

Article

## An Islamic Perspective in Managing Religious Diversity

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**Abstract:** This paper examines the concept of “diversity” as mentioned in the Qur’an and how commonalities in diverse religions may be used as a model for civilizational dialogue towards achieving harmony. This study reveals that religious and cultural diversity are laws of nature which cannot be changed while the concept of “identity” is a contested issue in modern discourse. Results also show that peace may be established among diverse religions through their commonalities and the best way to exploit these commonalities and to reduce the religious divide is through civilizational dialogue. The Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) and other methods for changing the nature of religious differences and reaching a consensus—thus arriving at a peaceful co-existence—are also discussed. It was found that people are often misguided or divided in the name of religion and culture, despite the fact that the philosophy of every religion is based on peace and harmony.

**Keywords:** religious diversity; conflict transformation; conflict management; dialogue; Islamic perspective

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## 1. Introduction

The Dalai Lama once argued that there will be “No peace among the nations without peace among the religions. No peace among the religions without dialogue among the religions” [1]. The Holy Qur’an says: “O People of the Book, let us come to a common statement/word (*kalimat in sawa’in*) between us and you...” (Al-Qur’an 3:64). The concept of dialogue is not a new idea; it has a lengthy and old history. Dante (1265–1321), in the 13th century, had talked about the idea of a universal community of the human race (*universalis civilitas humani generis*). Actually Dante’s main thinking behind this idea was that he gave more emphasis on the principle of humanity; justice with all despite religious diversities. Nevertheless, some scholars differed in their understanding on the emergence of the concept of dialogue, believing that the concept originated post-1989.

Looking into the events of “chaos and religious disharmony” created by some vicious terror organizations and juxtaposing the West’s misunderstanding about Islam and Islamic civilization and vice versa these are becoming critical issues which require extensive discourse for change. Differences and religious intolerance may be transformed through means of civilizational dialogue on the grounds of common agendas. By performing this exercise, world religions may be able to safeguard humanity and create equilibrium. Mistrust and lack of understanding between world religions is due to miscommunication. Civilizational dialogue could be the first alternative through which world civilizations would be able to make civil their major differences. The major challenges which world religions are facing these days are those of intolerance, religious fundamentalism, extremism, and religious dominance. World religions can use their teachings as tools for the purpose of maintaining peace and security in the world. Also by using common religious teachings which emphasize human dignity, peaceful coexistence, tolerance, and respect to one another, the real panacea to religious extremism and fundamentalism may be found. However, this exercise is still not being practiced in any real meaningful sense.

Thus, religious tolerance is always fruitful for a better understanding of other faiths and religions. Some scholars’ narratives contrast with our debate of civilizational dialogue. In accordance with their views there is a clash going on between world civilizations which will remain unfinished until one side exterminates the other. The researchers consider the above narrative as untrue and have responded accordingly to it in this study arguing on the basis that despite the diversity of people and religions, all are adamant in recognizing and respecting each other’s differences.

Mahatma Gandhi, a great supporter of peace said: “the fundamental Truth of all great religions of the world [is that]...the followers of those faiths...were at the bottom, all one, and were all helpful to one another” [2]. Civilizational dialogue as discourse and debate is considered a good response to Fukuyama’s notion of the “end of history” and Huntington’s idea of a “clash of civilizations” [3]. Here, we want to highlight the beautiful reflection of the great Iranian leader Mohammad Khatami: “Every dialogue, based on a presumption of the worth of the ‘Other’ provides grounds for human creativity to flourish” [4]. Although nations and cultures have achieved much so far as international liaisons and cooperation are concerned, it must be mentioned that these achievements were made possible through the initiatives of dialogue and negotiation. However, at the same time, it would not be at all accurate to claim that the present world has become free of conflicts and divisions.

Moderation in religious practice is another alternative which is so important that without it, the goal towards building a sustainable planet would be an illusion. Moderation can be the backbone of civilizational dialogue which all faiths need to recognize and adopt. Indeed, moderation is one of the cardinal messages of every religion. It is the contention of this paper that the Qur'anic perspective is the best interpretation of civilizational dialogue and compatibility. God had created many nations, tribes, and cultures in order so that they might all know one another [5]. Recognizing one another—a world brotherhood—is the basic philosophy of Islam.

