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## **The Qur'anic monotheism and its opportunities for building empathy and peace\***

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### **Abstract**

The Qur'an has been examined as a relevant resource in the extensive literature regarding notions of violence, peace, and conflict resolution. It has often been suggested that the Qur'anic tradition can be applicable in building theoretical foundations for acts of peacebuilding and nonviolence. However, researchers have frequently referred to certain challenges of integration as regards the relationship between Islamic and Western realizations of peace. As a response, many scholars have underlined the necessity to utilize indigenous processes and opportunities of peacebuilding in Muslim culture. We know that monotheism (*Tawhīd*) is the most fundamental theme of the Qur'an and functions as the basis of all Islamic life. Hence, the present paper aims at extracting the monotheistic opportunities of the Qur'an for building empathy as an important concept in peace studies. Application of contemporary theories of peace in order to understand the Qur'anic opportunities suggested that monotheistic teachings tend to encourage some sense of integrity within human community necessary for developing harmonious relationships in the global milieu. In addition, a triangular pattern of human commonality was reproduced based on the monotheistic doctrines. This model seems to shape the Qur'anic geometry needed for building empathy and peace in human community.

**Keywords:** the Qur'an; Monotheism; empathy; peace.

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## Introduction

In the contemporary era, religion is commonly believed to have (re)appeared throughout the different spheres of human interaction, from politics and economy to culture and education. Especially in the aftermath of 9/11, many scholars have explored the fundamental implications of this alleged 'resurgence' (Bouma, 2007; Thomas, 2005 & 2010) for human society. Hence, in an attempt to understand or interpret the dynamics underlying this trend, scholars in various fields of study and activists with different aspirations have developed a large body of literature examining the way religion influences broad concepts such as violence, terrorism, war, reconciliation, and peace. Indeed, the diversity of ideas regarding the multidimensional nature of this relationship has led to a polarized situation frequently referred to as 'ambivalence of the sacred' (Appleby, 2000).

Investigations into the destructive/constructive roles of religion as a significant individual/social factor have shaped an extensively ambivalent literature. On the one hand, religion is most frequently considered as a force for bigotry, enmity, violence, and war. Not only atheists like Richard Dawkins (2006) and Sam Harris (2004), but also many political and social scientists, psychologists, and social psychologists propose that religion is characterized by concepts and mechanisms which are potentially violent or destructive. See, for example, Rapoport (2001), Juergensmeyer (2003), Stern (2003), Kimball (2008), Herriot (2009), and Stein (2010). On the other hand, the proponents of religion highlight the religious patterns for compassion, tolerance, coexistence, reconciliation, and peacebuilding in human history. Numerous religious and non-religious activists have contributed to this body of literature in support of religion and spirituality. Their main argument is that in every religion, one can observe models, values, teachings, and

practices which encourage inner peace, compassion, human dignity, social integrity, nonviolence, peaceful coexistence, and tolerance. See, for example, Gopin (2000), Sachedina (2001 & 2009), Armstrong (2006), Mayton (2009), Esposito (2010), Hertog (2010), and Bhawuk (2011).

As regards the multiple didactic roles of religious texts, many critical studies report a contradictory power of the sacred as reflected in various textual resources of different world religions. For instance, the Qur'anic literature, revered by Muslims as the very word of God, has been the target of a diverse range of criticisms especially ever since the September 11. From atheists to priests, artists to journalists, the layman to the elite, many individuals have given public lectures, held Qur'an-burning ceremonies, produced films and documentaries, drawn strip cartoons, and composed books, all displaying the Qur'an as a malevolent piece of scripture which mandates hostility and intolerance, and calls for violence, murder, and terrorism. See, for example, Gabriel (2002, 2005), Harris (2004), Hitchens (2007), Richardson (2003), Rush (2008), Shoebat (2005), Spencer (2009).

However, many scholars disagree that the Qur'an could indisputably be called a book of war or considered inherently violent. Instead, they describe that its central message is one of peace and forbiddance of killing (Juergensmeyer & Kitts, 2011: 8). In fact, numerous studies have explored the peacebuilding opportunities provided by the Qur'an. See, for example, Abu-Nimer and Nasser (2013); Gopin (2001); Jafari and Said (2011); Tröger (1990). Their findings lead to the conclusion that religious resources including the Qur'an and Hadith help shape the perceptions of forgiveness, compassion, and reconciliation that are necessary for practical work against violence and conflict. Such researchers believe that we can employ the principles and values provided by the Qur'an, Hadith, and Islamic tradition

so as to build theoretical foundations for acts of peacebuilding and nonviolence (Abu-Nimer, 2003; Kadayifci-Orellana, 2007).

