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SLJEDBENICI KNJIGE U KUR'ANU

THE PEOPLE OF THE BOOK IN THE PRE-QUR'ANIC PERIOD

Abstract

The way Muslims understand the Qur'an has shaped their common interreligious perception. This article selects different Qur'anic verses that influenced Muslims in relation to people of other faiths beyond their [Islam]. The main goal of this paper is to show how even Quranic verses that might sound harsh to the ears of other believers can be read with sensitivity and understanding in the modern world. To achieve this, the article provides a historical analysis of the relevant Qur'anic verses along with some current discussions on the issue. Generally speaking, the Qur'an seems more appropriate for cultural and social pluralism than for theological pluralism or dogmatic syncretism. In addition, the Qur'an considers doing good—or competing in doing good—vital in the lives of people of different religious groups. Regardless, the Qur'an accepts the followers of the Book as they are and does not close the door to their exercise of religious freedom.

Key words: *Mecca, Medina, Muslims, Christians, Jews, Zoroastrians, Sabeans Holy Scriptures, the Qur'an, Torah, Psalms, Gospel, Abraham, Moses, Jesus, Muhammad. Zoroastrians, as well as an imprecisely defined group called the Sabeans*

THE PEOPLE OF THE BOOK IN THE PRE-QUR'ANIC PERIOD

Translator's note ^{▼1}

This paper deals with two issues: How does the Qur'an present the people of the Book in both the Meccan and the Madinan periods, and how have Muslims understood them in both the classical and the contemporary periods? Although it is difficult to do justice to this important and complex topic within the scope of an article, I start by focussing on the status of the People of the Book in the pre-Islamic period, in the Qur'an, in the exegetical tradition and finally in our own time. This will be followed by a general re-evaluation of the topic.

First of all, it is important to note that the concept of *ahl al-kitab* (the People of the Book) in the Qur'an is a very flexible and broad term. Generally speaking, the expression began to be used in the late Meccan and Madinan Surahs, and it occurs thirty-one times in the Qur'an. Besides this phrase, there are other expressions by which the Qur'an addresses the People of the Book, such as *alladhina utu al-kitab* (those who have received the Book), ^{▼2} *ataynahum al-kitab* (Those unto whom We have given the Book), ^{▼3} *utu nasiban min al-kitab* (those who were given a portion of the Book), ^{▼4} *wa awrathna al-kitab/alladhina urithu al-kitab* (We gave the Book as inheritance unto those/those who were made inherit the Book), ^{▼5} *wa man indahu ilm al-kitab*

^{▼1} *Ahl al-kitāb* (followers of the Book), in Islamic thought is a term used to refer to Jews, Christians, and Zoroastrians, as well as an imprecisely defined group called the Sabeans – who are recipients of divine books, as opposed to those whose religions are not based on divine, heavenly revelations.

The Prophet Muhammad gave many privileges to the *Ahl al-kitāb* group that must not be extended to the pagans.

Through this paper, the author analyzes how and under what aspect the Qur'an touches the term *Ahl al-kitāb*, in what contexts, and explores the relevance of these allegations, both historically and today. Especially at this historic moment we are in, it is important to refer to the divine discourse about people with whom we should nevertheless gravitate towards "a word to them and to us in common" in order to transform the conflicts in force between the followers of the Book and Muslims into reconciliation, thus opening up the possibility of dialogue that the Qur'an recommends.

As the author himself states at the beginning of the work, the paper focuses on two questions: how the Qur'an represents the followers of the Book in the Meccan and Medina suras and how Muslims understood relevant passages in modern and premodern times and the latter is why we consider this work important and current, and why, in our opinion, it was worth introducing it into the attire of our language.

The only translation difficulty we encountered when working on this text is the translation of Qur'anic phrases, paragraphs and excerpts from verses. In order to achieve effectiveness and receptivity in reading, we have sometimes resorted to the use of the translation of the Qur'an by Besim Korkut, and on other occasions we have translated the English quotation (translation) of the Qur'an that the author brought because it corresponded more contextually to a given passage. (J. Musanovic)

^{▼2} 2:101, 144, 145; 3:19, 20, 100, 186, 187; 4:47, 131; 5:5, 57; 57:16; 74:31; 98:4.

^{▼3} 2:121, 146; 6:20, 89, 114; 13:36, 27:52; 29:47; 45:16.

^{▼4} 3:23; 4:44, 51.

^{▼5} 35:32; 42:14.

(whosoever has true knowledge of the Book),^{▼6} *alladhina yaqraun al-kitab* (those who read the Book),^{▼7} *fas'al ahl al-dhikr* (ask the followers of the *ahl al-kitab*).^{▼8} Because of the special status given them by the Qur'an, the People of the Book are also addressed in it by specific titles. The Qur'an names Jewish people as *yahud*,^{▼9} *hudan*,^{▼10} *alladhina hadu*^{▼11} and *bani israil*.^{▼12} The term *nasara*, which refers exclusively to Christians in the Qur'an, is mentioned fourteen times.^{▼13} This term always occurs together with the expression *yahud* and its derivatives in the Qur'an. Besides this common term, there is one interesting type of address to Christians, namely *ahl al-injil* (the People of the Gospel).^{▼14} The name *hawariyyun* (the followers of Jesus during his lifetime) is mentioned five times in the Qur'an, all of these occur in the Madinan surahs.^{▼15}

Furthermore, the Qur'an mentions the Sabeans^{▼16} in three places and the Zoroastrians in one place.^{▼17} Although the Prophet Muhammad had no contact with the Sabeans, there is a prophetic report that the Zoroastrians should be accorded the status of People of the Book.^{▼18} However, most scholars have regarded both of them as *dhimmi* (subjects) of the Muslim community.^{▼19} In brief, the boundaries of the notion of *ahl al-kitab* in the Qur'an are not always definite (clearly defined), but it is safe to assume that a legitimate status is generally given to the Jews and Christians due to their religious beliefs. The verse 6:156^{▼20}, I suggest, strongly supports this conclusion.

▼6 13:43; 27:40.

▼7 10:94.

▼8 13:43; 27:40.

▼9 This occurs nine times in the Qur'an, only in the Madinan surahs (2:113 (twice), 120; 3:67; 5:18, 51, 64, 82; 9:30).

▼10 This occurs three times in Surah Baqara (2:111, 135, 140).

▼11 This occurs ten times (mostly in the Madinan surahs: 2:62; 4:46, 160; 5:41, 44, 69; 6:146; 16:118; 22:17; 62:6).

▼12 The phrase *bani israil* (the Children of Israel) is mentioned in the Qur'an nearly forty times. The usage of this phrase is quite different from that of the above mentioned terms. Although the phrase refers to the Jews living between the time of the Prophet Moses and that of the Prophet Muhammed, it also refers generally to all the Jews living before Islam. Thus the phrase *bani israil* seems to indicate the Jewish race, whereas the term *yahud* and its derivatives are generally used to address the Jewish people resident in Arabia. These (latter) terms have a pejorative connotation (Ömer Faruk Harman, 'Tefsir Geleneğinde Yahudilere Bakış', *Müslümanlar ve Diğer Din Mensupları*, Ankara: Türkiye Dinler Tarihi Derneği Yayınlar 2004, 119-120). It is also interesting to note that the title of one of the Qur'anic surahs in late Meccan period is *bani israil* (chapter xvii).

