

The True Meaning of Universality of the Qur'an

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Prologue

The purpose of this article is to provide reasons and evidences from the Qur'an to understand what the universality of the Qur'an means. My hope is that this article will generate constructive criticism and feedback and thoughtful questions that can then contribute in further developing my reasoning and any follow up writings. I of course remain as open minded as I can in case I found that my understanding needs alteration or correction. Note, an abridged version of this article can be found [here](#).

Before moving to the main body of the article a few important points should be noted:

a. Throughout this article I am referring to universality of the Qur'an and in doing so I have invented two terms to refer to two different concepts. These are General Universality (or Generally Universal) and Specific Universality (or Specifically Universal). While I admit these may not be the clearest terms for the purpose, I need to explain here what I mean by them so that the reader does not misunderstand the point:

'General Universality of the Qur'an' refers to the following understanding:

The Qur'an was sent for the Arabs (Ummi'in) in Arabia and whoever who have joined them, or may join them in future, to become part of their religious community (Muslims). While primarily aimed for this particular purpose, the Book also naturally contains a message that is universal and relevant to every human being. This is the message of Monotheism (tauwhid), being mindful about the hereafter and doing righteous things. This is a message that is in common between almost all religions that exist on the face of earth.

'Specific Universality of the Qur'an' refers to the following understanding:

The Qur'an was sent for the entire mankind and every human being is bound to follow it by becoming a Muslim and following the shari'ah of Islam.

In this article the General Universality of the Qur'an is not the subject of study, although it is referred to. In my understanding there is no doubt or questions about the General Universality of the Qur'an.

This article studies the Specific Universality of the Qur'an and argues, with the use of the Qur'an, that the concept of Specific Universality of the Qur'an is in conflict with the Qur'an. Throughout this article I use the above expressions with capital letters to refer to the above meanings, rather than any other meaning that may come to the mind from the terms.

b. I have learned from some highly intelligent scholars of Islam that in order to understand a concept in Islam we first need to study what the Qur'an says about that concept. No hadith and no historical evidence or scholarly opinion should be allowed to contribute in our understanding in the same level as the Qur'an. Only after understanding the concept from the Qur'an we will look at other sources. If we find that the sources other than the Qur'an are providing information that is not in line with what we understand from the Qur'an, then there can only be two possibilities: Either that information is incorrect/inaccurate, or we are not interpreting it correctly/accurately.

This is exactly what is done in this article. This writing is solely based on the Qur'an and does not take into the account any hadith or any historical incident. It is only by appreciating what the Qur'an says about the subject that we can then safely approach other sources to first evaluate their reliability and then to correctly understand their content. I can share my views on any questions with regard to what sources other than the Qur'an may suggest about this subject, in a follow up writing.

c. I have written this rather long article because I needed to document my reasoning in detail. The article is written for those who are comfortable with technical discussions on the Qur'an and do not get tired with detailed discussions and moving from an argument to a counter argument. Admittedly not all potentially interested readers may find this style of writing in such detail to be of interest or use. As noted at the start of this article, I have written an abridged and simplified version of the same content [here](#) where I have summarised my whole reasoning in ten pages without going into too much technical details. I expect that most readers will find that abridged version to be of more use to them.

d. I have presented my arguments in a logical sequence. I have first raised some rational questions, and argue that even without referring to any verses of the Qur'an these critical questions are enough for concluding whether the Qur'an is Specifically Universal. I have then looked at the Qur'an to provide verses from the Book in support of my rational conclusions. It is important for me that the readers of this article know that although the above is the logical sequence by which my arguments needs to be presented, for me the sequence was reverse. This means it was the numerous explicit verses of the Qur'an that led me to question my inherited traditional belief about Specific Universality of the Qur'an and to arrive on a new understanding on this subject. It was only then that I started to appreciate those rational questions and arguments that are now appearing at the start of this article.

e. Throughout this article, beside some classical scholars of the past, I have in particular made references to some of the past or contemporary Indo-Pakistani scholars. This was simply due to the fact that I knew that many of the readers of this article may be familiar with these scholars and may appreciate their works and views. This does not indicate any preference for or against the scholars mentioned.

Finally, a point on writing: To make the writing and reading smoother, in this article I refer to the Arabian Peninsula as 'Arabia', and to Arabs in the Arabian Peninsula as 'the Arabs'. Some scholars consider all or most of the Arabs of the Arabian Peninsula at the time of the prophet (pbuh) to be from Bani Ishmael (generation of prophet

Ishmael – pbuh). Some other scholars disagree with this. To avoid unnecessary debate, I preferred to use the word Ummi'in for the Arabs of the Arabian Peninsula at the time of the prophet (pbuh). This is also the word that is used for them in the Qur'an.

1. Introduction and Rational Inquiries

It is imperative to appreciate that nothing precedes rationality (Aql) not even the Qur'an. It is rationality that convinces us, Muslims, that the Qur'an is a divine Book and it is rationality that convinces us, Muslims, that the Qur'an is authentic. Even for a person who believes in the Qur'an simply as a matter of faith due to being born Muslim, it is rationality that prompts him/her to do so. Only here the level of rational thinking is very basic.