At the same time, researchers have underlined serious challenges in terms of understanding the relationship between Islamic and Western realizations of peace and conflict. According to Said et al. (2001), the discrepancy between the Western and Islamic conceptions of peace and conflict results from the different principles underlying their cosmologies. Moreover, Jafari and Said (2011) describe that from an Islamic perspective, peace does not merely correspond to the absence of war, but ‘a *presence* of divine guidance and human responsibility.’ In the same way, Kadayifci-Orellana (2009) highlights the wider range of meanings relating to the concept of peace as reflected in the Qur’an; some of which include internal and external order, a positive state of safety or security, justice and human development, salvation, perfection and harmony. In response to the Islamic-Western challenge, some scholars emphasize the application of a combined approach to both Western-based and Islamic resources in order to develop more pragmatic models for implementation within Muslim societies (Abdalla, 2000). Others highlight the importance of reproducing Islamic concepts and methods that would contribute positively to the mechanisms of conflict reduction in intergroup and interpersonal settings (Randeree et al., 2011). The same point is illustrated by Abu-Nimer (1996) as he underlines the necessity to utilize ‘indigenous conflict resolution processes’ existing in Muslim societies.

Indeed, monotheism (*Tawhīd*) is the most fundamental theme of the Qur’an and functions as the basis of all Islamic life. Due to its major ideological importance in Islamic thought, this underlying Qur’anic principle has cognitive and behavioral implications that need to be considered for

understanding the relationship between the Qur'an and peace/conflict. Thus, the present paper aims at extracting the monotheistic opportunities of the Qur'an for building empathy as an important concept in peace studies. In fact, in order to discern such Qur'anic potentials and reach valid conclusions, we would also need to consider contemporary theories of peace that have been produced outside the sacred sphere.

### **The Theory and Practice of the Qur'anic Monotheism**

The doctrine of monotheism (*Tawhīd*) is expressed in the Qur'an at both theoretical and practical levels, and carries both such implications, as well. When the polytheist Arabs asked the Prophet to describe his Lord, the following verse was revealed to clarify the principle underpinning a monotheistic creed: '*And your god is one God. There is no deity except Him, the Compassionate, the Merciful*' (The Qur'an, 2:163). The verse outlines the theoretical bottom-line of the Qur'anic monotheism: the unhesitating Oneness of God, the subsequent exclusive authority that the One God assumes, and two of the many attributes of His Essence which might help specify the quality of His relationship with humans and other creatures. The Qur'an seems to consider the notion of monotheism as both spiritually self-evident and intellectually justifiable. On the one hand, the existence of God is described as a self-evident fact (The Qur'an, 14:10). On the other hand, it is theoretically argued that monotheism prevents the universe from confusion and destruction: '*Had there been within the heavens and earth gods besides Allah, they both would have been ruined*' (21:22).

The same ideology about the existence of the Only God constitutes the first statement in the Islamic Testimony of Faith (*shahāda*). The monotheistic essence of the Testimony is a remembrance for the people through the instinctive knowledge inherited in man's soul (similar to the notion of

‘collective unconscious’ presented by Carl Jung, 1959). The motif has its theological roots in the Qur’anic imagery of the Primordial Covenant taken by all Adam’s descendants before the dawn of human history when they testified that Allah is their Lord (The Qur’an, 7:172). This Qur’anic allegory associates the human testimony of monotheism with an innate knowledge which lies at the core of human collective unconscious. Most importantly, the whole narrative is not to be reduced to an abstract metaphysical phenomenon; instead, the monotheistic covenant carries implications of responsibility and obligation for humanity. The Qur’an repeatedly mentions how much mankind tends to forget the covenant or keep ignoring it. Carrying on with its reminiscing style and evocative policy, the Qur’an further reminds the people how sincerely they have exclusive recourse to God in dangers, but as soon as their safety is guaranteed by Him, they often fail to recall their Savior and would return to their polytheistic belief in the worship of other deities (The Qur’an, 29:65). Great emphasis is also laid on the fact that whenever the people are asked ‘Who created you, the heavens and earth and subjected the sun and the moon?’ they would surely say, ‘Allah’ (The Qur’an, 29:61; see also 29:63, 31:25, 39:38, 43:9, 43:87, and many other passages pertaining to more or less the same subject). Employing such theological-cognitive reasoning, the Qur’an spotlights the inevitability of an urgent belief in the One God.