▼13 Almost all of them occur in the Madinan surahs: 2:62, 111, 113 (twice), 120, 135, 140; 5:14, 18, 51, 69, 82; 9:30; 22:17. In one place the term *nasrani* is mentioned.

▼14 5:47: 'Let the People of the Gospel judge by which Allah has revealed therein...'

▼15 3:52; 5:111, 112; 61:14 (twice).

▼16 2:62; 5:69; 22:17.

▼17 22:17.

▼18 Malik b. Anas, *al-Muwatta'*, İstanbul: Çağrı Pub. 1992, I.244; Only the Zahirite school of thought holds the view that marriage with a Zoroastrian woman is legitimate. (Abu Yusuf, *Kitab al-Kharaj*, Cairo: np., 1990, 122).

▼19 Ahmet Bostancı, *Kamu Hukuku Açısından Hz. Peygamberin Gayri Müslimlerle İlişkileri*, İstanbul: Rağbet Yay. 2001, 51.

▼20 6:156 'Lest you should say: The Book was sent down only upon two parties (*taifatayn*) before us, and we have indeed been heedless of their study'.

In terms of Holy Scriptures, the Qur'an mentions the *tawrat* (Torah),^{▼21} *zabur* (Psalms),^{▼22} *injl* (Gospel),^{▼23} and *suhuf* (Sheets of Moses and Abraham).^{▼24}

The People of the Book in the pre-Qur'anic Period

It is well known that before the emergence of Islam, the Arabs were familiar with the phrase *ahl al-kitab* (the People of the Book). It is also known that terms referring to both Jews and Christians occur in pre-Islamic poetry.^{▼25}

Concerning the Christian population in Mecca and Madina, Muslim sources mention a few individuals rather than a considerable community. In Mecca, the majority of these individuals were slaves,^{▼26} while in Madina they seem to have numbered no more than fifty. Nonetheless, it is known that there were many Christians living in different parts of the Arabian peninsula.^{▼27} Furthermore, we also come across some reports which show that there were Christian merchants who came to Mecca to conduct business, but they were not allowed to stay too long there, as the Meccan pagans feared they might convert the native population to Christianity,^{▼28} and so the Meccans drove them away. Similarly, there appear to have been few Jews in Mecca whereas there seems to have been substantial Jewish populations near Madina, although their origin in Arabia seems quite obscure. Islamic sources put the number of Jewish branches in Madina at twenty,^{▼29} and while some struggles

▼21 *Tawrat* is mentioned eighteen times in the Qur'an; almost all occur in the Madinan surahs (the single exception is verse 7:157 in the late Meccan surah A'raf).

▼22 *Zabur* is mentioned three times, two of which are related to the Prophet David. The plural form of the term *zabur* (*zubur*) occurs in seven places. Interestingly, most of these surahs are Meccan. Moreover, the late Hamidullah thinks that the statements *zubur al-awwalin* in 26:196 and *suhufu ibrahim wa musa* in 87:19 refer to the Hindus' sacred texts (Muhammad Hamidullah, *Le Saint Coran*, Beirut: Muassasat al-Risala nd., II.492, 804). However, this deduction does not seem very plausible.

▼23 *Injl* is mentioned twelve times in the Qur'an; almost all occur in the Madinan surahs (again the single exception is verse 7:157 in the late Meccan surah A'raf). It is also important to note that the Qur'an does not use the plural form 'Gospels'.

▼ 87:19. There are also some Prophetic traditions which say that God sent sheets to the Prophets Adam, Shît, and Enoch (Idrîs).

▼25 The word *yahud* is used in the poems of the *Jahiliyya* but it appears in the Qur'an during the Madinan period. Interestingly, the expression *bani israil* is not found in pre-Islamic poetry although it occurs in the Qur'an. (Harman, *Ibid.*, 119)

▼26 It is narrated that the Prophet Muhammed met three of them, namely Ya'ish and Jabr from Bani Hadrami, and Bal'am whom he taught the Qur'an (Ibn Jarîr al-Tabarî, *Jami al-Bayan an Ta'wil ay al-Qur'an*, Beirut: Dar al-Fikr 1988, VIII.177-8)

▼27 The majority of Christians lived in the tribes of Bakr b. Wail, Tayy, Has'am, Kalb, Taghlib etc. (Levent Öztürk, *İslam Toplumunda Birarada Yaşama Tecrübesi*, İstanbul: İnsan Pub. 1995, 25)

▼28 Not only foreign Christians but also a few native (converted) Christians were warned by the Meccans not to interfere in the local people's religious life. For example, Abu Sufyan advised Umayy b. Salt not to lead laymen away from their forefathers' beliefs. It is also noted that when Zayd b. Amr b. Nufayl refused to accept idolatry, his brothers tortured him and sent him away from Mecca (Ibn Hisham, *al-Sirat al-Nabawiyya*, Egypt: np., 1971, I.246; Rashid Rida, *al-Wahy al-Muhammadi*, Cairo: np., 1960, 75). It is also narrated that the daughter of Muawiya b. Mughîra b. Abî al-As (Amra) married a Christian man (Abu Najda). Consequently, she was blamed and severely criticised by the Meccans (Balâzurî, *Ansab al-Ashraf*, (in ed.) M. Schoessinger, Jerusalem 1938, IV B, 169-170)

▼29 According to the sources, when the Prophet came to Madina the number of Jewish people was around four thousand. (Muhammed Hamidullah, 'Medine'de Kurulan İlk İslam Devletinin Esas Teşkilat Yapısı ve Hz. Peygamber'in Vazettiği Yeryüzündeki İlk

occurred between the Madinan Arabs and the Jews, because of the Jews' knowledge about the revelation the native Arabs generally respected those living in Madina.

Meccan Period

When the Prophet Muhammad began to receive the revelation and started his prophetic mission, his first addressees were the Meccan Pagans. For this reason, the early Qur'anic passages focus primarily on the negative aspects of idolatry. This does not mean, however, that the Qur'an makes no mention of the People of the Book until the Madinan period. There are many scattered verses concerning the People of the Book in the Qur'an. Besides the narratives regarding the earlier prophets and their communities, there are some verses which give specific information about the beliefs and practices of the People of the Book. Before going into the details of these verses, we should remember that the Qur'an is not a systematic work of theology or law. An analysis of the Qur'anic narratives will show that the emphasis is placed on their dogmatic, spiritual and ethical values rather than giving a historical account in chronological order. If we look at the Qur'an from this perspective we will see that many highly respected Biblical figures are mentioned in it as representatives of the *ṣāliḥūn* (righteous) before the advent of the Prophet Muhammad, and that accordingly God sent a revelation to the Prophet Muhammad to confirm previous revelations (35:31). Considering itself a part of these revelatory traditions, the Qur'an is always on the side of the People of the Book while opposing the Meccan pagans (11:17).^{▼30} Furthermore, when the Meccan pagans used the deification of Jesus as an argument in favour of the idolatrous worship of angels, the Qur'an opposed them (47:57-59). God declares in the Qur'an '...My righteous slaves will inherit the earth' (21:105).^{▼31} Thus the People of the Book are seen as natural allies in the Qur'an. For this reason the Qur'an advises the faithless Meccan, who has a serious doubt about Divine revelation to a mortal man, to ask the followers of the Remembrance (*ahl al-dhikr*), namely the Bible (6:43; 21:7 and those who have read the Divine writings before 10:94). This might be seen as rather confusing, but Qur'anic verses such as 7:159, 168 draw our attention to the existence of pious people among the People of the Book. To show the relationship between the People of the Book and the Muslims of the early Meccan period, it is enough to remember the occasion of revelation of *surah Rum* (The Byzantines). Briefly, there was a great war between the Persians and the Byzantines. The Greeks were Christians and so the Muslims supported them,

Yazılı Anayasa', *İslam Anayasa Hukuku*, (ed.) Vecdi Akyüz, İstanbul 1995, 95).