Once our rationality convinces us about the Qur'an, then we will rely on the Qur'an for our religious inquiries. This does not mean that we should be able to rationally understand the full nature of every religious concept. Rationality itself tells us that understanding the full nature of some religious concepts are beyond our full grasp of rationality. However the one famously irrational element should never apply to our understanding of religion, and that is, contradiction. No understanding of religion can contain contradicting concepts either within our religious understanding or between our religious understanding and external realities.

With the above in mind, this article starts its query by raising a number of rational questions on the common understanding of Specific Universality of the Qur'an in order to open a door for further research into the Qur'an throughout the rest of the article.

This common understanding on Specific Universality of the Qur'an suggests the following:

- a. The Qur'an was revealed as 'the' guidance for the whole mankind.
- b. As a corollary of the above, all the instructions of the Qur'an, including the religious law (shari'ah) are meant to be eternal and universal.
- c. The above means in principle every human being is supposed to be Muslim, i.e., following the shari'ah of Muhammad (pbuh).

With the Qur'an being at the centre of the above scenario, a number of queries arises. Only a few of them are listed here:

1. If the Qur'an was sent as 'the' guide for all nations, then why is it relying on a very complex style of Arabic language? Understandably the Qur'an needed to be in the language of its direct addressees however no intentions can be seen in the Qur'an to make the style of its narration less complex, in order to make it less difficult for the other and the future residence of the world. Scholars of Islam are still trying to clarify the meaning of most of the verses of the Qur'an and they have significant differences about the meaning of many verses. While differences of views about the meaning of a text is understandable, the very unique and complex style of the Qur'an has definitely contributed in these disagreements.

2. If the Qur'an was supposed to be Specifically Universal, meaning to be 'the' guide for all mankind, then why the vast majority (if not all) of the issues that the Book

addresses are local issues? Why the addressees of almost all verses are the local addressees? Why (as Amin Ahsan Islahi rightly noted), even the apparently general titles like Mushrikin, Ahl Al-Kitab and Alladhina Amanu are in most cases referring to the Mushrikin, Ahl al-Kitab and believers at the time in Arabia? Why there are not much guidance for those who were not and are not among the primary addressees of the Qur'an? Why the other nations and faiths are almost completely ignored? How a book that only covered the local issues of a limited group of people at a certain point of history can be said to be sent as 'the' guide for all the nations of all time?

3. If the shari'ah was supposed to be for all nations and all times, then why the majority of the shari'ah was arranged in a way that it matched the already in practice laws among the Arabs at the time? In other words, why the shari'ah that was supposed to be universal and eternal, was so much tailored for a particular time and culture?

4. If the shari'ah of the Qur'an is the only set of rules that leads to tazkiyah (spiritual purification), then why the first does not seem to be the necessary prerequisite for the latter? Why do we see many in other religions/ideologies who appear to be very high in at least some of the aspects of tazkiyah but are not following our shari'ah, or any shari'ah of an organised religion?

5. How are non-Arabs supposed to be guided by the Qur'an when they cannot even understand Arabic and when scholars of the Qur'an agree that no translation of the Qur'an is the actual Qur'an, but is simply interpretation of the Qur'an by the translator? For an Arab person, there is only one obstacle in understanding God's guidance from the Qur'an. This obstacle is 'his/her own shortcomings in understanding the Arabic of the Qur'an'. For a non-Arab, there are two obstacles: 'the shortcoming of the translator in understanding the Arabic of the Qur'an' and 'His/her own shortcoming in understanding the translator'. While he/she may have control over the second shortcoming, there will be no control for him/her over the first shortcoming.

6. Where in the Qur'an God has made it the duty of non-Arab Muslims to learn Arabic, or where has it instructed Arab Muslims to translate the Qur'an for non-Arabs? Where in the Qur'an any mechanism is illustrated to guide the Arabs of the time on how to preach Islam to non-Arabs at that time and in the future? Why there is not a single verse in the Qur'an to instruct the Arabs to go beyond Arabia in order to preach Islam to non-Arabs?

7. With such a complex style of the language of the Qur'an, lack of guidance on how to preach for nations other than Arabs, and existence of so many cultures, faiths, civilisations etc. can we keep blaming Muslims for not presenting the true Islam to non-Muslims or does the blame really go to the commonly held scenario?

8. As human beings we all have been involved in managing events or arranging programmes. Suitability has always been the main component of any managing affair. Do we honestly see 'suitability' in the above scenario? Is it possible that God, the All Wise, formulate such scenario for guiding human beings?

As a student of Islam whose partial duty during the last 12 years was to answer questions on Islam I can totally understand that it is possible to provide an answer to

all the above questions, based on the commonly held scenario. I was involved in answering very similar questions and can still provide answers to them based on the commonly held scenario. This type of answering question is often referred to as an apologetic approach. In an apologetic approach, the assumption is that your belief is one hundred percent correct. Therefore your approach is to provide any possible justification to negate a criticism. While this approach may please those who wholeheartedly hold their faith about an understanding that they have inherited generation after generation, for a free mind who tries not to subscribe to any assumptions, these answers may not have the same appeal.