Communalism blossoms from the same vicious roots as terrorism and it is the most difficult to remove as it is a long lasting phenomenon in terms of its impact and role. Communalism can be defined as: “*ones strong allegiance to his own community or ethnic group rather than society as whole*” on the other side communalism is even more dangerous phenomenon than terrorism because it divides the people into different groups and weakens countries internally and externally. Nobel laureate Amartya Sen believes that “harmony and cooperation can be created through the plurality of identities which is resonant of differences. This plurality of identities can work for the benefit of all and it may remove the sharp divisions among people” [6]. Some analysts believe the war of democracy with other political systems cannot be justified because every country has its own polity, culture, language and economic system.

The World community is facing a plethora of challenges, such as neo-imperialism from the West and acts of Islamic fundamentalism [7]. “Freedom” in the modern world is a contentious and contested issue; nobody is free, all are regulated one way or other by different ideologies and different systems with the most persistent systems today being “Americanization” or “Western Hegemony” and “Islamic Fundamentalism” [8]. Western hegemony and Islamic fundamentalism are the two major constraints which divide the followers of the world religions.

Edward Said stated:

“When one uses categories like Oriental and Western as both the starting and the end point of analysis, research, public policy, the result is usually to polarize the distinction...and limit the human encounter between different, cultures, traditions and societies.” [9].

We completely support Said's point of view, that we do not need to divide the world under the ideas of “Westerners” and “Orientals”, rather we have to understand every culture, tradition and society rather than polarize the world into many compartments. Every country needs to have some kind of regularities or legal framework where religious fundamentalism, extremism, and religious blasphemy can be dealt with, such as in the recent case of the French magazine *Charli Hebdo*. These tragic events have raised important questions; whether freedom of thought and expression should be absolute or should be constrained. Many nations around the world faces challenges of religious fundamentalism. Here we want to cite examples of Pakistan, Afghanistan, Myanmar and India, secularism in these countries is not working due to existence of communal forces. In Pakistan and Afghanistan in particular—“Talibanisation” [10]—and other religious and extremist ideologies are sabotaging the minority religious communities and it is the same case in India where fascist [11] forces are working together to suppress Muslim, Sikh and Christian minorities. This research is a new approach on diversity through the method of civilizational dialogue.

The objective of this paper is to explore the principle of diversity as a Divine phenomenon, which obligates the various religious traditions to respect one another without showing any dominance or hatred towards others. It is the contention of this study that the major factors which destroy unity in diversity are communal and fascist forces. Civilizational integration of the world religions could be the real weapon in defeating these negative forces and paving the way towards peace.

This study shows that by using “commonalities” in civilizational dialogues, religious differences, incompatibilities, and conflicts can be addressed and rectified. Islam, through the Holy Qur’an, advocates the utilization of civilizational dialogue and commonalities for maintaining peaceful coexistence and religious order. This study also debates the vital role of civilizational dialogue in managing and transforming the nature of religious disorder. We believe, on the basis of the research data, that neither culture nor religion are the problem. The problem begins when people are misguided by their religious or political leaders.

## 2. Diversity as Mentioned in the Holy Qur’an

Today’s world is highly diverse. There is not a single country in the world which is homogenous and without diversity. Diversity is one of the laws of nature; it is not something human beings can claim is man-made, rather the Holy Qur’an states that diversity is created by God for us to benefit from:

“And if Allah had pleased He would have made you a single people, but that He might try you in what He gave you. So vie with one another in virtuous deeds” (5:48).

Thus, diversity is Allah’s Will and it is a test for us to live in peace and harmony with each other despite our differences. Also, Allah wants us not to assert superiority over any particular group, but to instead vie one with another in good deeds (Al-Qur’an, 49:13). Diversity is a natural phenomenon created by God and we are bound by the laws of nature to this diversified world, where religions and cultures exist next to each other in the same lands and countries. Since diversity is Divinely created, we all need to understand and accept the beauty of creation. Allah assures us that we can live together in peace and harmony with people of other faiths. The diversity of cultures is like a garden where different types of flowers grow on the same soil. Allah says of the diversity of human beings:

O people, we created you all from a single man and a single woman, and made you into races and tribes so that you should get to know one another. In God’s eyes, the most honored of you are the ones most mindful of Him: God is All Knowing, All Aware (49:13).

In another verse Allah says:

We have assigned a law and a path to each of you. If God had so willed, He would have made you one community, but He wanted to test you through that which He has given you, so race to do good: you will all return to God and He will make clear to you the matters you differed about (5:48).

