

AN ANALYTICAL REVIEW: RELIGIOUS PLURALISM, HARMONY AND FREEDOM IN THE LIGHT OF THE TEACHINGS OF THE QURAN AND THE BIBLE

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ISSN(P)2664-0031(E)2664-0023

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.37605/fahmiislam.v8i2.6>

Received: October 2025

Accepted: November 2025

Published: December 2025

ABSTRACT

This paper consists of a research-based analysis regarding religious pluralism and interfaith harmony in the context of the teachings of the Quran and the Bible. In this regard, a questionnaire was prepared through which the opinions of religious scholars and researchers were obtained. The main purpose of this research is to find out what religious individuals think about religious pluralism and what obstacles exist in the way of interfaith harmony. The paper discusses doctrinal differences and historical factors that have influenced the religious relations between Christianity and Islam. The research clarifies that the different interpretations of the sacred texts have, on one hand, promoted religious harmony, and on the other hand, also given rise to religious conflicts. In the light of selected verses from the Quran and the Bible, such strategies have been mentioned which, if adopted, can promote mutual understanding and perception between Muslim and Christian communities. Observing the Quranic verses related to Christianity in their correct context reveals that the Quran has not declared Christianity as a religion of disbelief or polytheism; rather, it has presented it as the religion closest to Islam. Although the Quran has indeed criticized or negated some beliefs and doctrines of Christianity, this criticism is addressed to certain groups or specific individuals of the Christian faith. However, when Christianity is mentioned as a whole religion, the Quran has always referred to them with the title of “Ahl-e-Kitab” (People of the Book).

KEYWORDS: Religious Texts, Muslim Thinkers, Different Religions, Interfaith Dialogue

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INTRODUCTION

Religious pluralism has various meanings and concepts. One of these concepts is that all religions of the world are seekers of truth; therefore, if only one religion is declared to be based on truth, the other religions cannot be declared false. "No single description or set of description applied to the real from within the realm of human experience can apply literally to the Real."¹ On the other hand, the term religious pluralism is frequently used in the sense of religious harmony and coexistence. In the present era, the majority of religious people understand it in this very sense. In question number 14, 83.1 percent (See Figure B14 from the appendix attached at bottom) of participants expressed the same opinion. All those verses of the Quran and the Bible which guide towards religious tolerance, harmony, and freedom have been presented in the context of religious pluralism. In addition, the books written on religious tensions between Christianity and Muslims, especially in the Indian subcontinent, have also been discussed in this paper. In the light of the teachings of the Quran and the Bible, the possibilities of connection instead of division between the two religions have been clarified, and in this regard, recommendations have been included as part of the paper.

EXEGETICAL APPROACH

Quran:

A considerable amount of material is available regarding the teachings of the Quran and the Bible on religious pluralism. In both revealed books, the interpretations of the verses related to religious freedom and harmony have been made during different periods of history. To encompass all this exegetical material in this paper would be a lengthy process. Since there are some specific verses on this subject, all the commentators, despite differences in the wording of these verses, have expressed the same meaning. The most clear and important verse in the Quran regarding religious freedom is: "لَا إِكْرَاهَ فِي الدِّينِ"² "There is no compulsion in religion"³ In the interpretation of this verse, Imam Tabari wrote that "no person can be forced to enter any religion, because this religion is absolutely clear and evident."⁴ However, he said that religious difference is a test for humanity. Allah Almighty has created the causes of their differences in religions so that they may be tested. Those who succeed in these tests will be successful, and their religion will grant them salvation. Imam Fakhr al-Din al-Razi, in his Tafsir al-Mafatih al-Ghaib, said that the difference of religions is natural. But he further stated that the Quran was revealed for the guidance of humanity, not for any specific nation. However, he declared the Quran as the only true guidance, which seems to be a kind of

contradiction. *“There is no doubt that this verse makes it clear that there is no room for compulsion in accepting religion, because faith and belief cannot be accepted by force.”*⁵ If religious diversity is natural, then it is difficult to consider only one religion as the means of salvation. The commentators of the modern era have also presented similar interpretations. The famous Tafsir al-Mizan fi Tafsir al-Quran, which consists of four volumes, has written that this verse of the Quran “There is no compulsion in religion” is a declarative sentence, meaning that no one can be forced to adopt any religion. Religion is, in fact, the name of faith, and faith cannot be adopted through compulsion, because compulsion and coercion relate to the outer aspect of a person, not to the inner self. Whereas faith is a matter of the inner self; therefore, forcing it is not correct. Thus, it becomes evident from both classical and modern interpretations that there is no compulsion in religion⁶ and other religions should be respected. In the interpretation and explanation of several verses of the Holy Quran (despite differences in wording), there is agreement that according to the teachings of the Quran, man is free in choosing his religion. When this question was asked of religious people, 78.5 percent of them answered “yes.” *(See Figure B1 from the appendix attached at bottom)* This opinion reflects that religious pluralism, in the sense of religious harmony and freedom, is supported by the majority. However, if the particularize of Islam is discussed, the opinion of the majority of Islamic scholars is that Islam alone is the religion of salvation.