^{▼30} Is he (to be accounted equal with them) who relies on a clear proof from his Lord, and a witness from Him recites it, and before it was the Book of Moses, an example and a mercy?...'.

^{▼31} This verse is the only explicit Biblical quotation (*Psalms*, 37:29) in the Qur'an.

whereas the Meccan pagans sympathised with the Persians due to their disbelief in One God. When the Persians conquered many places near the heartland of the Byzantine Empire in the fifth year of Muhammad's prophethood, the Muslims became dejected. They suffered not only from the pagans' oppression and cruel treatment but also from their exultant boasting about the victory of the Godless Persians. Consequently surah Rum was revealed to inform the Muslims about the victory of the Byzantines, which would take place within a few years. The Qur'anic prediction was fulfilled nine years later. ▼³²



ILLUSTRATION ~ Views of Mecca from an Album of Architectural Prints © Khalili Collection, ARC.pt 77 | printed in Leipzig | 1725.
 ILUSTRACIJA ~ Pogledi na Meku iz albuma arhitektonskih grafika. © Zbirka Khalili, ARC.pt 77 | štampano u Leipzigu | 1725.

Moreover, during these difficult days some vulnerable Muslims were advised by the Prophet to take refuge with the Emperor of Abyssinia. This reinforced the close relationship between Muslims and the People of the Book. Another verse which shows the Qur'anic preference for the People of the Book over the pagans is 17:107 'Believe therein or believe not, lo! those who were given knowledge before it, when it is read unto them, fall down prostrate on their faces, adoring.' The relationship between the People of the Book and the Muslims in the Meccan surahs is not limited to the aforementioned verses. At this juncture we should remember the verses of *surah Ra'd* (Thunder) that show the People of the Book's attitude towards Muslims. Although

▼³² Tabarī, *Ibid.*, XI. 16-20.

there are considerable differences of opinion regarding the period in which this surah was revealed, most scholars incline to the view that it is a Meccan surah but contains a few verses revealed at Madina. According to verse 13:36, the People of the Book rejoice in the revelation of the Qur'an. However, there are others among the People of the Book who deny the validity of some parts of it. In the following three verses the Qur'an states that it is an ordinance in the Arabic tongue, and the Prophet should follow only its teaching, otherwise there will be no protection. It is also emphasised that it was not given to any apostle to produce revelation save at God's behest (13:38).



ILLUSTRATION ~ The Byzantine-Sasanian War of 602-628 was the final and most devastating of the series of wars fought between the Byzantine Empire and the Persian Sasanian Empire. (Fresco from in the Basilica of San Francesco in Arezzo)

This verse (13:38) ends with the statement that every age had its revelation, *li kulli ajalīn kitāb*. The key verse in this passage is 13:39 'God annuls or confirms whatever He wills, for with Him is the source of all revelation, *wa indahu ilm umm al-kitāb*.' The classical exegetes explain this as referring to the succession of the divine messages culminating in, and ending with, the revelation of the Qur'an. ▼³³

Furthermore, the Qur'an pays attention to the differences among the followers of the earlier revelations, who were divided by a schism: some welcomed the new revelation while others denied it. These verses also indicate that the Qur'anic criticism of the People of the Book began at Mecca. The Qur'an sometimes criticises the Jews for their wrongdoings against themselves (16:118) and the Christians for their disagreements about the nature of Jesus (19:36-7). God created humankind as a single community, but later they begin to hold divergent views (10:19); nevertheless, 'If He had wished He could have made all humankind one single community' (11:118). Interestingly, the divergent views appeared only after they had come to know the truth. And had it not been for a decree that had already gone forth from your Sustainer (postponing all decision until a term set by God) it had been judged between them in respect of that wherein they differ.

In spite of their belonging to the same revelatory tradition, the Qur'anic criticism of the conflicts and disputes among the People of the Book gradually increases. The Qur'an has the task of confirming the truth in the Arabic tongue, of warning the evildoers and of bringing glad tidings to the doers of good (42:12), and also explains to the People of the Book where they hold divergent views (27:76). This gives the Qur'an privileged status to control or determine what is genuine and what is false in earlier revelations. This high status of the Qur'an reaches its peak with the late Meccan verse of *surah Araf* (7:157). In this verse the People of the Book are asked to follow the unlettered Prophet who was described in the Torah and the Gospel. The following verse, however, declares from the mouth of the Prophet Muhammad that he is an apostle of God to all of mankind, *jamīan* (7:158). ▼³⁴ But this universal call does not imply that the People of the Book should be forced to become Muslim. In another late Meccan verse (29:46) the Qur'an teaches Muslims how they are supposed to treat the People of the Book: 'And do not argue with the followers of earlier revelation otherwise than in a most kindly manner... and say we believe in that which has been bestowed from on high upon us, as well as that which has been bestowed upon you, for our God and your God is one and the same...'. Although some exegetes think that this verse is abrogated, from the Qur'an's general context it seems this view is not plausible. The function of this late Meccan surah is to draw attention to what unites the People of the Book and the Muslims. Now we will turn to examine the verses about the People of the Book revealed in the Madinan period.

▼³³ Ibn Kathīr, *Mukhtasar Tafsīr Ibn Kathīr*, Beirut: Dar al-Qur'an al-Karīm 1981, II. 286.

▼³⁴ There is another verse, *kaffatan* (34:28), which shows that the message of the Qur'an and the Prophethood of Muhammad are universal, his message is neither time-bound nor confined to any particular cultural milieu.



ILLUSTRATION ~ Views of the Medina from the Ottoman period. (Archive of Akšamija)

ILUSTRACIJA ~ Pogledi na Medinu iz Otomanskog perioda.

Madinan Period

It has been observed that with the migration to Madina, the number of passages concerning the People of the Book increases. The long surahs such as *Baqara*, which deals with the Jews; Al Imran which contains many passages about the Christians; and *Nisa'*, Maida and *Tawba*, which give equal weight to both Christians and Jews were revealed in Madina. The most probable reason for this lies in the Prophet's direct contact with these communities in Madina. The Qur'anic discourse about the People of the Book changes in accordance with the quality of their relationship with the Muslims.

It is well known that when the Prophet Muhammad came to Madina, besides the Arab Muslims and pagans he found many Jewish people there. Having built a mosque, established a brotherhood between the Meccan immigrants and the Madinan Muslims, fixed the boundary of Madina and counted the population, the most important achievement of the Prophet was to make an agreement among the different inhabitants of the region, namely the famous Madinan Pact. This treaty shows how a diverse community can live together in unity. Article 25 summarises the question of freedom of religion and autonomy by saying: unto Jews their

religion and unto Muslims their religion. In addition, the article also describes the Jews of Banî Awf as an independent community like the Muslims. ▼³⁵

Because there was no significant Christian community in Madina, the treaty does not mention them. However, when Muslims later encountered various Christian groups in the years of migration, they made an agreement with them also. When we look at the earlier Madinan surahs and Prophetic traditions, we find that the Muslims considered the People of the Book their fellows in religion and tried to behave in the same way as the Jews and Christians did in their daily life.