Islam teaches the same principle that Muslims have to respect every ideology, culture, community, and religion. The purpose of diversity is for the purpose of knowing one another. God did not make us one community because he wanted to test us, and all will be answerable to Him on the Day of Judgment. It should also be clearly highlighted that the Prophet of Islam (pbuh) was the true reflection

of the Holy Qur'an in real life; he always supported peace and dialogue. For example, it was on the day of the conquest of Makkah when he declared that everybody was equal to enter into the house of Abu Sufiyan, the leader of the Quraysh; this included many people who were enemies of Islam. The Prophet Mohammed (peace be upon him), said "Latasreeb alaikum yama" which means "you are free today". The peace process and dialogue requires tolerance and mercy, and these two qualities were visibly present in the Prophet of Islam (pbuh). The teachings of Prophet Mohammed (pbuh) is a message not only for Muslims, but for every human being to be at peace with their fellow human beings. However, the reality is that Muslims and others have forgotten this teaching of the Prophet (pbuh).

Given this scenario, no civilization can live in isolation, closing its doors to global knowledge. If there is any civilization wishing to opt for seclusion, it should make sure it is entirely self-dependent in all aspects of life; which would be extremely difficult and next to impossible to achieve and sustain. Such an exclusive way of living is against the spirit of the Qur'an, which calls for communication (*lita'arafa*) among tribes and nations (Al-Qur'an, 49:13). In this respect, communication between humans is vital since it is a realization of *tawhid* (oneness) at the horizontal level of human existence (*habl min al-nas*) (Al-Qur'an, 3:193). Nevertheless, there are many ways to communicate, and the context of communication that we are now dealing with is dialogue. As a true Muslim it is obligatory for one to show respect and compassion towards other faiths so that they may understand that Muslims strive for peace and love and that it is their religion, Islam, which teaches them to be peaceful and compassionate. Good conduct plays a commendable role in helping others to understand Islam and Muslims and gain their respect.

Gaining respect is a reciprocal relationship. When person A shows respect to person B, then person B will reciprocate with the same respect or more than he has received from the former. If person A does something wrong to person B then the result would obviously be different. Hence, the culture of respect needs to be practiced by followers of every faith. The duty of religious leaders in this regard is tremendous in that they have to preach religion in a way that will create peace and not violence. Religious leaders have to use religion as a tool for creating a sustainable environment and peaceful coexistence.

What we see today is a totally different picture worldwide. There is much animosity and incompatibilities going on between different religions; between two religions or between the same religious communities, for example, the Shia vs. Sunni, Tabligh Jamaat vs. Deobandi, and Ahle Hadith vs. Jamaat Islamiyya. The same thing is happening within other religious communities, such as in Hinduism, where there will always be a monopoly of power for the Brahmins over the Dalits (weaker sections) and with other groups who are not economically well off. Until today, the caste system is alive in Hinduism. In Christianity there are also differences between the Catholics and the Protestants and with other groups within the faith. So, it is clear that no culture or religion is without differences, but they must be dealt with through a process of dialogue so that peace can prevail. The basic dialogue process would begin by listening to everybody's grievances and differences and then coming to a consensus [12].

For managing religious differences it is paramount for all the religions to be moderate enough in their religious beliefs and practices and to always try to give space to other faiths as well. Moderation does not mean that one should forsake their religion; rather it means one should at the same time not let their religious practices be a problem for others who are not of the same faith [13].

### 3. The Clash of Civilizational Dialogue as an Instrument of Reconciliation and Transformation

The Honorable President of Iran, Mohammed Khatami, responded to Samuel Huntington's book *The Clash of Civilizations* on 22 September 1998, when he called upon the General Assembly of the United Nations to pursue a "dialogue among civilizations" as a tactful and mature reaction [14]. Khatami's understanding of the notion of dialogue was totally contrary to Huntington's thesis. Khatami rejected Huntington's "clash of civilizations" in a very scholarly way as he advocated mutual understanding and dialogue among the civilizations of the world.

In a later affirmation of his argument, Khatami called on scholars to protect the concept of dialogue among civilizations from "the onslaught of dogmatic enmity upon any possibility of reaching truth" that he associated with postmodern critics [14]. Such dialogue offers a viable and vital alternative to the clash of civilizations hypothesis, but the vitality of this global conversation may be located precisely in its renunciation of truth. Calling a session of the United Nations General Assembly for a precious cause of civilizational dialogue is the hallmark in the history of dialogue discourse in the modern period. It takes great courage and wisdom to recommend civilizational dialogue in the United Nations General Assembly and to reject Huntington's idea of a clash of civilizations. His vital support for the movement of civilizational dialogue brought about a euphoria to the dialogue society in particular and to the world in general. He tried to bridge the gap between the Western world and the Muslim world and placed all his efforts into creating amity and cooperation between these two worlds while paving the way forward for mutual understanding between people of different identities and cultures.