Bible:

There are many interpretations of the Old Testament, and it is not possible to encompass all of them; however, some ancient interpretations have been reviewed regarding religious freedom (religious pluralism). The Talmud, written in the Hebrew language around 200 B.C.⁷ presents moral teachings and emphasizes justice and harmony with the followers of other religions. Rashi’s commentary on the Torah 1040 A.D.⁸ also emphasized moral and social harmony.

In the New Testament, almost every interpretation emphasizes respect, harmony, and freedom, which are described in greater detail. Among them, Origen of Alexandria’s commentary on John and Matthew 254 A.D.⁹ states that the Kingdom of God is universal and not limited to any particular nation or religion. Affiliation with one religion does not mean hatred toward others.

These teachings are similar to those of the Quran, which declares Allah as “Rabb al-‘Alamin” (Lord of all the worlds) and the Quran as a Book of guidance for all humanity. In the modern era, Random A. Brown’s The Anchor Bible Commentary (New Testament Volumes) 2000

A.D.¹⁰ states that the teachings of Jesus (peace be upon him) are universal and based on human unity and harmony. Consequently, it can be said that neither any Quranic nor any Biblical interpretation promotes hatred or conflict. However, at times, individual interpretations by scholars have created tension.

MUSLIM - CHRISTIAN UNREST IN THE SUBCONTINENT:

The scholarly material that created religious tensions between Christians and Muslims is too expensive to be fully encompassed in this paper; however, the purpose of this research is to promote harmony and unity between Muslims and Christians in the Subcontinent. Therefore, it also reviews those writings that, since the nineteenth century, have caused religious tension between them. After the East India Company, Christian missionaries began the propagation of Christianity. In this regard, missionary literature started to appear. Most of the written material was according to the universal teachings of Jesus (peace be upon him); however, some writings also emerged that created conflicts between Christians and Muslims. In the early third century Hijri (ninth century A.D.), a Christian scholar wrote a book in Persian language titled “Mizan al-Haqq”¹¹ In this book, the researcher-style approach presented the Holy Quran as a collection of previous revealed scriptures and portrayed its authenticity as doubtful. In the Subcontinent, this was the first book after which intellectual tension began between Islam and Christianity. In response to this book, Hasan Mohani wrote “Al-Istifsar”¹² which was a strong and detailed reply in defense of Islam and the Holy Prophet (peace be upon him). Among these scholarly materials, a well-known work is The Life of Mahomet (republished in 1923,¹³ which is a biography of Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him). In this book, the prophetic character of Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) was acknowledged, stating that although the sword had some role in the spread of Islam, the main reason was the moral message of the Quran. However, he also included some doubtful narrations in this book, due to which most Muslim scholars regarded his work as biased. In figure 12, 46.2 percent (See Figure B12 from the appendix attached at bottom) of respondents expressed the opinion that this book increased religious tension, while 39 percent believed that this book played a role in promoting religious harmony between Christianity and Muslims. In response to it, Essays on the Life of Muhammad was written. Thus, Mizan al-Haqq and The Life of Mahomet increased the distrust between Muslims and Christians, and in response, Muslim scholars also began to produce polemical literature in large numbers. Initially, the book “Al-Istifsar”, which was written in reply to Mizan al-Haqq, was

soon followed by another polemical book titled “Izhar al-Haqq”¹⁴ In this book, the Christian doctrines of Trinity, Atonement, and the teachings of the Bible were critically examined. Although this book was written in a defensive manner, some of its portions created prejudice and tension. The majority of religious intellectuals also hold this view, 49.2 percent (*See Figure B13 from the appendix attached at bottom*) said that this book aroused religious prejudice, while 33.8 percent said that this is absolutely not the case and that it is rather a defensive response to Islamic beliefs.

As a result, both the Quran and the Bible emphasize religious freedom, harmony, and respect, although there exists diversity in interpretations. A considerable amount of material has created interreligious tensions, yet overall, both scriptures emphasize respect for religions and the universal dignity of humanity.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In this research, the teachings of the Bible and the Quran regarding religious pluralism, freedom of belief, and interfaith harmony were examined through both qualitative and quantitative methods. In this regard, keeping in view the ideas of contemporary pluralist scholars, a comparative textual study of the Quran and the Bible was conducted, in which those verses and passages were selected that relate to religious pluralism, tolerance, justice, religious freedom, and human dignity. In this research, a mixed research methodology was adopted, in which both quantitative and qualitative types of data were included. For the collection of primary data, a structured questionnaire was prepared, consisting of 14 questions. (*See Figure A from the appendix attached at bottom*) The data were analyzed through Google Form’s built-in tools and manual review. Similarly, as part of the field research, the researcher participated in various study circles at the Center for Muslim-Christian Studies located in the United States, where direct meetings with distinguished Christian scholars were held, and discussions took place on the teachings of the Bible. The comparative study of the Quran and the Bible provided deep insight into the concepts of religious pluralism and religious freedom.