ILLUSTRATION - Madinah Agreement/Constitution/Charter - *Mithāq al-Madīnah*. (Archive of Akšamija)

As a result of this intimate friendship, the Muslims, in contrast to the pagans, dressed themselves like the People of the Book and directed their prayers towards Jerusalem for a period of nearly sixteen months. Moreover, when the Prophet saw them fasting in the month of Muharram, he commanded the Muslims to

▼³⁵ Hamidullah, *Ibid.*, 100-104.

fast on the same days. The Qur'an also allowed the Muslims to eat the animals sacrificed by them, to marry with their women and eat from their dishes.^{▼36} These permissions indicate that the Qur'an and the Prophet were making a clear distinction between the People of the Book and the Arab pagans in Madina. Because their Scriptures contained authentic revelation and because out of ignorance some people might commit the error of falsifying them, the Prophet said 'Do not confirm the People of the Book, and do not accuse them of falsehood,' but say 'We believe in God and what He has revealed to us.'^{▼37} On the basis of this close relationship, the Prophet proclaimed that he was the man closest to the Son of Mary. Furthermore, he introduced the prophets as brothers who have the same father but different mothers.^{▼38}

Having noted this anecdote, we do not claim that Islam always preserves its neutral position towards the People of the Book. Because Muslims' selfunderstanding is partly related to their attitudes towards the People of the Book, we find many reports concerning the Prophetic invitation for them to accept Islam. It is recorded that the Prophet went to *bayt al-midrās* (House of Midrash) to ask them to accept common terms, or to invite Jewish scholars to a discussion. However, with the exception of a few individuals, the Jewish community in Madina did not accept these invitations. Thus the Jews, as a major addressee of the Qur'anic expression *ahl al-kitāb*, begin to be criticised in the Qur'an in the early Madinan verses. I think the first serious criticism against them occurred after the Qur'an's choice of the *Ka'bah* as the Muslims' direction of prayer (2:145). This is followed by many other criticisms levelled against them. The Qur'an reminds them frequently of their ancestors' mistakes committed against God and the prophets, and also enumerates their sins committed against God, the Prophet Muhammad, and the Muslims. Before focussing on these chain of errors made by the People of the Book (especially the Jews), I should like to draw attention to an important point, failure to see the distinction between the Qur'an's criticisms of the Jews in general and its censure of the Jews who were contemporaries of the Prophet Muhammad, prevents many Muslim scholars from evaluating the Qur'anic presentation of the Jews correctly. Consequently, many authors generalise local (conjectural) practices or beliefs of the Jews while the others localise general practices or beliefs. Some example of Qur'anic criticism against local Jews' beliefs and practices are as follows: hostility towards the Angel Gabriel (2:97), claim for the Sonship of Azra/Uzayr (9:30), belief in what has been bestowed on them and denial of God's other revelations or all revelations (2:91; 69:91), belief in idols and false deities (4:51).

^{▼36} Davut Aydıöz, *Tarih Boyunca Dinlerarası Diyalog*, İstanbul: Işık Pub. 2004, 105-108.

^{▼37} Bukhari, *Sahih al-Bukhari*, Beirut: Dar Ihya al-Turath al-'Arabi nd., IV.374 (Bab 25, no: 7362). Regarding the belief in the existence of authentic words of God in the Torah and Gospels, Muslims Jurists have discussed whether one should perform ablution before touching them. Furthermore, the notion of *shar'u man qablana* (the rules of those who received a Scripture before us) is worth mentioning. According to this rule, if the Qur'an and the Prophetic traditions are silent on an issue and this issue is explained in the Scriptures of the Jews or Christians, Muslims should take them into consideration.

^{▼38} Muslim, *Sahih al-Muslim*, İstanbul: Çağrı Pub. 1992, II. 1837.

According to Islamic sources, the violation of the treaties by local Jewish groups within a few years created a great deal of tension between the Jews and the Muslims. This increasing hostility and unstable relationship between the two sides is reflected in various verses. The Qur'anic narrative enumerates their and their forefathers' misdeeds: they did not want to sacrifice the cow (2:67:73), they worshipped the golden calf (2:54; 7:148: 20:88), disregarded their promise (2:83), spoilt their religion to acquire a trifling gain (2:79), ill-treated Moses (4:154), rejected the prophets (2:146), attempted to kill the prophets (2:87), hardened or covered their hearts (2:74; 2:88), forbade what God had permitted (3:93-4), wanted to see God (2:55), claimed to be God's children (5:18), claimed that fire would touch them in a limited number of days (2:80), broke the Sabbath-law (4:154), corrupted the Scripture (2:70), ▼³⁹ took rabbis as their Lords (9:31) and denied the last Prophet although he confirmed the Torah (2:87).



ILLUSTRATION ~ Musalla Mosque in Medina around the mid 17th century with its typical Ottoman minaret and domes. (Archive of Akšamija)
 ILUSTRACIJA ~ Džamija Musalla u Medini oko sredine 17. stoljeća s tipičnim otomanskim minaretom i kupolama.

▼³⁹ See 2:75, 79; 4:46, 48; 5:13, 16, 41, 45.

Although some of these criticisms are also directed against the Christians, the Jews are severely judged for their untrue statement made about Mary, Jesus' mother (4:156). Clearly, the Qur'anic criticism of the Jews who rejected the prophets and Jesus himself implies that the Muslims considered the earlier prophets, including Moses and Jesus, their own Prophets.

In the middle of the Madinan period, due to their failure to observe their agreement, main Jewish groups were expelled from Madina. Their departure coincided with the establishment of the Muslims' religious^{▼40} and political unity. During the second phase of the Prophet's life at Madina, the relationship between Muslims and Christians developed significantly. Within a few years, the Prophet sent envoys to the neighbouring states, which were generally Christian, and began receiving their ambassadors at Madina. One of the important results of this relationship was to make Muslims more familiar with the Christians' practices and dogmas in Arabia. This interaction is also depicted in the Qur'an. In contrast to its many criticisms of Jews, especially from ethical perspectives,^{▼41} the Qur'an criticises the Christians for their adherence to certain excessive dogmas. The concept of the Trinity^{▼42} and their elevation of their monks and religious leaders to be their lords beside God (9:31) are the most salient examples of their excess.

We are now in a position to consider the Madinan verses concerning the People of the Book. Similarly to some Meccan verses, a number of Madinan verses also state that mankind was once one community but when the clear proofs came they differed (2:213). In verse 5:48, it is said that if Allah had willed He could have made mankind one community. Having accepted the differences as a fact, the Qur'an talks about six groups: Muslims, Jews, Christians, Sabeans (2:62; 5:69), Zoroastrians and idolaters (22:17).^{▼43} The Qur'an's view of the idolaters is definite; however, concerning the status of the Jews and Christians in (2:62; 5:69) it is worth noting that both classical and modern Muslim scholars have made great efforts to explain them. The plain meaning of the verses (2:62; 5:69) is that, besides Muslims, those who follow the Jewish, Christian, or Sabeen faiths and believe in One God and the hereafter, and do right will have their reward with God. The classical exegetes identify those Jews and Christians, who achieved salvation with the pious believers who lived before the advent of Islam, or they associate them with a few individuals who converted to Islam during the time

▼40 Muslims are commanded to direct their faces to Mecca (*Ka'ba*) during their prayer, to fast in the month of Ramadan, to recite the *adhan* (call for prayer) to inform the people about the time of prayer, to start to attend regularly a Friday prayer. But these should not be seen merely as a tactic used by the Prophet in order to achieve what he wanted.