Based on our analysis, Huntington's clash of civilizations is a cynical and impractical idea that is not based on truth. Religions are quite peaceful in their teachings and are not at war with one another; rather they are at peace. However, our analysis also indicates that religion cannot be the remedy to those who do not want to learn from religions. These sort of people have been always been few in number and have little impact on the relationship between the world religions, because the majority of followers are very rational and understand the rights of other faiths in the contemporary world. We hope the majority of people who are rational, peaceful, cooperative beings will defeat extremist forces across the globe.

We believe that human beings are more acquainted with peace and cooperation than with conflict and clash: there will always be interdependence and a mutual bond between human beings because it is a natural inclination which cannot be altered. We do accept that sometimes conflicts and clashes happen due to marginalization factors which can stem from economic, political, ideological, social, and cultural differences, but these types of conflicts are actually demands for justice by those who are downtrodden, disadvantaged, and suppressed. Conflict or clash cannot emerge in a vacuum. Every conflict has some causes and issues; however, resolving those issues can be taken as a very strong move towards peace and amity.

The concept of "humanity" creates a sense of belonging in human beings as the idea is not bound by the principle of "my country and your country", rather on the common interest of human beings universally. "Love", "peace", and "cooperation" are not facile words; they are the foundational stones of humanity and world religions. We would like to exemplify this through the recent tragedy of Flight MH370 in Malaysia. The cooperation shown by many nations in the search for MH370 is one of the best known examples of global cooperation [15]. Religion today has become part of our indigenous

knowledge system which may be the alternative to overcoming many challenges which humanity today is facing, such as the diseases of communalism, religious hatred, intolerance, and extremism which can be avoided by using the common teachings of religion. Undoubtedly humanity as a whole can manage any problem or deflect any form of conflict through mutual cooperation and understanding. In today's global arena the nation building and the internationalization processes are faced with innumerable constraints and challenges, therefore joint efforts and civilizational cooperation can be the best mechanisms to creating a sustainable planet. Is it possible that we are witnessing an age foreseen by the Old Testament. Prophet Isaiah (a.s.) famously prophesied a time when nations "shall beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; a nation shall not lift up its sword against another nation, neither shall they learn war anymore" [15].

There is now a global consensus on civilizational dialogue for resolving inter-civilizational rifts and intra-civilizational rivalries through the democratic means of negotiation and dialogue. The United Nations Resolutions 53/22, of 4 November 1998, and 54/113, of 10 December 1999, advocate and entail principles of civilizational dialogue [16]. These resolutions state that civilizations are not confined to any particular individual, nation, or country, but cover the many cultures that coexist. The United Nations Millennium Declaration of 8 September 2000/1, considers tolerance, peace, respect, and accommodation the fundamental values and essence of international relations and cooperation in the 21st century [17]. This program of civilizational dialogue is the greater lesson for all nations to respect and to help one another in peacebuilding and mitigating differences among themselves. These United Nations resolutions have given impetus and strength to the movement of civilizational dialogue globally; and because of these declarations and resolutions on civilizational dialogue, the dialogue process is now acknowledged and recognized around the globe [18].

Therefore, while respecting each other in a multi-cultural or pluralistic society, one has to consider and adopt the principle of "humanity", thereby we can really understand the concept of a "global village", which has been frequently used in International Relations under the chapter of globalization and new world order. Through civilizational dialogue, people of different religions and cultures can reach amity and cooperation. Dialogue can be instrumental for changing conflicting behaviors and giving people the opportunity to establish peace. With the world recently witnessing a myriad of conflict situations and inter/intra-civilizational clashes, we observed and found that civilizational dialogue would be one of the best approaches to bridging the gaps between different cultures and segments of society so as to arrive at peace.

Norbert Ropers did not categorize dialogue as a constructive mechanism against conflict yet he viewed it as one means of transforming conflict. He believes that using common sense and being "down to earth" is very important in resolving conflicts rather than simply exchanging viewpoints. One has to understand the points of view of other parties involved; and the exchange of views must be reciprocal before a win-win solution can be achieved. It should not be the game where only the interest of the dominant party takes precedence; rather it should be the game with order and principles without any negative impact on any party [19].