AIMS OF THE RESEARCH

The primary objective of this research was to analyze the religious relations between Islam and Christianity and to highlight the common teachings of these two Abrahamic religions so that tolerance, dialogue, and mutual coexistence could be promoted.

An important aspect of this research is to understand the teachings of the Quran and the Bible in the context of the present era and to critically examine the extremism and hate-based attitudes that have arisen from misinterpretations of these divine scriptures.

Another important objective is to develop a new understanding of religious freedom, harmony, and religious pluralism in the contemporary context, because these concepts hold key significance for interfaith relations and global peace in the modern world.

One of the aims of this research is also to study the scholarly materials presented by both Muslims and Christians in the Subcontinent so that the religious gaps between these two religions in this region can be reduced.

It was also intended to conduct a research-based study of the interpretations of the Biblical verses regarding religious pluralism in order to gain awareness of the teachings of the Old and New Testaments concerning religious freedom and harmony.

DISCUSSION

To understand whether the teachings of the Quran and the Bible support religious pluralism or not, it is necessary first to understand the concept of religious pluralism. Since religious pluralism has several meanings and interpretations, however, in the contemporary context, a specific interpretation of religious pluralism is presented — that all religions are equally true. No single religion can be considered absolutely true; rather, truth exists in every religion, and every religion is a seeker of truth.¹⁵ This is that particular meaning. *“Truth is one, but the sages call it by different names. Religions are merely different paths leading to the same destination. Every religion is true because it is a different interpretation of the same Ultimate Reality.”*¹⁶ Some broad-minded intellectuals have even fearlessly declared that religion is the name of experiences, not of any single belief that can be labeled as religion. In their view, all religions existing in the world are various expressions of the same reality. As one of them writes: *“Different religions are gradually leading towards it (dedication of it). The Parliaments of Religions and the conferences and assemblies of liberal thinkers of all creeds are promoting mutual understanding and harmony. The study of comparative religion is creating a fairer attitude toward other religions. It is making us aware of the fundamental unity of all religions, indicating that the emphasis in each religion is determined by the genius of the people, the spirit of the age, and the need of the hour.”*¹⁷ Among Muslim thinkers and scholars, opinions regarding this interpretation are diverse. The traditional and conservative scholars tend to reject it. Several books and writings have been published opposing his interpretation; however, at the same time, a considerable number of Islamic scholars strongly

support it. Scholars such as Dr. Soroush and John Hick¹⁸ have done extensive work on the practical possibilities of this interpretation.

Overall, we can say that there are many verses in the Quran and the Bible that support such a concept that the message of the Quran is the establishment of a society where followers of different religions can live together with mutual respect, tolerance, and freedom. Islam, as presented in the Quran, recognizes the freedom of conscience, the sanctity of belief, and respect for religious diversity.

BIBILICAL TEACHINGS AND EXCLUSIVISM

To understand religious pluralism, it is very necessary to understand the theory of religious exclusivism, because these two theories stand opposite to each other; therefore, without understanding the theory of exclusivism, it is difficult to understand the theory of pluralism. The theory of exclusivism basically means that a religion declares itself to be the only salvific religion and does not accept the salvific nature of other religions. This theory is presented with great emphasis by almost all revealed religions. Christianity also fundamentally possesses this theory; however, in its interpretations and explanations, most scholars of modern Christianity present a broad-minded interpretation of this theory, which appears to be in harmony with the theory of pluralism. But fundamentally, there are numerous verses in the Bible that support exclusivism.

The Bible's teachings strongly encourage religious tolerance, respect for differences of opinion, and peaceful and just conduct with followers of different religions. However, the Bible also contains many verses that support the doctrine of exclusivism. "If we specifically talk about Christianity, some biblical interpretations hold the view that Christian beliefs and commandments are the only complete truth and the means of salvation after death. Other religions and their beliefs are not true, and following them does not lead to salvation."¹⁹ However, according to some contemporary pluralists, through a new perspective of religious pluralism, the Christian exclusivist belief and incarnational truth have been rejected. This is also referred to as the Christocentric point of view. Instead of the concept of incarnational truth, they introduced the idea of Ultimate Reality, denying the belief that Jesus Christ is the only incarnate truth. They declared this exclusivist point of view illogical and introduced a Reality-centric perspective, which regards all revealed religions as seekers of truth, all progressing toward the Ultimate Reality. This perspective opens strong paths toward religious harmony and coexistence among religions. It means that the modern concept of