The point is, we can hold a scenario to be true. As criticism comes to that scenario we naturally try to defend it and the human brain is strong enough to keep providing answers to any criticism. However for a free and brave mind, there will be a borderline when he/she realises that it is more rational to revise the scenario rather than defending it any further. I may argue that what is held in a box is an ice. If someone challenges this by asking then why it is not melting, I may answer that it's because the box itself produces cold. If someone challenges this by asking then why the surface of the box is so hot, I may answer by saying that it's a mechanism that makes its inner side cold. If someone challenges this by asking then what is this noise coming from inside the box, I may answer it by saying that it's the noise of the cooling mechanism inside it. I can keep defending my stance by rationalising what appears to be conflict. However if I am a rational person myself, it will come to the point when I should start asking myself whether there really is an ice inside the box or something else that is not cold, does not melt and makes noise.

The issue here is not 'what' the answers to the above questions are. Any student of Islam, including myself, may produce some answers to the above based on an apologetic approach. The issue is to what extent rationality can tolerate such apologetic answers.

It is essential to note a very important point here. For a person who may not be as loyal to the Qur'an as most of the readers of this article and myself, the above rational questions are enough to arrive at a convincing conclusion. In other words, purely from rationally point of view, we do not even need to go any further and look at the Qur'an in our quest. For a non-believer, the above contradicting set up itself points to only two possibilities, one that the commonly held scenario of Specific Universality of the Qur'an cannot be true or two, that the author of the Qur'an cannot be the All Wise God.

The objective of the next section is to illustrate from the Qur'an that the first of the above two possibilities is indeed the fact. In other words, the following section reveals that the above commonly held scenario (Specific Universality of the Qur'an) is not only absent from the Qur'an but is in fact against the scenario that the Qur'an itself is offering and therefore is false. This then leads to appreciate why the Qur'an has heavily used such local and culturally specific tone and references.

2. Reasoning from the Qur'an

Evidences and reasoning on the basis of the Qur'an to verify and revise the above scenario can be broadly categorised into two groups:

- 2.1. Evidences related to the style of the Qur'an and its content
- 2.2. Verses of the Qur'an that determine which scenario is correct

These are presented in the following sections:

2.1. Evidences related to the style of the Qur'an and its content

The above inquiries are in fact pointing to the evidences related to the style of the Qur'an and its context. These evidences can be reworded and briefly listed as follows:

- The complex language and style of the Qur'an
- Overall, very specific addressees of the Qur'an
- Addressing mostly the local issues and local people, with no or very little references to any global issues at the time or in the future, and no guiding references to people or nations other than its primary addressees.
- The shari'ah being very much on the basis of the socio cultural norms of the time and the location, with absolutely no attention to the conditions elsewhere
- No mentions of what to do beyond Arabia or any instructions about this
- Very specific and local theme, that is, warning to do itmam al-hujjah (completing the reasoning) for the Quraysh, polytheists and the people of the book in Arabia, and the consequences of these groups ignoring this warning

Are the above the characteristics of a Specifically Universal book or a local one? Was there really no other way for the All Wise God to make His supposedly universal guidance more suitable and accessible to its future addressees? In fact, even in the era of revelation, if it can be assumed that the book could be translated for (say) Persians (an assumption that is false), how relevant they would have found the Qur'an to themselves, their beliefs and their ordinary life issues?

The overall localised and specific tone and arguments of the Qur'an are so dominating in the book that relating the Qur'an to nations other than the Arabs of the time (Ummi'in) and time other than 1400 years ago, is today one of the challenges of the scholars of Islam.

It is important to notice that the arguments such as 'the Qur'an focused on its primary addressees so that they then become capable of focusing on the world' is a justification that holds little practical validity. First, there couldn't be any harms if beside verses on local issues, there were also verses on non-local (international) issues. Second, while there are specific instructions on how to deal with the polytheists and the people of the book in Arabia, there is not even one verse in the Qur'an to specifically inform or instruct about dealing with some of the other major communities, faiths and religious denominations in the world or at least in the Arabia's neighbourhood. Third, the Qur'an is the word of God, immune of any defects. However the nation who accepted the Qur'an were only human beings, therefore fallible. In delivering a universal and single system of guidance to the mankind, a fallible mechanism cannot replace an infallible one. The history of both Christianity and Muslims has illustrated what happens when this takes place. If it was possible for a fallible mechanism to take over from an infallible one and deliver such universal and single system of guidance to the mankind, then there was no need to have another

prophet in Arabia. Bani Israel could do the job. If the argument is that Bani Israel failed therefore God appointed Bani Ishmael, then I would inquire whether Bani Ishmael has failed any less than Bani Israel.