In addition, there is a chapter (*sūra*) of the Qur’an called the *Sūra of Tawhīd* (or *al-Ikhlāṣ*) which structures the veritable cornerstone of Muslim belief in Divine Unity. Most Muslims concur that this chapter is an embodiment of all Qur’anic teachings and the Islamic faith, i.e. the establishment of the Oneness of God:

*Say, ‘He is Allah, [who is] One, Allah, the Eternal Refuge. He neither begets*

*nor is born, nor is there to Him any equivalent.* ' (The Qur'an, Chapter 112)

The *Sūra of Tawhīd* is considered especially meritorious and is one of the first chapters to be learnt by Muslim children. The chapter seems to discuss monotheistic faith in both theoretical and practical perspectives. Apparently, in these verses God does not only introduce Himself to the people through His messenger (Prophet Muhammad), but also clarifies and confirms his uniquely dominant position amongst, or indeed above all, other deities already worshipped in Mecca. In other words, the eternal quality of Allah as the Transcendental Creator is reaffirmed in ways that eventually an incomparable position for Him is secured in opposition to polytheisms of any kind (Bowen, 1993: 99-100).

Needless to say, the Prophet was to fight cultic polytheisms and reform their corresponding corrupt morality. In fact, his preaching of a monotheistic faith posed explicit threat to the most powerful elements of polytheistic thought in Arabia. The Qur'anic monotheism encouraged the people to abandon their tribal gods and it consequently claimed dominance over the tribal belief systems with their weaker gods.

*Do they associate with Him those who create nothing and they are [themselves] created? And the false deities are unable to [give] them help, nor can they help themselves.* (The Qur'an, 7:191-2)

The Prophet spoke the language of the masses (The Qur'an, 14:4) and urged them to look into their own nature and the process of human creation, as well as the whole Creation surrounding them. Thus, he intended for the people to be reminded of the existence of an Only One Creator having brought the universe into being and having prepared the right conditions for human life to evolve (The Qur'an, 2:164). In so doing, the Prophet drew the people's attentions to the obvious, widespread signs (*āyāt*) of an Only Omnipresent

God superseding the numerous traditional Arab deities. Theoretically, faith in Muhammad's Omnipotent, Omniscient, and especially Omnipresent God made the existence, belief and act of worshipping such other deities useless and dispensable:

*And to Allah belongs the east and the west. So wherever you [might] turn, there is the Face of Allah. Indeed, Allah is all-Encompassing and Knowing.* (The Qur'an, 2:115)

Armstrong (2002: 8) does not consider the Qur'anic arguments pertaining to monotheism as philosophical. Instead, she believes that the Qur'an adopts a practical approach so that the new religion appeals to the pragmatic Arab audiences whose society suffers from 'spiritual malaise, chronic and destructive warfare, and an injustice that violated the best Arab traditions and tribal codes' (Ibid). The Qur'an (3:103) itself clarifies how enmity and corruption had plagued the Arab community before Islam. According to a contextualist approach, the macro context of the seventh-century Arabia, especially as characterized by the exploitation of girls, orphans, women, and slaves, had created the social demand for a system that could oppose those socioeconomic injustices (Saeed, 2014: 99). Thus, adopting a social reformer's stance and drawing upon socio-political, practical foundations, Prophet Muhammad attempted to encourage the masses to abandon their not only futile but more importantly detrimental belief in the long-held polytheism (The Qur'an, 10:18 & 25:3). In numerous passages, the Qur'an as an essentially monotheistic scripture blames the polytheistic belief systems for fostering division and segregation in human societies (see, for example, The Qur'an, 10:19). The alternative offered by the Qur'an (7:157) is surrender and submission (*islām*) to the One God, associated with devout adherence to and support for His chosen messenger (widely-known in pre-



Islamic Mecca as *al-Amīn* for his honesty and upright character). It is further elaborated in the same Qur'anic passage that the Prophet '*enjoins upon them what is right and forbids them what is wrong and makes lawful for them the good things and prohibits for them the evil*' and most socio-politically significant '*relieves them of their burden and the shackles which were upon them.*'