religious pluralism is not directly supported by the Bible, but rather contemporary Christian scholars have reinterpreted the biblical verses to support this modern understanding of pluralism. Many verses from both the Old and New Testaments are used in this regard, such as: *“One person considers one day more sacred than another; another considers every day alike. Each of them should be fully convinced in their own mind.”*²⁰ This verse teaches the recognition of each individual’s personal religious belief and consciousness. The Apostle Paul teaches that people should neither judge nor put pressure on others regarding their personal religious decisions, but rather they should be given the freedom to act according to their own conscience. This verse clearly supports religious freedom. *“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called the children of God.”*²¹ This teaching presents peace, reconciliation, and harmony as means to attain God’s pleasure. It is not confined only to the Christian community but encourages peaceful coexistence among people of different faiths and religions. *“Surely God does not show favoritism, but accepts from every nation the one who fears him and does what is right.”*²² This verse gives a revolutionary message in the Bible that God’s love and acceptance are not limited to any particular nation, race, or religion, but extend to every person who fears God and walks on the path of righteousness. These verses show that the Bible conveys a message based on the principles of religious pluralism, interfaith respect, and peace and justice for humanity. These teachings guide us to promote dialogue, tolerance, and mutual cooperation among people of different religions and beliefs so that a peaceful and harmonious society may be established. There are many fundamental moral and theological values shared between Muslims and Christians that provide a strong foundation for interfaith cooperation. The most important of these is faith in God. This understanding and realization is present among the majority of religious people on both Muslim and Christian sides. This can be clearly observed from question number 3. (See *Figure B3 from the appendix attached at bottom*) There are many fundamental moral and theological values shared between Muslims and Christians that provide a strong foundation for interfaith cooperation. The most important among these is faith in God. Both religions emphasize moral principles such as justice, charity, compassion, and human empathy. Furthermore, both faiths consider the establishment of peace, the sanctity of human life, and the strengthening of the family system as guarantees of social stability. On the basis of these shared values, Muslims and Christians can not only better understand each other but also work together effectively for the welfare of society. Such mutual cooperation highlights the fact that although there are some differences in beliefs, there is a wide scope of similarity at the moral level, which can serve as an effective means for promoting interfaith dialogue and

social harmony. In this regard, several institutions around the world are working to promote mutual understanding and harmonious coexistence. I attended multiple sessions at a Center for Muslim and Christian Studies USA where I engaged in discussions on this subject. The director of the Center has also authored a book titled "Reading the Bible in the Context of Islam."²³ Another renowned scholar associated with this Center has done remarkable work on exploring the possibilities of fostering religious closeness between Muslims and Christians in the light of the teachings of the Qur'an and the Bible.²⁴ Similarly, the World Council of Churches has also carried out commendable work. The conclusions it has drawn are as follows: "In 1979 the WCC produced a document entitled "Guidelines on Dialogue with People of Living Faiths" which sought to identify and discuss the major practical and theological issues in interfaith relations. While it addressed some of the overall aspects, it recognized the need for more specific "guidelines" or ecumenical considerations on Christian relations with each of the major faith communities in the world. This document results from the attempt to follow this up in the area of Christian-Muslim relations. It draws on the experience gained from the considerable work carried out over the years. All the meetings between Christians and Muslims organized by the sub-unit on Dialogue during the past twenty years have been documented in the WCC publication "Meeting in Faith". These meetings, however, are only a small part of a much richer history of relations and numerous dialogue encounters in many places. The document that follows is itself based on five regional meetings between Christians and Muslims organized in different parts of the world. These meetings helped to identify some of the important issues which Christians and Muslims need to reflect on and continue to consider together in the years ahead. Many qualified persons in the field of Christian-Muslim relations were consulted in the process."²⁵ Islam invites Christianity to live together in harmony and to share a common religious life with Islam. It has emphasized unity in the belief in the existence and oneness of God.²⁶ The Qur'an refers to the common word (Kalimah) that is shared between Islam and Christianity. Muslim scholars have interpreted this Kalimah to mean the doctrine of monotheism. Indeed, the very claim of commonality in monotheism indicates that Islam acknowledges Christianity's affirmation of the oneness of God. The implication of this shared belief in monotheism is that there should likewise be no denial of commonality in social and moral matters. The Qur'an has extended its invitation to all with the command: *"Help ye one another in righteousness and piety, but help ye not one another in sin and rancor."*²⁷ Therefore, on the basis of shared belief in God's oneness and in moral principles, Muslims and Christians can live a religiously shared and harmonious life. Islam and