The most important aspect in dialogue is that conflicting parties agree to come together in keeping in mind to always minimize and mitigate differences through democratic means. The first step in a democratic means of conflict resolution is the agreement to have a dialogue [20]. A facilitated dialogue is always better in understanding the conflict and then minimizing it. Dialogue can happen among

individuals, groups, inter-groups, peacebuilding teams, and between countries or nations. Dialogue can be bilateral, trilateral, or multi-party [21]. Harold Saunder, one of the most influential scholars on this topic, has defined dialogue as: “A process of genuine interaction through which human beings listen to each other deeply enough to be changed by what they learn” [21].

Here the main questions are: How can we change the dynamics of religious conflicts and clashes between religious communities? And what should be our parameters in the dialogue process? It is “indispensable that people of diverse cultural and religious backgrounds stand together in solidarity and actively cultivate relationships of understanding, respect and peace. Dialogue is actually meaningful interaction and exchange between people of different groups (social, cultural, political, and religious) who come together through various kinds of conversations or activities with a view to increase understanding and mutual trust” [22].

Since Islam is a very broad religion which can be taken as a complete code or way of life for all humanity, it would not be wrong to say that it is a religion which has universal applicability. However, some Muslims understand Islam in a narrow sense; they consider Islam to be only for them, and when they follow the teachings and perform the duties of Islam, they think they are complete as an individual believer. Islam encompasses every dimension of life; social, political, economic, educational, cultural, and societal, *etc.* As Muslims, we have to understand the greater philosophy of Islam and that narrowing it down would create many problems for the Muslim fraternity. For example, Muslims’ dealings with other faiths should be humane and cooperative so as to have an impact upon other religions and to help them understand that Islam is not based on radicalism and fundamentalism, rather it is a peaceful and just religion. Prophet Mohammad’s (pbuh) sayings document the ways to deal with non-Muslims.

Abdullah Ibn-Amr, May Allah be pleased with him, reported that the Prophet (pbuh) said:

“He who kills a promisor (a non-Muslim living among Muslims where he is promised to have protection, and he promises not to help enemies against Muslims, hence, he is called ‘a promisor’), will not smell the fragrance of paradise, though its fragrance is recognizable from a distance of forty years.” [23].

This Hadith of the Prophet clearly mentions that a person “cannot smell the fragrance of paradise” if he kills any promisor. In other words, to maintain peace and stability, every Muslim needs to be just and kind to all faiths, and this is the best framework which the Prophet of Islam (pbuh) has left for the whole Muslim Ummah (Islamic Community). Islam teaches Muslims to show respect and compassion to all other cultures. Islam is based on peace and harmony and its best example in practice is the life of the Prophet Mohammed (pbuh). All Muslims need to follow the Holy Qur’an and the Sunnah of the Prophet (pbuh) with full rationality and not blindly; only then can Muslims be at peace with other faiths.

Another scholar, Daniel Yankelovich, said that dialogue has the potential to transform conflict into cooperation. He says that the dialogue process may be successful if the parties involved understand three main things: (a) Equality must be a focus; (b) one should be a good listener with empathy; and (c) one of the aims of dialogue is to bring assumptions out into the open. There should not be any preconditions and prejudices in a dialogue process; it must be an open, but facilitated interaction. These three conditions can be used to remove the barriers of the dialogue process, and through these the parties would be able to reach a consensus and meaningful human interaction. And these are really ideal conditions for profound and successful dialogue [24].

The scholars of Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) have put forward four main principles in terms of responding to conflicts through means of communication. The first phase of communication must begin with the aim of identifying the substance of the conflict through mutual interaction and acknowledgement; formulating as much as possible the different points of view of the various parties in conflict in an attempt to reach a mutual understanding. The second phase of communication must include the fears, needs, values, experiences, and hopes of all the conflicting parties engaged in the dialogue process. This phase is for the purpose of personal acknowledgement and understanding the conflict biographies of the other side. The third phase is about the identification of shared values and interests and of similar needs and fears; it can be aimed at showing cooperation and compatibility on less controversial issues. And finally, in most cases, the fourth phase requires a lengthy period of preparations, and also personal confidence-building. It involves discussing approaches and ideas which might be implemented and then initiating practical measures for the resolution of the conflict [25].

Religious leaders, political leaders, think-tanks, and academic institutions could play an important role in transforming and reconciling religious conflicts if they work with integrity and genuinely believe that human blood is very costly. In particular, the role of religious leaders is important for the purpose of achieving religious balance and equilibrium, because it is they who influence the people in their respective religions.