While studying the development of the world's religions, Ellwood (2003: 84-85) considers Islam as a religion greatly concerned with 'the regulation of life in this world.' He further identifies the Qur'anic notion of monotheism as a catalyst for unity in the seventh-century Arab society. Likewise, Armstrong (2002: 7) considers such social concern as an essential part of the visions of the great world religions developed during the Axial Age (c. 700 B.C.E. to 200 B.C.E.). Nevertheless, the Qur'an itself seems to address the issue somewhat differently. In the Qur'anic language, the original true religion revealed for mankind had always been monotheism – the innate knowledge of which was expressed in the allegory of the Primordial Covenant. It should be noted, however, that the Qur'an does not only evoke for the people the instinctive belief in the One God, but also provides the Prophet with historical information regarding the monotheistic faith (See, for example, the Qur'an, 22:78 & 3:67). Prophet Muhammad is commanded to embrace Islam as an Abrahamic or monotheistic religion and to adhere to the Divine Nature or Disposition '*the fitrah of Allah upon which He has created [all] people*' (The Qur'an, 30:30). Indeed, the character of Abraham has also been considered as an important parameter in the Prophet's self-perception (Peters, 1994: 119). Hence, the Prophet's mission was to restore the monotheism of Abraham, which according to the Qur'an had been ignored by his people (The Qur'an, 30:30).

Bayman (2003: 150) explains that polytheism can lead to discrimination and inequality between human beings. He illustrates how the Shiite scholar Ali Shariati (1933-1977) paid attention to the coexistence of inequality and polytheism and employed the words of Tocqueville (French political thinker, 1805-1859) to refer to 'the sociology of associationism' through which men captivated in too many social levels, discover or devise so many divinities to help them explain the isolation of 'nations, castes, classes and families, and find a thousand private roads to go to heaven.' The Qur'anic fact is that throughout history (especially in the pre-Islamic period), the people had just distorted or ignored the intrinsic true religion in order to justify the inequities created through human behavior and inspired by their own desire for more gain.

We can also understand Armstrong's notion of the Axial Age transformations (Armstrong, 2006) through the application of Qur'anic teachings with regard to the history of monotheism. It might be said that from the Qur'anic perspective, human beings – located in increasingly polarized and unjust societies – experienced the necessity to return to the original monotheistic faith as a motive force which can ensure the restoration of justice and equality. As the Qur'an spells out (see, for example, the Qur'an, 43:22-29), the old polytheistic religion based on ignorance and blind obedience had proved useless and was to be avoided. It was the appropriate time and context now for the polytheist Arabs to reinstitute the instinctive human knowledge of the Oneness of God as promoted by Prophet Muhammad, to practice its worldview and to restructure their shattered community accordingly.

### **The Qur'anic monotheism as promoting unity and empathy**

Some critical writings tend to introduce monotheism as a religious idea

which 'may lead to aggressive evangelization or conversion campaigns that are not conducive to the creation of religious tolerance' (Ter Haar, 2005). Others claim that monotheism sponsors exclusion, violence and persecution (Assmann, 2010). In addition, Schwartz (1997) controversially argues that the legacy of Biblical monotheism is responsible for exclusivism, authoritarianism, intolerance, misogyny, ill treatment of minorities, jingoistic nationalism, fundamentalism, patriarchy, and, in general, violence towards the Other. It is suggested in such critical literature that the 'myth of monotheism' is a system in which the formation of identity depends on 'rejection of the Other and the subjection of the Self' carrying implications of power and violence (Smith, 1998).

In contrast, Gopin (2005) highlights the centrality of the imaginative element in understanding the contributions of monotheistic narratives to peacebuilding. He defines monotheistic traditions as metaphoric myths in the sense that they are powerful instruments which can bring 'infinitely complex problems into a manageable cognitive structure of reality, allowing problems of dizzying proportions to be understood by the human mind and absorbed by the human heart' (Ibid: 8). Moreover, Kearns (2008) points to the role of religious figures including Abraham, Virgin Mary, and Prophet Muhammad in terms of their unique monotheistic relationship with the divine. She further illustrates an association between such monotheistic experiences and reciprocal hospitality toward others. A similar 'shared ethic of reciprocity' is discerned in the teachings of Abrahamic traditions when Reynolds (2010) explains that 'hospitality is a bestowal of welcome that opens toward another as loved by God.' And in the context of Islamic theology, Sachedina (2006: 46) holds that the Qur'an seeks to construct a just and equal society based on the commands of the monotheistic God. He also pinpoints the common

Abrahamic tradition of 'the Divine-human covenant that locates justice in history through community' (Ibid: 48).