Christianity are both revealed religions and both are monotheistic with fundamental shared religious values. There is a great deal of similarity in their core beliefs. The revealed scriptures of both religions share common positions on human values. However, despite this, religious conflicts and clashes between these two faiths have been a tragic part of history. There is a vast amount of literature that exists against each other. On the other hand both scriptures emphasize for coexistence and harmony and respect the faith and seminaries of each as Quran says. ²⁸”وَلَوْلَا دَفْعُ اللَّهِ النَّاسَ بَعْضَهُمْ بِبَعْضٍ لَهَلَّ مَتَّ صَوَامِعُ وَبَيْعٌ وَصَلَوَاتٌ وَمَسَاجِدُ يُذَكَّرُ فِيهَا اسْمُ اللَّهِ كَثِيرًا

If Allah did not check one set of people by means of another, there would surely have been demolished monasteries, churches, synagogues, and mosques in which the name of Allah is commemorated in abundance. And Allah will certainly help one who helps Him. Lo! Allah is indeed Strong, Mighty.²⁹ These are the vary reasons that increase hostility in beliefs and religious thoughts.

In the Qur'an, there are several verses that grant freedom to practice religion. Many contemporary scholars, applying these verses in a modern context, believe that people of other faiths in any Muslim-majority country should be allowed to preach their religion. Many modern scholars argue from Quranic principles such as justice, mercy and non-coercion that others should be given the freedom to express their beliefs, provided that the preaching is done with respect and tolerance, without any hatred or compulsion. Historically, Christian communities under Muslim rule were granted religious freedom and allowed to maintain their churches. Preaching activities were limited and controlled by rulers in such a way that no discord was created. This period can be considered an era of religious tolerance and patience. However, from the perspective of traditional scholars, preaching by other religions is generally not permitted. Islamic jurisprudence generally holds that non-Muslims may perform their religious worship and rituals in designated places, but open preaching is prohibited to maintain social peace and prevent discord among Muslims. The current situation in Muslim countries varies significantly. Different countries have different laws and attitudes. Some countries have secular systems where religious freedom and preaching are permitted, while in some others, preaching may be restricted under religious laws.

From these findings, it is evident that Muslims do not hold a very clear position regarding religious freedom under Islamic law. The Qur'an does not give a clear directive prohibiting non-Muslims from preaching in a Muslim-majority country. However, when it comes to Christianity, some clarity is found in the life of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him). *“A delegation of 60 members from BanuNajran met with the Prophet (PBUH) in Medina,*

where they discussed matters such as the belief in God, the doctrine of the Trinity and the birth of Jesus (peace be upon him). When the negotiations failed, Mubalah (mutual invocation of God's curse to prove the truth) was proposed. During this visit, the Prophet (PBUH) also allowed them to worship in the Prophet's Mosque in their own way.³⁰ Therefore, Muslim majority rulers should legislate and implement religious-secular laws so that people of different religions can not only follow their own laws but also freely preach their beliefs. This is the approach that will pave the way for religious harmony.

The Bible does not explicitly clarify whether Muslims are allowed to openly preach their religion in a Christian-majority country. However, the Bible emphasizes the importance of preaching and spreading the message of faith to others. Jesus Christ (peace be upon him) commanded His followers to *"Go and make disciples of all nations,"*³¹ meaning to spread the message of faith throughout the world. Although this command was specifically directed at Christians, it shows how important religious preaching is considered. At the same time, the Bible teaches us to live with others in love, respect, and peace. As Peter explains in the new international version of the Bible, a wife and husband should each treat the other with respect and to every man who does not respect you, in reply you must make respect and gentle behavior with him as he says. *"Who is going to harm you if you are eager to do well? But even if you should suffer for what is right, you are blessed do this with gentleness and respect, keeping a clear conscience, so that those who speak maliciously against your good behavior in Christ may be ashamed of their slander. For it is better, if it is God's will, to suffer for doing well than for doing evil."*³² The Apostle Paul says, *"If it be possible, as much as lie in you, live peaceably with all men,"*³³ "Answer to everyone with gentleness and respect."³⁴ These teachings balance the act of preaching with respect for the beliefs of others. Regarding other religions, the Bible does not condemn their existence but emphasizes maintaining the truth and avoiding false teachings. This means Christians should remain firm in their beliefs but are not commanded to suppress or harshly oppose the religious expressions of others. Furthermore, in the present day, this issue needs to be examined within its political context. Politically, all Christian-majority countries around the world have secular governments. In secular governance systems, freedom to practice religion and to preach is generally allowed without discrimination. For this reason, in countries that make up about one-third of the world's Christian population, Islamic preaching is more active compared to other religions. Therefore, it can be said that Christianity does not prohibit other religions from preaching. This attitude aligns with the Bible's principles of love, respect, and peace. Hence, the Bible gives Muslims open permission to preach their religion, provided

they remain within the bounds of respect and peace and do not spread coercion or discord. This view is also shared by many Muslim and Christian scholars, as can be inferred from this graph.