▼41 Such as their claim to be chosen by God, their love of life and their cowardice when called on to fight, their mocking God's rule and their frequently collaboration with hypocrites and idolaters against the Muslims.

▼42 4:171-172; 5:17, 72-75, 77, 116 .

▼43 In his interpretation of this verse (22:17) Zamakhshari is extremely exclusivist: '...there are five religions, four of which belong to Satan and the one to the Compassionate'. He did not consider idolaters to be a religious community. (Zamakhshari, *al-Kashshaf*, Beirut: Dar Ihya al-Turath al-Arabi 1997, III.149)

of the Prophet Muhammad.▼⁴⁴ They also think that the context of these verses supports their conclusion. Furthermore, the report narrated by Ibn Abbas says that when the Prophet recited verse 3:85 'Do they seek other than Islam, when unto Him submitted whosoever is in the heavens and the earth...' then he started to read verse (2:62). This displays the exegetes' general stance regarding the salvation of the People of the Book.▼⁴⁵



ILLUSTRATION ~ Views of the Medina - engraver André Hercule de Fleury, 18th century. (Archive of Akšamija)
 ILUSTRACIJA ~ Pogledi na Medinu - graveer André Hercule de Fleury, 18. stoljeće.

Nonetheless, besides the verses (2:62; 5:69) which base the minimum condition for salvation on only three elements, there are other verses which affirm that the People of the Book are not all alike, and that there are upright people among them (3:113-114). According to these verses, these followers of the earlier revelations

▼⁴⁴ The names of these individuals are: Abd Allah b. Salam, Najashī (Negus of Abyssinia), Sa'laba b. Shu'ba, Usayd b. Saiyya, Asad b. Ubayd (Tabari, *Ibid.*, III.52); Concerning the occasion of revelation of this verse (2:62) Ibn Kathir notes that it was revealed due to Salman al-Farisi's inquiry about his pious Christian friends. According to Ibn Kathir, from the time of Moses to that of Jesus, Judaism prevailed, from the time of Jesus to that of Muhammed, Christianity prevailed, from the time of Muhammed to the end of the world Islam will prevail (Ibn Kathir, *Ibid.*, I.71-2).

▼⁴⁵ Ibn Kathir, *Ibid.*, I.71.

recite God's messages throughout the night, prostrate themselves, enjoin the doing of what is good and forbid the doing of what is wrong and vie with one another in good works. The classical exegetes exhibit a similar attitude towards these verses and identify these pious people with those who converted to Islam. ▼⁴⁶ Nevertheless, the exegetes are troubled by the expression *ahl al-kitāb* in the verse, and indeed the validity of the above mentioned interpretation remains seriously problematic. If they are converted Muslims, why does the Qur'an refer to them as the People of the Book? Once again, the classical exegetes hold the view that this is due to their having been Jews or Christians before conversion. But the literal meaning of the verse, which is accepted as ambiguous by Tabari, identifies these people with the followers of earlier Scriptures. ▼⁴⁷ Other Qur'anic verses such as (2:101, 148; 3:78/*fariq*), (3:69, 72/*ta'ifa*), (2:109; 5:66, 80-81/*kathīr*), and (3:110/*akthar*) also indicate that not all (or only some or a group) of them are the same. ▼⁴⁸

Concerning the status of the People of the Book, certain passages (5:42-43, 47, 66) in surah Maidah are worthy of attention. The main theme of these verses is the observance of the judgement of the Torah and the Gospel. If the People of the Book do not put the judgement of these Books into practice they will be evil (wrong) doers. Although in 5:66 there is a clear reference to the necessity of the judgement of the Qur'an besides those of the Torah and the Gospel, in other verses (5:42-3, 47) only the Torah and the Gospel are intended. The classical exegetes' understanding of these verses is, however, quite different and they again incline towards some sort of exclusivism. For example, in the interpretation of verse 5:66, they explain the meaning of the observance of the judgement of the Gospel as follows: 'They promised to obey the last Prophet in their Scripture. Thus the observance of the judgement of the Gospel means to fulfill this promise'. ▼⁴⁹ The great exegete Razi asks, in relation to the interpretation of verses (5:43-47), 'After the Qur'an, is it possible to obey the rules of the Gospel?' In answering this question Razi offers three comments. Firstly, similarly to the abovementioned exegesis, the meaning of the observance of the judgement of the Gospel is that Christians should obey the verses which indicate the Prophethood of Muhammad. Secondly, they should implement the rules which are not abrogated by the Qur'an, and finally, they should confirm without alteration or distortion what God has sent in the Gospel. ▼⁵⁰

▼⁴⁶ Tabari, *Ibid.*, III.52-53; Ibn Kathir, *Ibid.*, I. 312.

▼⁴⁷ Tabari, *Ibid.*, III. 56.

▼⁴⁸ 3:75 is also an interesting example: 'Among the People of the Book there is he who, if you trust him with a weight of treasure, will return it to you. And among them there is he who, if you trust him with a piece of gold, will not return it to you unless you keep standing over him...'

▼⁴⁹ Baydawi, *Anwar al-Tanzil wa Asrar al-Ta'wil*, Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-Ilmiyya 1988, I. 274.

▼⁵⁰ Razi, *Mafatih al-Ghayb*, Beirut: Dar al-Fikr 1981, XII. 11.



ILLUSTRATION ~ Sections of the Sultan Süleyman *Tesezkurname* scroll. View of Madina in 1890 and Masjid al-Nabawi, the Mosque of the Prophet, 1908. (Archive of Akšamija)

ILUSTRACIJA ~ Dijelovi svitka sultana Sulejmanove *Tesezkurname*. Pogled na Medinu 1890. i Mesjid al-Nabawi, Poslanikova džamija, 1908.

Ibn Kathir's comment is in line with Razi's interpretation.^{▼51} The question why the classical exegetes are in favour of an exclusivist interpretation of these inclusivist or to some extent pluralistic verses should be

^{▼51} Ibn Kathir, *Ibid.*, I. 523. Interestingly, the Qur'an also makes a delicate distinction between the Jews and the Christians in 5:82 'You will find the most vehement of mankind in hostility to those who believe (to be) the Jews and the idolaters. And you will find the nearest of them in affection to those who believe (to be) those who say: Lo! We are Christians. That is because there are among them priests and monks, and because they are not proud.' On the basis of this verse, Zamakhshari says 'Since the Jews are mentioned before idolaters, this shows that they are going even further' (Zamakhshari, *Ibid.*, I. 701). God's characterisation of the Christians as being tender-hearted and as weeping when they hear the Qur'an, however, is in accordance with what is reported concerning the Negus of Abyssinia or the envoy of Abyssinia who converted to Islam. Tabari, on the other hand, says that whoever bears these characteristics should be considered within the boundary of the verse (Tabari, *Ibid.*, V. 3).