2.2. Verses of the Qur'an that determine which scenario is correct

There are four groups of verses that together and even separately determine whether the Specific Universality of the Qur'an is a Qur'anic concept or if it is in fact against the very premise of the Qur'an. It is important to note that the totality of the following verses develop a framework and a premise that is not matching the concept of Specific Universality of the Qur'an. Any counter arguments for any of these verses also need to justify the interpretation of the rest of the verses that are quoted in this section. I would also argue that as far as I can see, none of these verses need much analysis to understand what they actually mean. The verses are in fact very explicit and over analysis is only needed when one tries to distance oneself from their explicit meaning.

These groups of verses are presented in turn:

2.2.1. Verses that limit the scope of the prophetic mission by explaining the reason that the Qur'an was revealed

If one asks, according to the Qur'an, for what function the Qur'an was revealed, the answer can easily be taken from the Qur'an:

وَ كَذَلِكَ أَوْحَيْنَا إِلَيْكَ قُرْآنًا عَرَبِيًّا لِنُنذِرَ أُمَّ الْقُرَىٰ وَمَنْ حَوْلَهَا وَ نُنذِرَ يَوْمَ الْجَمْعِ لَا رَيْبَ فِيهِ فَرِيقٌ فِي الْجَنَّةِ وَ فَرِيقٌ فِي السَّعِيرِ

And thus have We revealed to you an Arabic Quran, so that you warn the Mother City (Mecca) and those around it, and that you may give warning of the day of gathering together wherein is no doubt. A party shall be in the garden and a party in the Burning Fire (42:7)

وَ هَذَا كِتَابٌ أَنْزَلْنَاهُ مُبَارَكٌ مُصَدِّقُ الَّذِي بَيْنَ يَدَيْهِ وَ لِنُنذِرَ أُمَّ الْقُرَىٰ وَمَنْ حَوْلَهَا وَ الَّذِينَ يُؤْمِنُونَ بِالْآخِرَةِ يُؤْمِنُونَ بِهِ وَ هُمْ عَلَىٰ صَلَاتِهِمْ يُحَافِظُونَ

And this is a Book We have revealed, with blessings, confirming what came before it and so that you warn those who live in the mother city and around it. Those who believe in the Hereafter, it is they who will believe in it and it is they who protect their prayers (6:92)

Based on the above two verses the scope of the mission of the prophet (pbuh) was not an unlimited one. It was in fact limited and the limit was Arabia (Mecca and surrounding).

It is important to note that the above two verses are not just limiting the scope of the prophet's (pbuh) mission. These two verses are in fact explaining why the Qur'an was revealed: 'To warning people in Arabia'. Note that 'ل' in لِنُنذِرَ is for علة (cause).

Therefore the argument that the above only covers the function of the Qur'an during the lifetime of the prophet (pbuh) does not hold.

If the Qur'an was revealed to warn or to guide the whole world, then the above wording would have been inappropriate and wrong. The Qur'an introduces itself as a book that is very clear and without confusing remarks (e.g. 12:1, 39:28). Anyone who reads the above verses without any presumptions will conclude that the Qur'an was sent for one reason, and that was to warn people in Arabia.

In the light of the above verses, the meaning of verses like the following also becomes clear:

وَإِنَّهُ لَذِكْرٌ لَّكَ وَلِقَوْمِكَ وَسَوْفَ تُسْأَلُونَ

And this is a reminder for you and your people and soon you will be questioned (43:44)

The Qur'an has even answered the question that why its mission was limited to Arabia and the Arabs in that location in particular:

... لِنُنذِرَ قَوْمًا مَا آتَاهُمْ مِنْ نَذِيرٍ مِنْ قَبْلِكَ

... (this is) to warn people who did not have a warner before you (28:46)

لِنُنذِرَ قَوْمًا مَا أُنذِرَ آبَاؤُهُمْ فَهُمْ غَافِلُونَ

(this revelation from the Mighty and Merciful) is for people whose forefathers were not warned and were ignorant (36:6)

أَمْ يَقُولُونَ افْتَرَاهُ بَلْ هُوَ الْحَقُّ مِنْ رَبِّكَ لِنُنذِرَ قَوْمًا مَا آتَاهُمْ مِنْ نَذِيرٍ مِنْ قَبْلِكَ لَعَلَّهُمْ يَهْتَدُونَ

Or do they say: He has forged it? Rather it is the truth from your Lord so that you warn a people to whom no warner has come before you, that they may be guided (32:3)

وَهَذَا كِتَابٌ أَنْزَلْنَاهُ مُبَارَكٌ فَاتَّبِعُوهُ وَاتَّقُوا لَعَلَّكُمْ تُرْحَمُونَ أَنْ تَقُولُوا إِنَّمَا أَنْزَلَ الْكِتَابَ عَلَى طَائِفَتَيْنِ مِنْ قَبْلِنَا وَإِنْ كُنَّا عَنْ دِرَاسَتِهِمْ لَغَافِلِينَ أَوْ تَقُولُوا لَوْ أَنَّا أُنزِلَ عَلَيْنَا الْكِتَابُ لَكُنَّا أَهْدَى مِنْهُمْ فَقَدْ جَاءَكُمْ بَيِّنَةٌ مِنْ رَبِّكُمْ وَهُدًى وَرَحْمَةٌ ...

