as the Qur'an expressly requires kindness (*birr*) and strict justice (*qist*) toward communities of other faiths who do not initiate hostilities (Q. 60:8, discussed in Section 5.5). The relativist reading eliminates this distinction by denying that doctrinal disagreement even exists.

7.2 Deferral of Ultimate Judgment to the Divine

"On the Day of Resurrection, Allah will decide between you what you used to disagree about." (Qur'an 22:69)

In order to avoid human institutions from turning truth claims into a justification for worldly injustice, the Bible frequently refers ultimate theological judgment about human religious differences to the Eschaton. This postponement is in line with the non-pressure concept of Q. 2:256, which was covered in Section 4.2. If God alone has the last say, then human coercion toward religious compliance is not only discouraged but also blatantly incorrect.

7.3 Civic and Ethical Collaboration

By framing plurality as a race toward good deeds (*al-istibāq fī al-khayrāt*, Q. 5:48, discussed in Section 4.1), the Qur'an reroutes the energy of intercommunal difference away from zero-sum doctrinal contest and toward cooperative ethical ends, such as social welfare, justice, and, by extension, environmental stewardship and human rights.³²

7.4 Between Exclusivism and Relativism: Locating the Qur'anic Model

Returning to the two extremes named in Section 1.2, the model developed across Sections 4–7 locates the Qur'an at neither pole. Against exclusivism, the analysis in Section 6 shows that the martial verses are context-bound rather than a general license for coercive uniformity, and that they operate within, rather than displacing, a dominant register of courteous argument, scriptural inclusion, and civic justice. Against relativism, Section 4.4 shows that this civility does not amount to theological equivalence: the Qur'an maintains an uncompromising truth-claim and offers direct critique of doctrines it holds to be mistaken. The resulting position is best described, following Esack's distinction, as civil and epistemic pluralism combined with theological particularism a position that is textually more demanding, and considerably harder to caricature in either direction, than either extreme in the existing debate.³³

³²Mohammed Abu-Nimer, *Nonviolence and Peace Building in Islam: Theory and Practice* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2003), <https://doi.org/10.5744/florida/9780813025889.001.0001>.

³³Esack, *Qur'an, Liberation and Pluralism*, 91.



8. Implications for Contemporary Practice

8.1 Educational Curricula

The register-sensitive model developed here has direct pedagogical utility. Rather than presenting students with a curated list of “tolerant” verses that avoids the martial material an approach that leaves students unprepared for polemical challenges curricula grounded in this model can teach the full corpus alongside its governing hermeneutical principles: register, audience, and occasion of revelation. This equips students to engage confrontational verses analytically rather than either apologetically dismissing them or absorbing an exclusivist reading uncritically.

8.2 Policy and Constitutional Governance

Policy-makers in Muslim-majority states seeking to ground minority-rights protections in indigenous textual authority, rather than presenting such protections as externally imposed, can draw on the non-coercion principle of Q. 2:256 and the civic-justice mandate of Q. 60:8 as textually explicit foundations while the discussion in Section 4.2 and Section 6 counsels against treating this foundation as though it resolved every downstream question of minority law by itself; that resolution remains a matter of contemporary legal reasoning (ijtihād) informed by, but not dictated by, the base text.³⁴

8.3 Interfaith Dialogue Methodology

Dialogue forums can operationalize the Kalimatin Sawā’ pattern identified in Section 5.3 beginning from areas of shared ethical commitment (poverty alleviation, environmental stewardship, social justice) before addressing points of doctrinal departure as a structurally Qur’anic, rather than merely diplomatically convenient, sequencing for interreligious engagement.

9. Conclusion and Recommendations

9.1 Conclusion

This study has reconstructed the Qur’an’s communicative architecture toward religious difference as a register-sensitive system rather than a single, undifferentiated stance. Diversity is theologically grounded as divine intentionality (Section 4.1) and epistemic opportunity (Section 4.3); human agency and conscience are protected as a precondition for authentic faith (Section 4.2), even as this protection coexists with contested downstream legal questions the Qur’anic text alone does not settle. Communicatively, the Qur’an deploys courteous argument (Section 5.1), inclusive scriptural address (Section 5.2), a contested but textually serious universalist register (Section 5.4), and civic-justice obligation (Section 5.5) as its dominant modes, while its confrontational verses (Section 6) are best read, on the balance of contextualist evidence examined here, as bounded responses to specific historical conditions rather than as a general supersession of that dominant architecture while acknowledging, in the interest of the intellectual honesty this study has aimed at throughout, that this remains a contested rather than closed question in Islamic scholarship.

9.2 Recommendations

The scope and constraints of this study inevitably lead to three expansions (Section 3.5). First, instead of using the purposively sampled corpus utilized here, a corpus-linguistic, computationally aided follow-up might measure register distribution over the whole Qur’anic text. Second, whether the register-sensitive model developed here for the Qur’anic text extends coherently into the post-Qur’anic legal tradition or deviates from it, as suggested in Section 4.2’s discussion of apostasy law, could be tested in a parallel study that incorporates the ḥadīth corpus and classical fiqh. Third, research comparing this model to communicative approaches to religious plurality in other scriptural traditions would determine if the register-sensitivity found here is a characteristic unique to the Qur’an or a more universal aspect of scripturally grounded pluralism.

³⁴Saeed and Saeed, *Freedom of Religion, Apostasy and Islam*, 95-97.