There are more than 50 verses in the Holy Quran related to war and fighting. Since the Quran is neither a textbook nor a manual but a book of guidance that often speaks in general terms, its interpretation is adapted according to the requirements of time. For proper interpretation, it is essential to understand the Quranic verses in their historical context and the circumstances of their revelation (Asbab al-Nuzul). If these verses are understood in their full context, very different and moderate conclusions emerge. Throughout history, however, these verses have often been misunderstood or misused. Many extremist and self-styled jihadi groups have emerged who misuse these verses, creating tension particularly between the Abrahamic religions, especially Islam and Christianity. A fundamental question arises: If Islam does not prefer war and fighting over peace and reconciliation, then why did the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) engage in many battles during his lifetime? Although the history and background of these wars is beyond the scope here, it is clear that in the early days of Islam, Muslims were subjected to aggression, and most of the wars were defensive in nature. Islam permits defensive warfare. The Quran states, "Permission [to fight] has been given to those who are being fought because they were wronged. And indeed, Allah is competent to grant them victory."³⁵ Even in these wars, moderation is required. The Quran commands: "Fight in the way of Allah those who fight you but do not transgress. Indeed, Allah does not like transgressors."³⁶ Many times, war-related verses are presented without their historical context; selective verses are quoted while ignoring those that preach peace, tolerance, and mercy. This selective interpretation promotes harsh and aggressive ideologies. These extremists fail to understand that war is a last resort and should be stopped if the enemy retreats. For example, the verse "*But when the forbidden months are past, then fight and slay the Pagans wherever ye find them; and besiege them, and prepare for them each ambush. But if they repent and establish regular prayers and practice regular charity, then open the way for them*"³⁷ must be understood in the specific historical context, which extremists often ignore.

The Bible contains many verses about war, especially in the Old Testament, where the battles of the Israelites are mentioned. Some of these verses include commands from God to wage war against specific nations. Similar to the Quran, extremists misuse these verses to justify violence, leading to religious terrorism and social conflict. For example, the Old Testament contains verses like the conquest of Jerusalem, where God commands the destruction of the

city and its inhabitants. Another verse commands King Saul to completely destroy the Amalekites. These verses were revealed in specific historical contexts and should not be interpreted as general orders for war or violence. Christian history also has episodes of extremist violence, such as the Crusades. However, today, all Christian denominations interpret these war-related verses as specific to those historical events. They do not use them to justify religious violence or wars in the present day. Most Christian and Jewish scholars consider these war accounts as historical facts, not as present-day mandates for war or violence. Like the Quran, the Bible also contains teachings on justice, mercy, peace, reconciliation, and the right of different peoples to live peacefully. For example, the Bible mentions offering peace to enemies and many prophets condemn war while encouraging peace and reconciliation. Verses like *“He will judge between the nations and will settle disputes for many peoples. They will beat their swords into plowshares and their spears into pruning hooks. Nation will not take up sword against nation, nor will they train for war anymore.”*³⁸ The New Testament does not support war or religious violence. Jesus Christ taught a message of peace, love for enemies, and nonviolence. The Bible and the Qur’an both teach extensively about religious diversity, freedom of religion, and peaceful coexistence as the fundamental principles of human societies. There are several verses in both divine books that highlight the dignity of human beings without any discrimination based on creed, caste, or religion. In most cases, both scriptures address humanity as a whole rather than any specific religious group. The purpose of the revelations in both is to guide humanity, as the Qur’an states: “Ramadan is the (month) in which was sent down the Qur’an, as a guide to mankind, also clear (Signs) for guidance and judgment (between right and wrong).”³⁹ Moreover, the purpose of the Prophet Hood of Muhammad (peace be upon him) is also to address all humanity, as the Qur’an says: We have not sent thee but as a universal (Messenger) to men, giving them glad tidings, and warning them (against sin), but most men understand not.⁴⁰ The Qur’an, while mentioning five religions, makes it clear that whoever acts in accordance with the true teachings of these religions will attain success on the Day of Judgment. As Allah the Almighty says: *Those who believe (in the Qur’an), and those who follow the Jewish (scriptures), and the Christians and the Sabians, any who believe in Allah and the Last Day, and work righteousness, shall have their reward with their Lord; on them shall be no fear, nor shall they grieve.*⁴¹ Both the Qur’an and the Bible present a comprehensive and dignified perspective on religious pluralism. The fundamental message of both these sacred scriptures is that religious diversity is not merely accidental or a result of human weakness, but rather a part of divine wisdom and design. God created humans in

different nations, tribes, and religions so that they may recognize one another, strive in goodness, and freely seek the truth. The Qur'an clearly states that if God had willed, He could have made all humans one single community, but He appointed a distinct law and path for every nation so that they may be tested and compete with each other in righteousness. This shows that God has made diversity a part of the test and a natural system. Similarly, the Bible states that God created all nations from one man (Adam) and settled them in various parts of the earth so that they may seek God and attain His knowledge. Both scriptures agree that salvation does not depend solely on religious identity, but on sincerity, righteousness, justice, mercy, and faith. The Qur'an praises those who believe in God and the Last Day and perform good deeds, regardless of their religion. The Bible also places foremost importance on moral teachings, such as loving one's enemies, practicing justice, mercy, and humility.