And this is a Book We have revealed, blessed; therefore follow it and guard (against evil) that mercy may be shown to you. Lest you say that the Book was only revealed to two parties before us and We were truly unaware of what they read. Or lest you should say: If the Book had been revealed to us, we would certainly have been better guided than they So indeed there has come to you clear proof from your Lord, and guidance and mercy ... (6:155-157)

Based on the above the answer is very straightforward: Because the Arabs did not have a warner before and they could argue that why there was revelations for the two communities of Jews and Christians in the past but not for them.

In this way, together, the above group of verses shatter the foundation of the claim that the Qur'an was revealed to warn or to guide all human beings in the entire world. The Qur'an itself gives a much more specific and local reason for its revelation. It was revealed for the Arabs because they never had a warner (while neighbouring their cousins from Bani Israel who had many warners).

At this point, a curious rational mind will ask another question:

But why God did not send the prophet (pbuh) for all human beings? Answer to this question is given in the next section.

2.2.2. Verses that associate diversity of nations with the need to have separate guides for each nation

The Almighty has made it clear in the following verses that in between the two choices of 'sending a guide for all nations' and 'sending a guide for each nation', He has gone for the second:

إِنَّمَا أَنْتَ مُنذِرٌ وَ لِكُلِّ قَوْمٍ هَادٍ

You are only a warner and for every people (nations) there is a guide (13:7)

إِنَّا أَرْسَلْنَاكَ بِالْحَقِّ بَشِيرًا وَ نَذِيرًا وَ إِنَّ مِنْ أُمَّةٍ إِلَّا خَلَا فِيهَا نَذِيرٌ

We have sent you truthfully as a bearer of good news and a warner and there is no community to whom a warner was not sent (35:24)

وَ لِكُلِّ أُمَّةٍ رَسُولٌ فَإِذَا جَاءَ رَسُولُهُمْ قُضِيَ بَيْنَهُمْ بِالْقِسْطِ وَ هُمْ لَا يُظْلَمُونَ

And for every community there is a messenger, so when their messenger comes they will be judged with fairness and they will not be wronged (10:47)

وَ لَقَدْ بَعَثْنَا فِي كُلِّ أُمَّةٍ رَسُولًا

And verily we raised a messenger for every community (16:36)

Some scholars argue that the above local approach was applied till the time of Abraham (pbuh) and that after this, it was the nations from generation of Abraham (Bani Israel and then Bani Ishmael) who were in charge of preaching to the rest of the world. Such major change of the divine policy however is not referred to in the Qur'an and is only a heavily opinion based interpretation. This also does not seem to be in line with the tone of the above verses. The prophet (pbuh) was sent more than 2000 years after this alleged significant change of the divine policy in sending messengers. Referring the prophet (pbuh) and the addressees of the Qur'an to a practice that was abrogated more than two millenniums ago seems pointless.

There can be scholarly discussions on the difference between *rasul* (messenger) and *had* (guide) and *nabi* (prophet) or whether a *rasul* was sent to every nations or only to those nations that were included in that region of the earth where Abrahamic religions started and initially spread. However the fact remains that the above verses reveal the approach of the Almighty in guidance to be a local based approach rather than a universal based approach. Verse 13:7 in particular emphasises on this by using the generic word *hād* (guide).

Still, a question may be asked, that why God would not send one guide for all nations and would send local guides for each nation.

The following verses provide a very in-depth and enlightening answer to the above question that paves the way for the rest of this article:

إِنَّا أَنْزَلْنَاهُ قُرْآنًا عَرَبِيًّا لَعَلَّكُمْ تَعْقِلُونَ

We have sent the Qur'an in Arabic so that you may show understanding (12:2)

فَأِنَّمَا يَسَّرْنَا بِلِسَانِكَ لَعَلَّهُمْ يَتَذَكَّرُونَ

We have facilitated (its understanding) by (sending it in) your language so that they may be reminded (44:58)

فَأِنَّمَا يَسَّرْنَا بِلِسَانِكَ لِنُبَشِّرَ بِهِ الْمُتَّقِينَ وَنُنذِرَ بِهِ قَوْمًا لُدًّا

So we have facilitated (its understanding) by (sending it in) your language to give good news with it to the pious and warn with it stubborn people (19:97)

وَمَا أَرْسَلْنَا مِنْ رَسُولٍ إِلَّا بِلِسَانِ قَوْمِهِ لِيُبَيِّنَ لَهُمْ

And we have not sent a messenger but in the language of his people so that he may deliver to them (the message) clearly (14:4)

وَلَوْ جَعَلْنَاهُ قُرْآنًا أَعْجَمِيًّا لَقَالُوا لَوْلَا فُصِّلَتْ آيَاتُهُ أَلْأَعْجَمِيُّ وَعَرَبِيٌّ

And if we had made this Qur'an in non-Arabic language (they) would say why its verses are not clear, a non-Arabic (book) and Arab (addressees?) (41:44)

The above verses have made the logic of local guidance of the Almighty clear. The logic is 'language'. God sends guidance with the language that is known and clear for those who are supposed to be guided. Verse 41:44 in particular is interesting. God Himself states that expecting appreciation of a guidance in a different language is illogical. He says that if the Qur'an was revealed in non-Arabic language then the Arabs would object. God has appreciated this potential objection and therefore emphasises in different places in the Qur'an that the Book has been revealed in clear Arabic so that it can be appreciated (12:2, 16:103, 26:195, 39:28, 41:3, 43:3).