Indeed, they play a vital role as far as preparing people for the dialogue process and in mitigating religious conflicts between communities. If religious leaders adopt moderate approaches when delivering their speeches, the mind-set of those in religious conflict can be changed. Religious preachers and leaders can easily teach peaceful lessons to their communities; and these efforts need to be done at every level. The moderation of religious leaders ultimately affects the moderation of religious believers at large, automatically creating new avenues of peace and compatibility within society.

Adama Dieng, the United Nations Under-Secretary General, and the UN Secretary General Special Adviser on the Prevention of Genocide, in his lecture on the occasion of the 9th World Assembly of the Religions for Peace, said:

We are all witness to history how diversity of religions and beliefs have significantly contributed and enhanced the struggle for human rights and peaceful coexistence. For example, most religions teach that all individuals are equal and must have equal rights and opportunities. The principle of equality, however, does not require uniformity rather it calls for unity with diversity. Unity with diversity does not ignore nor attempt to suppress the diversity of ethnic origins, history, language or traditions that differentiate the peoples and nations of the world. The equal dignity owed to all mankind seeks respect for the differences in the identity of each person. It is in absolute respect for the right to be different that we find authentic equality and our ability to peacefully coexist [26].

Basically, all religions are based on peace and tolerance. If we want to see Islam in practice then we should live our lives by the examples from Prophet Mohammed's (pbuh) life. His teachings can have great impact on every individual because he was complete from every angle. Muslims need to look at the peace strategies used by our Prophet (pbuh), as his entire life is the best example of peace and tolerance.

David Thomas points out that for Islam, other faiths are measured according to their resemblance to, and affirmation of, the principle of *tawhid*, and that this is a typically an "inclusivist strategy" of

recognizing one's own theology in the other. We do agree with Thomas's notion and we also believe that the concept of *tawhid* works as an instrument towards cooperation and peaceful relations between different faiths, because it creates a sense of unity and integration in diverse religions [27].

Prophet Mohammed's (pbuh) life is the symbol of peace and tolerance. On many occasions he could have shown his power, but he did not because he was sent by Allah as a mercy for the entire universe. It is the same with the main personalities of other religions; they were also merciful and peaceful, but it is shameful that people from all religions have forgotten the message of peace, tolerance, and worldly brotherhood taught by their respective religious leaders. People have become more materialistic than religious. If they really wanted a peaceful world then they have many options, one of which is the use of religion for the purpose of recognition and mutual interaction. However, the fact of the matter is that peace can only be established when the followers of the various world religions are able to discuss more common principles rather than conflicting ones. The common ideals of each religion can create many avenues for peace. As such, the civilizational dialogue project for world religions is one of the best methods to reach peace and harmony. It has been seen throughout history that a true religious person can never be a problem for the other religious communities. A true Muslim would never be a problem for his neighbors or for any human being if he really understands the Holy Qur'an and the Sunnah of Prophet Mohammed (pbuh) [28].

#### 4. Conditions and Example of a Successful Dialogue

Dialogue has immense importance in resolving and minimizing the differences among conflicting parties. The concept of dialogue is a way forward for human self-realization at the individual as well as the communal level. Dialogue not only has a national dimension, but also an international one in transforming the nature of conflict through democratic processes [29]. From an Islamic perspective, interreligious dialogue is not only important because of the current Islamophobia in the world, but it is also an obligation from the religious perspective. There are several parameters and a necessary framework which conflicting parties need to adopt when dealing with the dialogue process. The conditions for a successful dialogue from an Islamic perspective are as followed:

- The discussion should be on friendly terms (*ahsanu*) and held in the best way with the people of the Book and previous revelations (*Ahl al-Kitab*) (Al-Qur'an 29:46).
- Muslims accept the divine origin of other religious scriptures and believe that other believers believe in the same God: "We believe in what we have been revealed to you and what is revealed, and our God and your God is One." (Al-Qur'an 29:46).
- "That each of us is equal; no one dominates or is better than the others: let us come to a common statement/word (*kalimat in sawa'in*) between us and you...and that none of us are masters/lords (*arbaban*) over the other, except God who is the master of all." (Al-Qur'an 3:64).
- That the diversity in humanity is part of the Divine plan, and so only God can judge people. Cooperation should be based on the common good for all people.
- The Qur'an acknowledges that the common good can be discovered by all people from all religions and traditions, and that we must all strive for the good (Al-Qur'an 5:48).