In the body of the present study, we need to pay special attention to the prosocial implications of the Qur'anic emphasis on Abrahamic monotheism. Based on the Qur'anic outlook, the monotheism preached by the Prophet is equivalent to the one universal religion of truth enjoined upon Abraham, Moses and Jesus (16:120 & 42:13). According to Wessels (2002), the Qur'anic image of Abraham as an original monotheist and a follower of the universal religion of truth provides Prophet Muhammad with the opportunity to introduce Islam 'without rejecting the faith claims of Jews and Christians.' While addressing audiences from Abrahamic religions, the Qur'an invites the monotheist worshippers to return to the unified religion of truth 'and not be divided therein' (42:13; see also 16:120 & 4:152). In addition, the Qur'an strongly emphasizes that social disintegration leads to failure; therefore the Prophet is commanded to abandon '*those who have divided their religion and become sects*' (The Qur'an, 6:159).

Furthermore, the Qur'an (49:11) strictly forbids mocking or ridiculing other peoples and insulting them. Instead, brotherhood between nations and attention to the concerns, needs and capabilities of others is emphasized. In many parallel passages, the Qur'an endorses the unity of humankind by declaring that they originally belonged to a unified community or *umma* (2:213 & 23:52). In fact, the Qur'anic definition of the idea of *umma* is developed so as to include all members of human community. The Qur'an teaches that human beings have been '*created from one soul*' (7:189), that they originally belonged '*to one community [religion], [before their deviation]*' (2:213), and that they have received divine guidance through the

appearance of prophets with '*no distinction between any of them [His messengers]*' (2:285).

Hence, we can argue that the Qur'an theoretically highlights at least three levels of universal equity among the members of human community, which can in turn foster the spirit of empathy. Stemming from the essentially monotheistic faith preached by the Prophet and expressed in such a religio-linguistic discourse, these notions may be translated into a triangle of human commonality comprised of three categories: metaphysical, biological, and historical (figure 1). Throughout the Qur'an, it is taught that human beings have the same Creator God (6:102 & 42:11), common primordial parents (4:1 & 6:98), and some shared prophetic heritage (2:136 & 10:47). One interpretation can be that such Qur'anic acknowledgement of a threefold human commonality prepared the ground for the Prophet to cultivate the seeds of a new culture of empathy and equity. In fact, he had found the disenfranchised majority of his own community in particular, and the whole Arab society in general, thirsty for such an alternative culture. (See, for example, the Qur'an 3:103.)

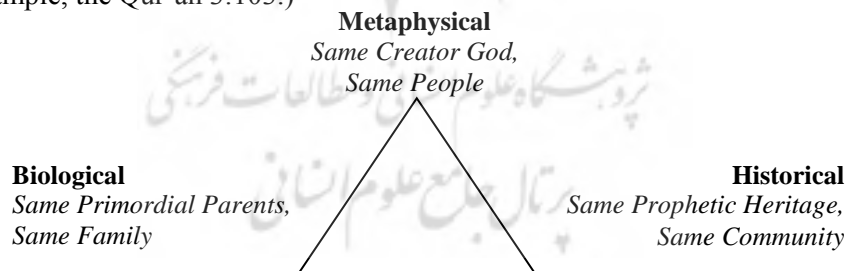


Figure 1. A triangle of human commonality in the Qur'an

Having been provided as an alternative to the limited, discriminatory tribal cognition of its own contemporary social milieu, this triangle of human commonality tends to increase the human capacity for empathy. In fact,

empathy is an important concept in contemporary peace studies. For instance, in Johan Galtung's peace-studies literature, empathy is simply defined as 'the capacity for deep understanding, cognitively and emotionally, of the Other' (Galtung, 2000: 91). It has often been argued that empathy potentially breeds more positive attitudes toward 'the Other' since it can increase the perception in individuals that they share a common humanity with others (Stephan & Finlay, 1999). Galtung (2007: 27) emphasizes on empathy as the first episode of a peace 'mantra' or 'peace by peaceful means check-list', also including 'non-violence and creativity.' In explaining the significance that he assigns to empathy for violence control and peace, Galtung (Ibid: 23 & 28) notes that it is an essential, but often lost, element which makes conflict transformation possible through transcending contradictions. Furthermore, abundant research explores how empathy improves intergroup attitudes and reduces bias by hindering hostile attitudes and behavior. See, for example, Batson et al. (1997); Litvack-Miller, MacDougall, & Romney (1997); Wang et al., (2003). There is also abundant research demonstrating that empathy can be explicitly taught (Barak, 1990; Erera, 1997; Pinzone-Glover et al., 1998). This education can happen and be strengthened as a result of explicit encouragement (Batson et al., 1997).