addressed clearly. I think the prime motive behind this inclination is the existence of other verses which indicate that belief in the prophethood of Muhammad is necessary. Verse (3:199) explicitly states that some of the People of the Book believe in what has been revealed to the Prophet Muhammad and what was revealed to them. Similarly, verse (4:162) mentions that those who are firm in knowledge believe in the revelation sent to the Prophet Muhammad. The reason why the Prophet Muhammad was sent is explained in verse (5:19) ‘O People of the Book! Now, after a long time during which no apostles have appeared, there has come unto you Our Messenger to make (the truth) clear to you, lest you say “no bearer of glad tidings has come unto us, nor any warner.” For now there has come unto you a bearer of glad tidings and a warner...’. The classical exegetes see these verses as clear proof of Muhammad’s prophethood, thus they hold the view that the Qur’anic revelation was sent to rectify or correct the distorted religion of the People of the Book. ▼⁵² Tabari says that the last Prophet brought the *Furqan* in order to distinguish between truth and falsehood. ▼⁵³ If they accept Muhammad as a Prophet, God will give them twofold of His Mercy (57:28). According to Baydawi, this twofold mercy is the reward for their belief in the Prophethood of Muhammad. Tabari, however, holds the meaning to be that their belief in Muhammad’s prophethood will perfect their faith. ▼⁵⁴

Interestingly, when the Qur’an deals with non-Muslims in these verses, it generally uses the expression *ahl al-kitāb* as if it is drawing the believers’ attention to similarities rather than differences. Thus Islam, on the one hand, invites them to accept a common term (*tawḥīd*), and on the other, tries to get both Christians and Jews to draw closer to itself. In addition, the verse which occurs in the middle of surah Baqara (2:143) suggests that the Muslim community is the community of the middle way, who bear witness to the truth before all nations by keeping an equitable balance between extreme positions. ▼⁵⁵ Clearly, these verses call the people to believe in the Qur’an and Muhammad; They also gives a privilege position to the Muslim community, who have the responsibility of conveying the final messages to neighbouring communities. Historically speaking, this reaches its peak in verse 3:64 ‘Say: People of the Book! Come now to a word common between us and you, that we serve none but God, and that we associate not aught with Him, and that do not some of us take others as Lords, apart from God. And if they turn their backs, say: ‘Bear witness that we are Muslims.’ ▼⁵⁶ The

▼⁵² Ibn Kathir, *Ibid.*, I. 500-1; They generally think that faith in God necessarily entails belief in Muhammad because God has made this incumbent upon mankind.

▼⁵³ Tabari, *Ibid.*, IV. 166-7.

▼⁵⁴ Tabari, *Ibid.*, XIII.41-2 ; Baydawi, *ibid.*, II. 472.

▼⁵⁵ In line with this verse, verse (3:110) describes Muslims as the best community.

▼⁵⁶ There is another verse (3:61) in this surah which is called the verse of *mubāḥalah* (trial by prayer). On the occasion of a dispute between the Prophet and a deputation of the Christians of *Najran* who maintained that Jesus was the Son of God and therefore God incarnate, the Prophet summoned them to curse those who tell lies. Although they refused the trial by prayer proposed by the Prophet, he accorded them a treaty guaranteeing all their civic and religious freedoms. (Baydawi, *Ibid.*, I.263; Muhammad Asad, *The Message of the Qur’an*, Gibraltar: Dar al-Andalus 1980, 76).

subjects of this verse, according to the exegetes, may be either Jews or Christians, but taking previous verses into account it seems the main addressee is the Christians. It is also narrated that when the Prophet sent a letter to Hiraqlus, he recorded this verse on the back of the letter.^{▼57} From the Qur'anic verses, it is clear that neither the Jews nor the Christians gave a positive reply, because the following verses (3:67-68) reject the claim of Jews and Christians who associated Abraham only with their own religion. The Qur'an reminds them that the people who have the best claim to Abraham are surely those who follow him, as does this Prophet (Muhammad) and all who believe in him (Muslims).

These are generally late Madinan verses and the tone adopted here by the Qur'an is very severe, which is understandable bearing in mind the military tension then existing between the Muslims and the People of the Book. For instance, in 5:51 the Qur'an also warns the Muslims not to make the Jews and Christians their allies.^{▼58} The classical exegetes understand this verse generally in the context of not trusting non-Muslims in religious matters. Others, who associate alliance or friendship with intimate confidences, explain the verse as enjoining Muslims not to give away the secrets of the Muslim state.^{▼59} Nonetheless, these approaches do not prevent Muslim scholars from appreciating the virtues and merits of the People of the Book. In brief, the Qur'an does not reject absolutely friendship between Muslims and the People of the Book. At this juncture, it is worth remembering one of the contemporary Muslim activist and scholar Said Nursi's approach to the verse: 'Just as not all of the characteristics of an individual Muslim necessarily reflect the teaching of Islam, so also, not all of the qualities of individual Jews or Christians reflect unbelief.' And he asks 'Can a Muslim love a Christian or Jew?' After noting the marriage of a Muslim man with a woman of the People of the Book, he replies 'Of course, yes. He should love her'.^{▼60}

Another late Madinan surah in the Qur'an which records the tension between the Muslims and the People of the Book is *Tawba* (Repentance). This surah was revealed during a military expedition and clearly reflects the non-Muslims' alliance against Muslim unity. An interesting aspect of this situation is illustrated in verse 9:29: 'Fight against such of those who have been given the Scripture as believe not in Allah nor the Last Day, and forbid not that which Allah has forbidden by His Messenger, and follow not the religion of truth, until they pay the tribute readily, being brought low.'^{▼61} The verse cannot be understood unless it is considered part of one integral whole. Thus one should read it in its historical context and in the light of other verses.

^{▼57} Qurtubi, *al-Jami' li-Ahkam al-Qur'an*, Beirut, 1985, IV. 105.

^{▼58} 'O you who believe! Take not the Jews and Christians for friends. They are friends of one to another. He among you who takes them for friends is (one) of them. Lo! Allah guides not wrongdoing folk.'

^{▼59} Baydawi, *Ibid.*, I. 270; It should be noted that both Jews and Christians are employed in various places in Muslim state.

^{▼60} Said Nursi, *Munazarat*, Istanbul: Yeni Asya Pub. 1993, 71.

^{▼61} *Jizya* is no more and no less than an exemption tax in lieu of military service and in compensation for a covenant of protection accorded to such citizens by the Islamic state (Asad, *ibid.*, 262).

Modern Muslim Scholarship Concerning the Notion of the People of the Book in the Qur'an

The pressures of Modernism and secularism, which are the most important natural consequence of modernity, are reducing the force of religion in the public sphere. Regarding secularisation, we see a related issue, namely pluralisation. Although religious and social pluralism has not been seriously addressed, it has now become a basic feature of modern societies. It is clear from an examination of the Qur'anic text and the Prophetic traditions that both classical and modern Muslim scholarship support social and cultural pluralism, which guarantees and protects the coexistence of diverse religious people, their rights and freedoms. This cannot be said for dogmatic or theologic pluralism (the claim that all religions are equally true). In contrast to the classical scholars, modern scholars approach pluralism pluralistically. Although the view of a great number of contemporary Muslim thinkers on this issue are in line with those of their classical counterparts, some intellectuals go beyond the traditional framework. They hold the view that if non-Muslims preserve the minimum conditions of the principles of faith (such as believing in One God, in the Day of Judgement, and performing righteous action) they will be saved from calamity in the hereafter.