Moreover, both scriptures reject coercion in religion. The Qur'an states that "there is no compulsion in religion," making faith a matter of individual free will. Likewise, the teachings of Jesus (peace be upon him) in the Bible show that he only invited people but never forced belief on anyone. The judgment of guidance and misguidance is left to God. Consequently, the general view of both the Qur'an and the Bible is to acknowledge religious diversity, respect the beliefs of others, and treat. It has already been mentioned earlier that religious pluralism has various meanings. Besides religious diversity, religious harmony, and religious freedom, it also means accepting all religions as inherently true and valid. Among all these, religious pluralism implies that no religion in the world is entirely based on absolute truth nor is any religion entirely false or wrong; rather, all are moving towards unity through a diversity of truths. Every believer in any religion is essentially a seeker of salvation and truth, therefore every religion contains some element of truth. It does not matter whether someone worships one God or idols; this difference is not of great significance. No single religion is the sole means of salvation; other religions may also be possible paths to reach God. In contrast to this understanding of religious pluralism, both the Bible and the Quran, as revealed scriptures, advocate exclusivism (i.e., adherence to the belief that only one religion is true). They are not ready to accept this concept of religious pluralism completely.

Islam and Christianity have some differences in beliefs, such as the divinity of Jesus (peace be upon him) and the cross. However, the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) did not let these differences become a cause of conflict or dispute. Instead, he regarded them as an opportunity to bring the People of the Book together on a common point and to unite them on the principle of the oneness of God. For this purpose, the Prophet (PBUH) made several treaties with the Christians of Najran. One of the most important and well-known agreements

is the Treaty of Najran. Similarly, when Muslims migrated to Abyssinia (Ethiopia), Christians gave them refuge and accepted their cause.

Moreover, when discussing religious relations between Islam and Christianity, the Quran describes Christians as the closest friends to Muslims in a religious sense: “You will surely find the most intense of the people in animosity toward those who have believed to be the Jews and those who associate others with Allah; and you will find the nearest of them in affection to those who believe are those who say, *‘We are Christians.’ That is because among them are priests and monks and because they are not arrogant.*”⁴² This verse teaches us that Christianity is the religion closest to Muslims and instructs Muslims to adopt a gentle and loving attitude towards Christians because they possess the ability to accept truth and incline towards peace.

SUMMARY

The nature of religious relations between Christianity and Islam depends on religious ideas and a shared intellectual heritage. However, religious relations are not solely influenced by religious elements; political, social, and economic factors play a significant role.

Relations among Muslims, Jews, and Christians have been shaped not only by theology and beliefs but also strongly by historical circumstances, making history a foundation for religious understanding.

خلاصہ کلام یہ ہے کہ تمام مذاہب بالخصوص یہودیت، عیسائیت اور اسلام کے ماننے والوں پر لازم ہے کہ وہ مذہب کے حوالے سے اپنے روایتی طرز تفکر سے ماورا ہو کر عقلی بنیادوں پر مذاہب عالم کو سمجھنے کی کوشش کریں گے تو یقین سے کہا جاسکتا ہے کہ مذاہب کے درمیان فصل کے بجائے وصل کی راہیں ہموار ہوں گی جس سے مذہبی ٹکراؤ سے روکا جاسکتا ہے اور عالمی سطح پر امن و آشتی کا ماحول پیدا کیا جاسکتا ہے۔⁴³

*In short, this statement is that all revealed religions, specifically to the followers of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, are required to think above their traditional and rigid approaches and try to understand the religions on a rational basis; then it can minimize the distance among the religions, especially Christianity and Islam, and also it can prevent conflicts. In this way, peace and freedom can be created among religions globally.*⁴⁴ If these relations are examined from a historical perspective, it becomes clear that religious relations depend largely on political and social connections and regional interests. In the contemporary era, the key drivers influencing better or worse relations between these religions are more regional and political than purely religious, where religion plays an external role. Therefore, it can be

said that religious relations alone cannot independently or decisively shape relations, but improvements in international relations will facilitate better religious relations.