Hence, we now aim to focus on the didactic function of the Qur'an as a strong religious resource in order to discover how the Qur'anic doctrines of monotheistic human commonality can be associated with the promotion of empathy. It can be argued that the Qur'anic passages pertaining to such monotheistic perspectives provide the audience with opportunities to seek commonalities of *self* and *the other*. What follows is a short discussion regarding the potential attitudinal effects of the monotheistic Qur'anic cognition on its adherents:

(1) Acknowledging the fact that all are created by the same Creator God will potentially prevent some members of the global human community from assuming certain nobility over others at the creation level. As a result, it may reduce the possibilities of some individuals or groups calling for those less noble – perhaps with their weaker gods – to be classified in lower social castes and ill-treated accordingly. It seems that the Qur'an challenges those cultures or *false* theologies which are socially disintegrating in essence and tend to legitimize their own social-class manifestations. Such essentially monotheistic emphasis on the oneness of God as the Creator and Sustainer of all human beings, introduces metaphysical unity as a significant aspect of human equity. The alternative Qur'anic culture has the potential to struggle against subtypes of violence including exploitation, segmentation, repression, expulsion, and marginalization.

(2) According to the monotheistic biology of the Qur'an – which is generally in line with its Biblical counterpart – human beings are but descendents of common primordial parents, Adam and Eve. This understanding of the origin of humankind basically leaves no room for any legitimization of racial or gender discrimination against 'the other'; for all are but members of one family as vast as the global community. None of the siblings in this close-knit family is to fall victim to racism. Perhaps this is the hidden meaning conveyed through the allegory of God's covenant with Abraham and his descendants, albeit narrated differently in the Bible and the Qur'an; compare, for example, Genesis (15:1-21) and the Qur'an (2:125). Consequently, it sounds fair to say that according to the Qur'an, racial discrimination is not an inborn phenomenon in the global sphere, but a product of human activity and has to be ended through human activity. Moreover, within the framework of this Qur'anic cognition, gender

discrimination finds no theological legitimization. Instead, the Qur'an highlights the common origin of men and women (4:1), and their equal theological and spiritual prospects (4:124). Even more importantly, the Prophet utilizes such numerous passages concerning the dignity of women as justifications for an unprecedented recognition of their legal status, conferring upon them the rights of marriage, divorce, ownership, and inheritance; see, for example, the Qur'an (2:236-237; 4:4-19). Indeed, in urgent legal matters that had something to do with the wholesale social justice of the community, the Qur'an showed no tolerance towards the polytheistic ideology. In the pre-Islamic era, women had been suffering from explicit gender discrimination, especially in terms of having no legal rights regarding marriage, divorce, and inheritance. However, as Armstrong (2002: 16) points out, 'the Qur'an gave women rights of inheritance and divorce centuries before Western women were accorded such status.' With the new attitude aroused in its adherents regarding the human interaction with others in a global community, the Qur'an can be seen as seeking to combat racial and gender segregation, oppression, and exploitation.

(3) The Qur'an (10:47; 35:24-25) announces that God has never left any nations without messengers. According to some other Qur'anic teachings, there is no distinction between any one of God's prophets (2:285). In a pluralistic language, it can be inferred that the religious-spiritual heritage of all nations is thus recognized. The Qur'an clearly presents a universalistic and inclusive notion concerning theological issues such as faith and salvation (2:62). In Galtungian literature, 'a structure of exclusion' may finally hurt or harm in a direct fashion of violence, or it might lead to deep insults to basic human needs leaving them unsatisfied (Galtung, 2007: 18). In this regard, the Qur'an seems to provide alternative attitudes making



positive, inclusive emotions possible toward 'the other.' At the same time, the Muslim scripture challenges exclusive claims of parallel monotheistic faiths and urges them to recognize their common grounds (3:64-65). The term 'People of the Book' repeated throughout the Qur'an seems to offer and function as a theological justification making more concentration on shared beliefs and values achievable. Therefore, by considering the Qur'anic teachings on the common nature of prophetic message, one might argue that this religious text highlights the necessity to build a peaceful approach toward other religions (cultures) as they all originated from a single source and are not basically different from each other.