Our first example of this approach is that provided by Musa Jarullah who lived all his life within a multi-religious community in Russia. In his work *Rahmeti İlahiye Burhanları* (The Evidences of God's Mercy) written in 1911, he argues, basing his opinion on verse (39:56),^{▼62} that God's Mercy will embrace everybody because the word *ibad* used in this verse is not specific but general.^{▼63} In their interpretation of verse (3:113: 'They are not alike...') Abduh and his favourite pupil Rashid Rida argue that the classical exegetes failed to understand how a non-Muslim could be saved even if he or she believes in the basic principles (belief in God, and the hereafter, and the performance of the good deeds), and so the classical scholars identified these praised Jews and Christians with the converted Muslims. In addition to this, Abduh and Rida see no contradiction between the partly distorted natures of the Torah and the Gospel and the righteous attitude of one group among the People of the Book. There are some prophetic traditions which are authentic, weak and fabricated but whoever observes their teachings is called a practitioner of the tradition. Thus Rida believes that truly pious and religious people are known only by God, therefore no one (whether Muslim or non-Muslim) is justified in

▼62 39:53 'Say: O My slaves (*ibadi*), who have been prodigal to their own hurt! Despair not of the mercy of Allah, Who forgives all sins. Lo! He is the Forgiving, the Merciful'.

▼63 Quoted from the article written by Adnan Arslan ('Dini Çoğulculuk Problemine Çözüm Önerisi', *Müslümanlar ve Diğer Din Mensupları*, Ankara: Türkiye Dinler Tarihi Derneği Pub. 2004, 348). The other verses on which Jarullah frequently places great emphasis are 5:117-118; 42:5; 50:29. Furthermore, he argues that hellfire is not eternal.

practising 'religious nationalism' concerning the matter of ultimate salvation.^{▼64} This shows that at least in principle Rida is ready to accept dogmatic pluralism.

The Indian Shiite scholar Hasan Askari, who was influenced by the famous Muslim mystics, supported the idea of pluralism.^{▼65} There is also another scholar from Pakistan, who discussed the issue more elaborately. I am speaking of the late Fazlurrahman, who spent most of his life in the West. According to Fazlurrahman, the vast majority of Muslim commentators avoid giving the obvious meaning of the verses (2:62; 5:69) which assure that whoever (no matter whether they are Muslims, Jews, Christians, or Sabeans) believe in God, and the Last Day, and do good deeds are saved. The Qur'an, Fazlurrahman says, gives its final answer to the problem of pluralism in verse (5:48). Briefly, humankind was a single unity, but this unity was later split up in accordance with God's plan. Thus the Muslim community is recognised as a community among the communities.^{▼66}

Using Fazlurrahman's argument as a starting point, a few Turkish academics point out that the Qur'an was not revealed to abrogate previous Scriptures but to confirm them. Thus, the Qur'an asks the People of the Book to treat the notion of *tawhid* seriously but does not ask them to abandon their own religion. These scholars give numerous examples to show that the teachings of the People of the Book are in accord with the basic principles of faith and ethics and differ only in the implementation of the rules. They also seek to make a distinction between two Islams: one is established by the consensus of Muslim scholars (jurists and theologians), the other is the universal Islam preached by all the prophets who came to different nations at different times. According to them, the failure to see this distinction has confused Muslim scholarship concerning the verses about the People of the Book. They think that most of the Qur'anic criticisms levelled against the People of the Book are historically specific rather than an everlasting judgement. For this reason, they argue, belief in the Prophethood of Muhammad is not an essential part of *tawhīd* and salvation.^{▼67}

Today many Muslims find this pluralistic approach exemplifies as an extreme liberalism in Islamic thought which they cannot easily accept. It is worth noting here that like their Christian counterparts, those Muslim intellectuals who promote the idea of dogmatic pluralism are generally marginal figures. Before closing this section, I would like to summarise the attitude of two other enlightened Turkish scholars towards the

^{▼64} Muhammad Abduh/Rashid Rida, *Tafsir al-Manar*, Beirut: Dar al-Ma'rifa nd., IV. 71-74.

^{▼65} Kate Zebiri, *Muslim and Christians: Face to Face*, Oxford: Oxford One World 1997, 163; Some Muslim and non-Muslim intellectuals prefer to use some Sufists' arguments to support religious pluralism. Rumi, Ibn Arabi, Abu Saïd Abi al-Khayr, Ibn Sab'in, Qushayri are most frequently cited in this context. However, Keller's recent work proves the contrary. (See Carl-A. Keller, 'Perception of Other Religions in Sufism', *Muslim Perceptions of Other Religions: A Historical Survey*, in Jacques Waardenburg (ed.) New York-Oxford: Oxford University Pub. 1999, 181-194.

^{▼66} Fazlurrahman, *Major Themes of the Qur'an*, Minneapolis: Bibliotheca Islamica 1991, 165-167.

^{▼67} Süleyman Ateş, 'Cennet Kimsenin Tekelinde Değildir', *İslami Araştırmalar Dergisi*, 3 (1989), 7-24; Mehmet Okuyan-Mustafa Öztürk, 'Kur'an Verilerine Göre Ötekinin Konumu', *İslam ve Öteki* in (ed) Cafer Sadık Yaren, İstanbul: Kaknüs Pub. 2001, 163-216

notion of the People of the Book in Muslim tradition. These scholars are Said Nursi and Fethullah Gülen, whose teachings are being welcomed with open arms in Turkey. Nursi, whose life spanned the Ottoman and Republican Eras, lived in very painful and unfortunate times for Muslims. However, he never lost his hope that religions would flourish again in the near future. He sincerely asks believers (both Muslims and Christians) to come together and work together: 'The believers should now unite, not only with their Muslim brothers but with truly religious and pious Christians, disregarding questions of dispute and not arguing over them. For absolute disbelief (atheism) is on the attack.'^{▼68} His particular emphasis on Muslim-Christian cooperation was the result of many Prophetic reports which indicate that Muslims will enjoy peace with the pious Christians at the end of time. This unity will ensure security, and together they will fight against the common enemy, namely irreligiosity.^{▼69} To encourage this common endeavour, Nursi re-formulates the expression *ahl al-kitāb* as *ahl al-maktab* (the literate People).^{▼70} This original re-interpretation should not be seen as a simple semantic contribution. Nursi, with utmost sincerity, calls the Christians the people literate in modern science, whose knowledge enables them to fight against the disbelief which stems from a secularism rooted in modern science. Thus Nursi believes in close dialogue with Christians and thinks that real humanity, dignity and justice can only be established by a mutual understanding based on cooperation between these revealed religions. In saying this, however, Nursi is not implying that there are no differences between Islam and Christianity or that the differences which exist are not significant. There are important differences between the Christian and the Islamic faiths. But what Nursi is trying to do, as Thomas Michael points out, is that concentrating obsessively on these differences can blind both Muslims and Christians to the even more important common task which they share, that of offering the modern world a vision of human life and society in which God is central and God's will is the norm of moral values.^{▼71}

In line with Nursi, Gülen, a contemporary Turkish thinker and religious scholar, believes in the importance of the dialogue with the People of the Book. His starting point in this regard is *basmala* (the initial phrase of Qur'anic *surahs*). He sees in this phrase God's most recurrent attributes, namely 'the Compassionate and the Merciful/*rahīmān and rahīm*'. These words, according to Gülen, requires human beings to show compassion not only to their fellows but to all living beings.^{▼72} For Gülen, this is a natural conclusion to be drawn from

^{▼68} Said Nursi, *Emirdağ Lahikası-I*, İstanbul: Envar Pub. 1992, 206.