As humans, we should strive together for the good of everyone and leave judgment to God. The theological debates should not be about who has the truth, but how to share their collective search for the truth. Inter-religious dialogue is the search for truth, and interreligious cooperation is the search for the good of mankind. The inter-religious experience is thus an enrichment for mankind, and therefore probably also part of the Divine Plan. Debate and discussion should not be for the purpose of our ego, but to realize the truth and let the truth come out. The Holy Qur'an clearly mentions to all Muslims to speak gently and with wisdom when speaking with other faiths:

“Invite (all) to the Way of thy Lord with wisdom and beautiful preaching; and argue with them in ways that are best and most gracious: for thy Lord knoweth best, who have strayed from His Path, and who receive guidance.” (Al-Qur'an 16:125).

“Let there be no compulsion in religion: Truth stands out clear from Error: whoever rejects evil and believes in Allah hath grasped the most trustworthy hand hold that never breaks. And Allah heareth and knoweth all things.” (Al-Qur'an 2:256).

These Qur'anic verses very clearly instruct Muslims on the need to be just in relation with other faiths and to not to impose their values on any culture or ideology, because there is no compulsion in Islam. Most of the problems in the present world arise from issues related to minority rights which lead to major conflicts in most countries. For example, in Christian dominated societies such as France, they have imposed a rule that no women can wear the veil despite this being a right of Muslim women. In this sense, the French Government policies are a negation of democracy and secularism. In Nigeria, some people believe that we should have an Islamic law which should be imposed on all people, whether Muslims or Christians. This sort of propagation for the implementation of Sharia law has at many times produced negative results in Nigeria. North and South Nigerians are divided and they have many times fought on the issue of Sharia law because more than 40% of the population in Nigeria are Christians. In India, Muslims do not feel safe in many places because of their religious identity. Hindu extremism is a big challenge for Muslims in India. These examples show that there is compulsion in the name of religion whereas the Qur'an could be used as a possible solution to the prevailing problems of religious extremism.

Taking a multiracial society like Malaysia as another example, peace and harmony are the most crucial aspects to the survival of a nation. Malaysia, being a multiracial country with various ethnicities, cultures, and languages, has always prided itself as moderate, progressive, and a model of a peaceful Muslim-majority country. There is no doubt that Malaysia today stands out in the world as an example of how different ethnic or religious communities can live in peace and harmony and work together for the progress and well-being of the nation. As a country of diverse races, cultures, and religions, Malaysia is indeed unique in proving how its diversity can be utilized and harnessed for nation building. Despite the different political ideologies and contrasting view and opinions, they have always been able to respect and appreciate one another.

Civilizational dialogue as a mechanism or tool to gain mutual understanding and explore similarities and differences between diverse groups has always been encouraged in Malaysia. For example, under the inspiration of the former Deputy Prime Minister, Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim, there had been inter-civilizational dialogues, stimulating the University of Malaya Centre for Civilisational Dialogue (UMCCD), Malaysia to be established in 1996, just before Samuel P. Huntington published his thesis

on the “Clash of Civilizations”. The setting up of UMCCD was because of the fact that dialogue of civilization was fast becoming a much needed mechanism for discourse revolving around issues that arise from the inevitable encounter between nations, ethnic groups, faith systems, ideologies, worldviews, and cultures. Looking at civilization not merely in the context of the past, UMCCD’s main focus is on the articulation of values that may be the basis of a common platform for the solving of issues and problems universally encountered across and within cultures and civilizations [30].

UMCCD also acts as a reference point and serves on a consultative basis in many government and non-government organizations locally and abroad. To date it has published widely on many topics pertaining to the dialogue of civilizations as well as provided supervision for scores of local and international postgraduates whose ultimate goal is to practice dialogue for a world without conflicts.

One of the significant programs organized by the UMCCD on 23–24 October 2012 is the “International Symposium on Inter-civilizational Dialogue towards Peace, Harmonious Co-existence and Sustainability”. This program served as a platform for people of different religious and cultural backgrounds on dialogue on how the people can move towards peace, harmonious co-existence, and sustainability. The aim of the dialogue was to allow the sharing of experiences and perspectives of the different civilization/custom/culture/belief of the dialoguers in finding balance and suitable practices towards a peaceful and harmonious environment in the Malaysian society.