Amin Ahsan Islahi explains the same point when he interprets verses 26:198-199:

وَلَوْ نَزَّلْنَاهُ عَلَىٰ بَعْضِ الْأَعْجَمِينَ فَقَرَأَهُ عَلَيْهِمْ مَا كَانُوا بِهِ مُؤْمِنِينَ

And if we had revealed this to some non-Arabs and it was read (in non-Arabic language) to them (i.e. Arabs), they would not believe in it (26:198-9)

He writes in tadabbur-i-Qur'an (5:560):

It has provided further clarification that if this Quran had been revealed to a non-Arab in a non-Arabic language; and he recited it to them (the Arabs), then they would have given an excuse as to what is the relevance of a Quran in non-Arab language for an Arab.

(Amin Ahsan Islahi, Tadabbur-i-Qur'an, 5:560)

Just as sending a non-Arabic book to the Arabs would have been futile, sending an Arabic book for non-Arabs too would have been futile. In other words, just as an Arab in such situation could say لَوْلَا فَصَّلْتُ آيَاتُهُ أَأَعَجِبُ وَعَرَبِيٌّ (why its verses are not clear, a non-Arabic book and Arab addressees?) a non-Arab too in such situation could say in his own language to the effect that لَوْلَا فَصَّلْتُ آيَاتُهُ أَعَرَبِيٌّ وَعَجَمِيٌّ (why its verses are not clear, an Arabic book and non-Arab addressees?).

Careful readers note that the word language in the earlier paragraph above was put in quotations. This is because I believe the issue is more than just 'language'. The word 'language' here in fact refers to much deeper issues, that is, the element of cultural and social familiarity. In other words, even a non-Arab who could speak perfect classic Arabic at the time would have not fulfilled the requirements to be a chosen prophet for the Arabs. This is clear from the following verses:

كَمَا أَرْسَلْنَا فِيكُمْ رَسُولًا مِّنكُمْ يَتْلُوا عَلَيْكُمْ آيَاتِنَا وَيُزَكِّيكُمْ وَيُعَلِّمُكُمُ الْكِتَابَ وَالْحِكْمَةَ وَيُعَلِّمُكُم مَّا لَمْ تَكُونُوا تَعْلَمُونَ 2:151

Just as we sent a messenger from among yourselves to read Our verses to you and (in this way) purify you by teaching you the book and the wisdom and teaching you what you did not know

(2:151, also repeated with very similar wording in 3:164)

لَقَدْ جَاءَكُمْ رَسُولٌ مِّنْ أَنْفُسِكُمْ عَزِيزٌ عَلَيْهِ مَا عَنِتُّمْ حَرِيصٌ عَلَيْكُمْ بِالْمُؤْمِنِينَ رَءُوفٌ رَّحِيمٌ

Certainly a Messenger has come to you from among yourselves; grievous to him is your distress, extremely caring about you; to the believers compassionate, merciful (9:128)

In the above verses the emphasis on sending a messenger from within the same community is clear. In other words, the notion of having the same language in guidance is rooted in a more in-depth concept, that is, having a guidance from the same community. The Qur'an was in Arabic and contained references known to the Arabs just as the prophet (pbuh) was an Arab and had the same culture as the Arabs.

Imam Hamiduddin Farahi has explained this with perfect wording:

و اما ذرية اسماعيل عليه السلام، فهم محجوج عليهم برجل منهم، و هو قلبهم و لسانهم. و لا تظنن النبي صل الله عليه وسلم رجلا اجنبيا يرسله الله للوعظ، و لكنه الثمرة اليانعة من شجرة فطرتهم؛ نشا من جرثومهم، و تربي فيهم من بين غيهم و رشدهم ...

However the generation of Ishmael (pbuh), the reasoning is done for them by a man from them (i.e. the prophet pbuh), and is from their own heart and language and they do not see the respected prophet (pbuh) as a stranger that God has sent for preaching. He was in deed an exuberant tree from the tree of their own nature, he was born and raised among them... (Tafsir Nidham al-Qur'an, 54-5)

Imam Farahi explains the suitability of sending the prophet (pbuh) to his own nation. None of the above positive features, as quoted from Imam Farahi, apply if one argues that the prophet (pbuh) was sent to the whole mankind. I will revisit this view of Imam Hamiduddin Farahi by quoting an earlier sentence from him, in section 2.2.4

One may argue that while prophet Muhammad (pbuh) on the basis of the verses that were mentioned earlier was only warner for Arabia, the guidance that he brought was for the entire mankind. It should be noted that while in our scholarly and academic discussions it may be helpful to separate the guiding function of the Qur'an from its warning function, in the Qur'an these two functions are not separated. The Qur'an and the prophet (pbuh) guided the addressees by warning them. The whole concept of itmam al-hujjah, as explained by scholars like Javed Ahmad Ghamidi, is based on guiding people by warning them. In the book of Mizan by Javed Ahmad Ghamidi, warning is introduced as the universal strategy of preaching by Bani Ishmael and the rest of Muslims. Guiding and warning although technically being different, are two inseparable concepts in the Qur'an. Verse 13:7 has made this clear by putting both warner and guide in one formula.