The triangle of human commonality, as we have discerned and extracted from the monotheistic teachings of the Qur'an, can provide a basis for the promotion of unity and empathy. In the words of Sachedina (2006: 45), such Qur'anic monotheistic doctrines emphasize that people 'share a common ethical responsibility toward one another'; therefore, these doctrines can improve sociability and positive bonds between members of the human community and help promote mutually respectful relationships. This finding can also be documented and related to the scientific studies which suggest that reading information about the experiences of other individuals and groups can create empathy (Stephan & Finlay, 1999). Consequently, we can observe that the spirit of unity and empathy is embodied in the doctrines preached by the Qur'an as the greatest Muslim sacred text.

### **The peacebuilding opportunities of the Qur'anic monotheism**

Needless to say, the implications of such human commonality highlighted throughout the monotheistic passages of the Qur'an are not restricted to the religious or socio-ethical sense. Many scholars have examined the significance of the monotheistic narrative in relation to the notions of

intergroup interaction and peace. For instance, Gopin (2005) considers what he calls the metaphor of Abrahamic family as a source of profound possibilities for building peace and nonviolence. Therefore, the Qur'anic narratives pertaining to Abraham as a most prominent monotheistic figure can be utilized for peacebuilding purposes, especially among the adherents of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. The Qur'an (3:67) teaches that Abraham was neither a Jew, nor a Christian, but a submitted *hanīf* who adhered to perennial monotheism, and that he was not of the idolaters. Drawing on some historical fact, the Qur'an (3:65) asks Christians and Jews: '*O People of the Scripture, why do you argue about Abraham while the Torah and the Gospel were not revealed until after him? Then will you not reason?*' As Glassé (2001: 22) illustrates, the Qur'anic description holds that 'Abraham represents primordial man in universal surrender to the Divine Reality before its fragmentation into religions separated from each other by differences in form.' Additionally, we can argue that the Great Prophets do not belong to anyone group; instead, it is the essence of their monotheistic message that should be accepted and followed by members of human community. Regarding peace and brotherhood, especially between Islam, Christianity and Judaism, the Qur'an puts greater stress on Abraham's role-model behavior rather than his personal identity. To promote peaceful cooperation, at least between the three major religions of Islam, Christianity and Judaism, we can apply the monotheistic doctrines and thus follow in the footsteps of Abraham to surrender completely to the religion of truth and act according to its ethical teachings. In the Qur'anic context, a parallel pattern of belief and practice based on the Abrahamic model has been emphasized:

*Indeed, the most worthy of Abraham among the people are those who followed him [in submission to God] and this prophet, and those who believe*

*[in his message]. And God is the ally of the believers. (The Qur'an, 3:68)*

From a socio-theological perspective, Abraham is demonstrated in the Qur'an as the rational exemplary character for those who want to be counted among the successful in this world and the righteous in the Hereafter. In other words, the Qur'an introduces Abrahamic monotheism with its corresponding worldview and societal doctrines as an ideal alternative for numerous ideologies which have not only failed to benefit their followers, but also caused division, conflict, and violence:

*And who would be averse to the religion of Abraham except one who makes a fool of himself. And We had chosen him in this world, and indeed he, in the Hereafter, will be among the righteous. (The Qur'an, 2:130)*

Additionally, Muzaffar (2005) finds the faith-based unity encouraged through the monotheistic image of Abraham as an important concept which would help reject religious exclusivism and sectarian attitudes. From a philosophical and sociopolitical perspective, Boldt (2011: 204) explains how the monotheistic teachings of Abrahamic religions pertaining to the notion of human commonality promote the endorsement of human dignity and the tolerance and recognition of human differences. Indeed, recognition of human differences is a notion which finds reference in the Qur'anic passages highlighting that diversity is not a source of tension among human communities. It is suggested by the Qur'an that diversity is to help human beings get to know and gain greater familiarity with one another:

*O mankind, indeed We have created you from male and female and made you peoples and tribes that you may know one another. Indeed, the most noble of you in the sight of God is the most righteous of you. Indeed, God is Knowing and Acquainted. (The Qur'an, 49:13)*