In the following year, the UMCCD organized the “Forum & Exhibition on Youth Interfaith Dialogue: A Youth Discussion on Peace and Harmony” on 7 December 2013 and the “UNESCO World Philosophy Day: Inter-civilizational Dialogue & Sustainable Planet” on 18 December 2013. Both the dialogues were mostly attended by Malaysian youths; (1) To explore the perceptions of youth on peace and civilizational dialogue; (2) To encourage civilizational dialogue among the representatives of different religions/cultural backgrounds so as to have a better understanding on issues related to sustaining peace and harmony; (3) To be a platform/forum that brings youths together in unity in order to allow them to have discussion and a better understanding of one another. To date, the Centre has organized more than 250 events related to civilizational dialogue which ultimate goal is to practice dialogue for a world without conflicts and a harmonious and peaceful sustainability.

## 5. Concluding Remarks

Diversity is the natural inclination which all of us have to accept in the core of our hearts. Giving space to all religions and cultures is the best way to harmonize the relations between one religious community and another. Most religions from the very beginning have been great supporters of tolerance, accommodation, and peaceful co-existence. They advocate equal rights to all people and do not differentiate human beings on the basis of color and race.

The Holy Qur’an states that “He made so many tribes and races and cultures among you so that you might recognize one another” (Al-Qur’an 49:13). These principles of peace and harmony are also the cardinal principles of Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Sikhism, and other religious ideologies. Religion and culture were never constraints; the main constraints are politicization and the misuse of religion and culture for one’s own interests. Problems arise when one shows hatred towards other cultures and consider his own above all; this superiority complex gives birth to communalism and chauvinism which are the main hurdles people face during inter-civilizational and intra-civilizational

conflicts. People with conflicting behavior are those who lack tolerance, accommodation, cooperation, and amity. Through civilizational dialogue people of different philosophies and ideologies can minimize and mitigate their differences. The difference between Christianity and Islam (Inter-civilizational differences), and differences between the same culture and same group, such as Sunni *versus* Shia (Intra-civilizational differences), can be managed once both parties utilize civilizational dialogue. Parties should not be silent because silence (a communication gap) can give birth to a security dilemma which can give birth to new conflicts and clashes.

There are many commonalities between world religions, therefore the better way to achieving peace, consensus, peaceful co-existence, and above all cooperation would be through these commonalities; and the first tool that religious communities can use is civilizational dialogue to build trust and consensus among themselves. Religious hatred, communal feelings, and radicalism are the main challenges for the modern world. Religious communities have to learn from past mistakes and to respect multiculturalism and pluralism. Religious leaders can become the torchbearers of peace and cooperation and they can teach the same in their respective religions. Religious tolerance is required to be started from top to bottom at a societal level so that world religions can be able to maintain peace and respect one another. World religions can use all means to teach societies about mutual respect and religious harmony. However, civilizational dialogue is the major alternative which can be used to prevent religious hatred and religious extremism. Here, the role of all stakeholders become very important, such as the role of religious scholars, political leaders, common schools, common supports, and technological means, which can strengthen the movement of civilizational dialogue.

It is believed that culture and religion do not create conflict or rivalry between the followers of different religions and faiths. Culture, religion, and above all the notion of diversity, are for the purpose of developing better understanding between human beings—so humans can “recognize one another”. The world civilizations can defeat forces of communalism, segregation, balkanization, and extremism once the people of this world come together on one platform. The principle of humanity has no barriers of caste, color, community, culture, and religion. The principle of civilizational dialogue teaches that “humanity” does not support one sect or one group, rather it is a notion free from all these concepts. Here, we are more concerned about the “common agendas and common issues” of humanity. In other words, if human beings understand it in one phrase then they would say “my problem is your problem and your problem is my problem” and the solution to the problem would also be “you and I”—this is the whole philosophy behind the discourse of civilizational dialogue. Civilizational dialogue is the best tool through which human beings can create a sustainable and balanced planet where present generations and posterity both can be happy. Civilizational dialogue is a “means, not an end in itself”. It is a means to reach consensus, compatibility, cooperation, and above all peace. In summation, it can be said that the core issue is the attainment of “world peace” and a “sustainable planet” and the means or method to reach peace is through civilizational dialogue.

The world community in general and world religions in particular is capable enough to recognize intolerance and extremism and use various mechanisms to defeat this menace. For instance, peace education, sensitization, civilizational dialogue, tolerance, conferences, joint sports, and the exchange of ideas may be the ways forward to preserve unity in diversity.

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## Author Contributions

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## Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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