Despite the above point about inseparability of warning and guiding functions of the Qur'an, I have no rational problems with the argument that the Qur'an can be guide for all nations. However only as long as it can be established what this guidance entails. This relates to General Universality of the Qur'an that is discussed later in section 2.3.

Sections 2.2.1. and 2.2.2. have tried to provide evidence from the Qur'an to establish the following:

- a. God provides guides for every nation not one guide for all nations
- b. The reason for the above is that God appreciates diversity among nations and that this diversity requires diversity in the mode of guidance. Language is one of the important elements of this diversity, but not all of it.

A curious mind may now develop a question. Such diversity surely results in differences of the paths in a God aware life. Is this going to be a problem or has the Qur'an already appreciated and approved such differences? The next section provides answer to the above question:

2.2.3. Verses that inform about accepting the diversity of paths towards God

In response to the arrogant critics of some of the religious rituals and laws that were brought by the prophet (pbuh) the following verse was revealed:

لِكُلِّ أُمَّةٍ جَعَلْنَا مَنَسَكًا هُمْ نَاسِكُوهُ فَلَا يُبَارِعُوكَ فِي الْأَمْرِ وَادْعُ إِلَى رَبِّكَ إِنَّكَ لَعَلَىٰ هُدًى مُّسْتَقِيمٍ

For every community we established a path (ritual) that they follow so they should not argue with you about this matter and invite to your Lord you are verily on the straight path (22:67)

The verse points out that every community of God have their own ritual. Similar verse was revealed among the directives to change the qiblah. The verse again points out to the diversity in choosing a worship direction (or to interpret it more generally, diversity in rituals):

وَلِكُلِّ وِجْهَةٍ هُوَ مُوَلِّئُهَا فَاسْتَبِقُوا الْخَيْرَاتِ أَيْنَ مَا تَكُونُوا يَأْتِ بِكُمْ اللَّهُ جَمِيعًا إِنَّ اللَّهَ عَلَىٰ كُلِّ شَيْءٍ قَدِيرٌ

And for every direction (of worship) there are people (associated with it) so compete with each other in goodness, wherever you are, God will gather you all, God has power over everything (2:148)

In explaining the above verse Muhammad Asad, famous interpreter of the Qur'an writes:

Almost all of the classical commentators, from the Companions of the Prophet downwards, interpret this as a reference to the various religious communities and their different modes of "turning towards God" in worship.

(The Message of the Qur'an, foot 123 in explaining the verse 2:148)

The resemblance of this verse and the more detailed verse of 5:48 is referred to later in this section. The religious path that was brought by the prophet (pbuh) therefore is one of the possible religious paths. From this perspective verse 45:18 will be very relevant:

ثُمَّ جَعَلْنَاكَ عَلَىٰ شَرِيعَةٍ مِّنَ الْأَمْرِ فَاتَّبِعْهَا وَلَا تَتَّبِعْ أَهْوَاءَ الَّذِينَ لَا يَعْلَمُونَ

Then we put you on a religious path of the affair (of religion) so follow it and do not follow the desire of those who do not know (45:18)

Here, shari'ah is in a nakarah form, meaning, 'a shari'ah', implying that the shari'ah of Muhammad (pbuh) is one of the possible sets of shari'ah for God's religion. Of course in the terminology of the Qur'an shar'ah is not just religious rules and rituals, it refers to an entire religious system that includes rules and rituals.

It may be argued that the above verses are referring to the history, that is, in the history each succeeding community of God was given a different path and therefore each path replaces the previous one. However the appearance of these verses does not support this interpretation. Verses 22:67 and 2:148 are both in responding to the doubts and criticisms about the shari'ah brought by the prophet (pbuh). If it was the case that this shari'ah should replace the previous shari'ah of other nations then the response would have been something like 'this shari'ah replaces the previous ones' or, 'in every era there is a different shari'ah' rather than 'each community has their own shari'ah'.

Moreover, verses like the following negate such interpretation:

وَ كَيْفَ يُحْكُمُونَكَ وَعِنْدَهُمُ التَّوْرَةُ فِيهَا حُكْمُ اللَّهِ ثُمَّ يَتَوَلَّوْنَ مِنْ بَعْدِ ذَلِكَ وَمَا أُولَئِكَ بِالْمُؤْمِنِينَ

And how do they ask for you to make a ruling among them while they have Torah in which there is God's ruling, then they turned back after this and they are not (really) believers (5:43)

وَأَلْيَحْكُمْ أَهْلُ الْإِنجِيلِ بِمَا أَنْزَلَ اللَّهُ فِيهِ وَمَنْ لَمْ يَحْكَمْ بِمَا أَنْزَلَ اللَّهُ فَأُولَئِكَ هُمُ الْفَاسِقُونَ

And the followers of Injil should rule based on what God has sent in It and whoever does not rule based on what God has sent (to them) then verily they are transgressors (5:47)

Verse 5:43 criticises those Jews who approached the prophet (pbuh) to rule for them in accordance to his shari'ah. The verse asks why would they do this when they have their own shari'ah. This is not a sarcastic expression, but a wondering one. Similarly verse 5:47 makes it an obligation (for the Christians in Arabia, at the time of the prophet – pbuh) to follow the shari'ah of (not the Qur'an but) Injil.