FINDINGS

In this research, information was gathered from Muslims and Christians through surveys and interviews. Additionally, a critical and qualitative review of primary and secondary sources was conducted, through which their views and understanding regarding religious pluralism, religious harmony, and religious freedom were explored in the light of the teachings of the Quran and the Bible. An analytical study of these views and expert interviews yielded the following detailed findings:

The research clearly showed that both the Holy Quran and the Bible contain clear principles of religious harmony, tolerance, and religious freedom. Several verses of the Quran confirm that there is no compulsion in religion. In the New Testament of the Bible, the teachings of Jesus (peace be upon him) encourage mercy, love and good treatment even of enemies. Both religions fundamentally recognize human dignity, freedom of conscience, and good conduct in interfaith relations.

The instructions related to war and fighting in both revealed books are linked to specific historical and social contexts. The Quran permits fighting under specific circumstances, such as in defense against oppression and tyranny by those against whom fighting is taking place. The Old Testament of the Bible mentions certain wars, but the teachings of Jesus in the New Testament are completely based on non-violence and peace. The research concluded that the concept of fighting in both religions is not about aggression or imposing religion on others, but is restricted to defense and survival.

The Holy Quran clearly regards the People of the Book, especially the Christians, as the closest to Muslims. “We found the nearest in affection to the believers to be those who say, ‘We are Christians.’” The research prominently revealed that Islam and Christianity share significant commonalities on issues such as monotheism, prophet hood and ethics, the hereafter, and human dignity. Both religions have similar or shared concepts regarding divine guidance, prophet hood, principles of worship, and human kindness, providing a strong foundation for interfaith dialogue and intellectual exchange.

Both religions' teachings allow freedom of preaching, invitation, and explanation of the faith. The Quran assigns the responsibility of conveying religion to the messengers and grants

individuals the freedom to accept or reject. Similarly, the followers of Jesus are instructed in the Bible to preach the “Good News” (Gospel), but compulsion and coercion are prohibited. During the research, it also emerged that both religions accept religious pluralism to a limited extent, meaning they acknowledge that followers of different religions can sincerely practice their faith and seek God. However, both religions hold particularistic or inclusivism views concerning salvation — that is, each religion considers its followers deserving of salvation, while the hope of salvation for others is dependent on certain conditions or interpretations. To understand this better, opinions were collected from religious people through a questionnaire. The results of are positive and encouraging, especially in a global context where religious harmony and interfaith dialogue are needed. A majority of 66.1% agreed that Muslims and Christians can promote mutual understanding by acting on common beliefs. This shows that many see religion as a source of unity, not division. Moreover, 23.7% said cooperation should be limited to social matters a cautious but positive view supporting social-level harmony despite differences. Meanwhile, 8.5% believed Islam and Christianity are contradictory, showing a need for interfaith awareness to understand shared moral values. Encouragingly, no one opposed promoting common beliefs, showing that extremist influence was negligible a hopeful sign for interfaith tolerance.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of this research, the following recommendations are presented, the implementation of which is crucial for a better future of the country and nation. It is hoped that the Government of Pakistan and its policy-making institutions will seriously consider these recommendations while formulating religious policies so that the beloved homeland Pakistan can be freed from the serious problem of religious extremism.

- i. To achieve this objective, it is essential to implement policies based on religious pluralism in the country. Similarly, educational institutions, especially universities, should include these recommendations in the curriculum development process and establish a religious and secular education system under which students can have opportunities to study different religions according to their interests and inclinations.
- ii. It is necessary to understand the teachings of the Quran and the Bible in their correct historical and religious contexts and convey them to the general public. For this purpose, awareness campaigns on these topics should be conducted in madrasas, churches, and educational institutions to reduce misunderstandings and prejudices.

- iii. Regular dialogues and joint workshops should be held between Muslim and Christian scholars, clerics, and community leaders. Joint text study circles and workshops on the Quran and the Bible should be organized to promote religious harmony.
- iv. Instead of having only Islamic Studies departments in Pakistani universities, departments of Theology should be established so that all major world religions, especially Christianity, have representation. This will pave the way for interfaith understanding and foster attitudes of mutual respect among different religions.
- v. The negative effects of the exclusivist theory in Muslim and Christian communities should be clarified, and joint statements and programs should be organized to reject this theory, freeing relations between the two religions from political and ethnic interests and basing them on genuine religious harmony.
- vi. Strong policies and monitoring should be implemented to reduce propaganda that fuels religious differences in the media. Messages of religious harmony and religious freedom should be promoted through the media to foster tolerance and coexistence in society.
- vii. Strict laws should be enacted and effectively enforced against extremism and religious hatred to reduce religious intolerance.
- viii. Awareness about interfaith respect and religious freedom should be increased among the public through various religious and social organizations, such as seminars, conferences, and media programs.

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