^{▼69} See Said Nursi, *Şualar*, İstanbul: Envar Pub. 1993, 587; There are some reports which say that at the end of time, Jesus will come and act in accordance with the holy law of Islam or that Jesus will come and perform ritual prayer behind the *Mahdi* (Ibn Maja, *Sunan*, İstanbul: Çağrı Pub. 1992, I.1360-61). Nonetheless, Nursi does not talk about the Christians' complete conversion to Islam; rather he thinks that current Christianity will be purified in the face of reality, it will cast off superstition and unite with the truths of Islam. According to Nursi, this will be a transformation into a sort of Islam (Said Nursi, *Şualar*, 587).

^{▼70} Said Nursi, *Sözler*, İstanbul: Sözler Pub. 1993, 396.

^{▼71} Thomas Micheal, 2.

^{▼72} Zeki Saritoprak-Sidney Griffith, 'Fethullah Gülen and the People of the Book: A Voice from Turkey for Interfaith Dialogue', *The Muslim World*, 95, (2005), 333.

God's beautiful name *wadud* (the Beloved One). Thus he holds the view that dialogue is the most important practice of Islamic ethics. This, however, should be carried out in complete sincerity, using a constructive approach and without claiming any superiority^{▼73} Accepting every individual in his or her own situation is one of Gülen's most frequent mottos. Gülen's aim is to prepare different religious communities to learn how to live together in mutual respect and in peace. The existence of serious criticism of both Christians and Jews in the Qur'an, Gülen says, should be re-evaluated in accordance with its historical conditions. This historical reading, according to Gülen, will allow Muslims to re-establish healthier relationships with other communities both religious and non-religious.^{▼74} Nonetheless, Gülen's emphasis seems to be on cultural and social pluralism rather than on dogmatic pluralism.

Conclusion

the contents of the Qur'an concerning the People of the Book is very rich. There are various verses which deal with their fundamental beliefs, practices, and moral principles, and with some important Biblical figures. As a matter of fact, it is possible to find more references regarding some of these issues and figures in the Qur'an than in the Gospels and the Hebrew Bible.

Leaving aside the polemical works, it is clear that Western scholarship is interested in the Qur'anic presentation of the People of the Book. But we must admit that, generally speaking, Western scholars' understandings of this field are not in accordance with those held by Muslims. The main reason for this, especially in relation to supposed points of similarity, lies in their methodology, namely using non-Muslim terminology and criteria to analyse the Qur'anic text. The result can be astonishing: some find incarnation in the Qur'an, some see references to original sin. Others, having considered the differences on a semantic level, argue that the Qur'an confirms the legitimacy of the Trinity. Some non-Muslim scholars who have strong religious background find the Qur'anic theology extremely inflexible. As followers of the earlier Scriptures, both Jews and Christians tend to think that any endorsement on their part of the authenticity of the Qur'an and the Prophethood of Muhammad would be tantamount to a denial of their own faith. The Final group among the non-Muslim experts consists of those who see the claims of all Scriptures to be true as relative, and consider no religion superior or inferior to another. From an Islamic perspective, none of these approaches seems helpful.

▼73 Saritoprak-Griffith, *Ibid.*, 334.

▼74 Selçuk Camcı-Kudret Ünal, *Hoşgörü ve Diyalog İklimi*, İzmir: Merkür Y. 1999, 156.

When we look at Muslim scholarship, with the exception of a few scholars we find a similarity of approach. In the classical period, few Muslims were interested in the Bible. It is clear from their works that they were not well acquainted with the contents of either the Hebrew Bible or the New Testament.^{▼75} It is important to note that Muslims' understanding of the People of the Book is determined by the Qur'an and the Prophetic traditions. In the Qur'an and the Prophet's sayings, however, we find many assessments of the Prophet's contemporaries rather than a general evaluation of the People of the Book. It is true that the Qur'an attributes various negative moral and theological qualities to the Jews and Christians. But the same Qur'an also accepts that spiritual depth exists in those communities. Above all, the People of the Book is a religious status given to them by the Qur'an. As in every religious community, there are sincere and insincere people. What the classical Muslim exegetes did, however, was to disregard the historical conditions surrounding the verses critical of the Jews and Christians and too easily applied the negative characteristics mentioned in the Qur'an to the People of the Book at all times and places. They unfortunately focussed on the polemical verses rather than treating the Qur'an as a whole. In addition, like their non-Muslim counterparts, they also evaluated both Judaism and Christianity according to the criteria of their own religion and reacted with horror to some controversial issues such as division within the Godhead, annulment of the prophetic immunity from sin, the status of the verbal inspiration of the Scriptures and so on. These scholars' attitude towards the People of the Book is confessional in that they reject the possibility that any other religion can provide salvation.

Others, by contrast, seem to incline towards religious pluralism, disregarding some unbridgable dogmatic differences. Their focus on the universality of Divinity, the relativity of faith and the Compassion of God enables them to promote pluralism. Nonetheless, their approach is not free from problems. Moreover, the views of these scholars are generally not welcomed by the Muslim masses. An other group of Muslims, however, disregard controversial questions and concentrate on what the believing communities can do. In modern society, all kinds of religious people coexist within the same city, street, university, classroom, factory and so on. So this group tries to find ways of establishing religious diversity within social unity.

Here it would be useful to consider one of the most important Qur'anic terms, namely *taaruf*. The meaning of the verse where this term occurs is as follows: 49:13 'O mankind! We have created you male and female, and have made you nations and tribes that you may know one another. Lo! the noblest of you, in the sight of Allah, is the best in conduct (*taqwa*)...'. It is safe to assume that one of the key words of the Qur'an concerning plurality lies in this verse. *Taaruf* (knowing each other) should be reconsidered in the context of the need to find common grounds for the coexistence of diverse religious communities. It is a key that could open the door to interfaith dialogue. Here the Qur'an draws attention to equality in regard to biology and to a dignity

^{▼75} Ibn Ishaq, Jahiz, Ibn Qutayba, Baqillani, Ibn Hazm, Juwayni, Ibn Khaldun represent the exceptions.

common to all. Thus no one can be justified in boasting of an inherent superiority over others. Furthermore, the idea of superiority is criticised in another key verse (4:123) in the Qur'an which says 'It will not be in accordance with your desires, nor the desires of the People of the Book. He who does wrong will have the recompence thereof, and will not find against Allah any protecting friend or helper.' So, true salvation should be looked for in *taqwa*, and only God knows *taqwa*. Thus the answer to the question of how the adherents of the three Abrahamic traditions could be allies lies in the degree of the notion of *taqwa* within the borders of *ta'āruf*. The limits of *ta'āruf*, however, are described by another verse (2:256) 'There is no compulsion in religion. The right direction is henceforth distinct from error...'.^{▼76} According to this verse, no one should place another under pressure to accept the faith of Islam. Those who do so commit a grievous sin. It is also important to note that this verse also enjoins Muslims to protect the life, possessions, generation and, most importantly, religious freedom of others. This is the realm of *ta'āruf* and it should apply not only to the believing communities but also to non-believers. God knows the best, *wa 'llāhu a'lam*.



▼76 Concerning the occasion of revelation of this verse, it is mentioned that when the Madinan Arabs had no children, they vowed that if God had given them children they would have given them to the Jews who would have educated them religiously. And when they had children they did this and gave their children to the Jews. Then the Prophet came to Madina and a few years later, when the Jews left the city, they wanted to take these children with them. However the children's parents tried to prevent this. The dispute was brought to the Prophet, who decided that if the children adopted Judaism and wanted to go with their religious fellows they could go. (Tabari, *Ibid.*, III.14-18)

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