In addition, when it comes to the notions of human commonality or 'shared

humanity' and the way it relates to peacebuilding, the Qur'an seems to be a particularly relevant resource. According to Sachedina (2009: 81-82), this notion is well reflected in the passages where the substance of the message is inclusive of all human beings, in which cases the Qur'an employs the universal address 'O humankind!' and proceeds with its universal evocation. Challenging the various masks of discrimination in a universal community, the Qur'an (49:13) celebrates human diversity and emphasizes that the creation of human beings into different classes of gender, race, and tribe is but an opportunity for them to get to know and recognize each other. Such religiously inspired textual teachings can improve notions of shared identity between human beings and eliminate stereotype perceptions. According to the findings of many psychological studies (see, for example, Pettigrew, 1997; Vescio et al., 2003), the reduction of stereotype perceptions can in turn lead to more favorable intergroup attitudes necessary for building peace and integrity. Borrowing Galtung's words, we may find out that in the Qur'anic language, human 'diversity' is to be regarded 'as a source of mutual enrichment' (Galtung, 2007: 24).

Indeed, this same monotheistic passage (49:13) vetoes any form of human prejudice against 'the Other' and advocates the doctrine of 'righteousness' (*taqwā*) as an alternative criterion of nobility among the people. The significant point is that the application of this exclusive canon is in itself theologically reserved for God to judge upon human deeds accordingly in the Hereafter. Perhaps, we can say that this alternative benchmark of nobility provides some basis for a Galtungian 'transcendence' as a major conflict resolution method; one which favors going beyond negotiation and compromise for 'disembedding the conflict from where it is located, and embedding it elsewhere' (Galtung, 2000: 22). Furthermore, it may be

discerned that the Qur'an aims at promoting negative peace through abandoning a culture that legitimizes human prejudice and discrimination as elements of 'structural violence' (Galtung, 1969). In a positive peace fashion, it can be stated that the Qur'an then aims at reminding its audience of a shared humanity that is often lost in the storms of *mimetic desire*.<sup>1</sup>

A similar motif is observed in a series of parallel passages which mention the idea of 'a unified community' (*umma*) and consequently provide valuable opportunities for building peace and harmony. Although the notion of *umma* is sometimes interpreted so restrictively by some exegetes as to mean 'Muslim Community' exclusively, it had originally been developed as an integral tool for the Prophet to transform a fully stratified tribal society into a multiculturally egalitarian one. These verses are fundamental to the Qur'anic conception of peaceful coexistence with others (Takim, 2007), not only in their own historical context but rather in the present day global milieu. This can be related to what Galtung (2007: 24) refers to as 'soft readings of abrahamic religions' that make conflict resolution possible; here, he associates such approaches to human interaction with 'a culture of unity of human beings.'

**Conclusion:**

The Qur'anic monotheism – both theoretically and pragmatically – emphasizes on a universal belief in the Oneness of the Creator, universal unity and sameness with regard to human birth and parentage, and common grounds within different contexts of prophetic or spiritual culture. These Qur'anic teachings seem to encourage some sense of integrity within human community necessary for developing harmonious relationships in the global

1A theory proposed by René Girard throughout which the mimetic human rivalry and the consequent violence are studied. See Girard (2005).

milieu. It seems fair to acknowledge that the threefold pattern of commonality designated in the Qur'an will help promote empathy in the minds and hearts of followers toward people from different faiths and cultures. From a practical standpoint, adherence to the monotheistic pattern of metaphysical-biological-historical commonality necessitates that everyone be treated empathetically and equally – based on the Qur'anic instruction that human beings have been created by the same God, of the same origins, and that all are equal before Him.

Batson and Ahmad (2009) demonstrate that empathic concern for the Other can foster more positive attitudes toward out-groups and promote intergroup understanding, respect, and trust. In the same pattern, the triangular model of human commonality extracted here from the Qur'anic monotheistic teachings might best serve to build empathy as a major element in the process of peacebuilding. In other words, the powerful function of the Qur'an as a didactic resource provides valuable opportunities for peacebuilding purposes since it educates its devout audiences on how to handle their relationships with 'the Other' empathetically. As a result, the Qur'an can be approached as a relevant resource in 'cultural peace' (Galtung, 1990) with considerable potentials for fostering cognitions and emotions in its adherents that would improve integrity and peace in human interactions.

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