Note that the above verses are in the chapter of Ma'idah, last or one of the last chapters revealed. By the time that Ma'idah was revealed itmam al-hujjah (completing of reasoning) had been completed for the people of the book and the chapter of Ma'idah itself is one of the most critical chapters about the people of the book due to them not believing in the prophet (pbuh), yet they are still advised to follow their own shari'ah. This means believing in and accepting the prophet (pbuh) does not contradict following their own shari'ah. In other words the invitation of the Qur'an for the people of the book of Arabia did not include invitation to follow the shari'ah of the Qur'an. Note that in 5:43 the indication of their disbelief is not that they do not follow the ruling of the Qur'an, rather, it's that they do not follow the ruling of the Torah. I will elaborate on this point in the next section. The verse also makes it clear that despite any alterations, the version of the Torah that was with the Jews at the time contained the ruling of God and was enough for them.

The ultimate message of the Qur'an in appreciation and in fact informing about the diversity of paths towards God is in the following verse:

... لِكُلِّ جَعَلْنَا مِنْكُمْ شِرْعَةً وَمِنْهَاجًا وَلَوْ شَاءَ اللَّهُ لَجَعَلَكُمْ أُمَّةً وَاحِدَةً وَلَكِنْ لِيَبْلُوَكُمْ فِي مَا آتَيْنَاكُمْ فَاسْتَبِقُوا الْخَيْرَاتِ إِلَى اللَّهِ مَرْجِعُكُمْ جَمِيعًا فَيُنَبِّئُكُمْ بِمَا كُنْتُمْ فِيهِ تَخْتَلِفُونَ

... for each from among you (communities chosen by God) we established a law and a path and if God wanted He would surely made you all as one community however He wanted to put you in challenge with regard to what He gave you (separately) so compete with each other in goodness, your return, all, is to God so He will inform you of that in which you differed (5:48)

It should be noted that the above verse comes after the earlier two quoted verses in the same chapter, and in the last or one of the last revealed chapters of the Qur'an (Ma'idah). The above verse is very clear about co-existence of different forms of shari'ah as a legitimate concept before the Almighty. After indicating in verses 43 and 47 of the same chapter that Jews and Christians should follow their own shari'ah, this verse very clearly announces that God never wanted all people to follow the same shari'ah (the verses quoted in section 2.2.2. revealed what the reason was). The expression فَاسْتَبِقُوا الْخَيْرَاتِ (*hasten towards goodness*) can only find its true and relevant meaning when the above point is appreciated. The addressees of فَاسْتَبِقُوا الْخَيْرَاتِ are not just Muslims, it is the same addressees as مِنْكُمْ (*each among you*), that is, the chosen communities of God. So the verse says that each of you chosen communities are given a path that is suited for yourself, therefore, instead of worrying about the differences or trying to find a law that suits your desires best, use what is given to you as a challenge (لِيَبْلُوَكُمْ) to constructively compete towards goodness. Note the same expression فَاسْتَبِقُوا الْخَيْرَاتِ (*compete with each other in goodness*) that is used in this verse and in 2:148 as referred to earlier.

It is due to this subjective, conditional shari'ah (as compared to the objective, unconditional core concepts of religion) that the Qur'an does not include it when it comes to giving a universally applicable criteria for success in the hereafter:

إِنَّ الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا وَالَّذِينَ هَادُوا وَالصَّالِحِينَ وَالنَّصَارَىٰ مَنْ آمَنَ بِاللَّهِ وَالْيَوْمِ الْآخِرِ وَعَمِلَ صَالِحًا فَلَا خَوْفٌ عَلَيْهِمْ وَلَا هُمْ يَحْزَنُونَ

Those who believe (in prophet Muhammad – pbuh) and the Jews and the Sabians and Christians, any of them who (truly) believe in God and the hereafter and does righteous deeds then there will not be any fear or any grief for them (5:69, also repeated with very similar words in 2:62)

It seems like this verse (and its repeated version, 2:62) has put many traditional scholars in difficulty, promoting them to come up with a variety of justifications and interpretations to change what the verse is saying so explicitly. This is because they often find the explicit meaning of the verse to be in contradiction with their presumptions. The verse however is so clear that it does not need any interpretations. Muslims, Jews, Sabians and Christians all differ in their shari'ah, however this does not affect their success in the hereafter. What does affect it is what is in common between these groups, that is belief in God and the hereafter and doing righteous things.

It is then in the light of the above verses on diversity of paths towards the Almighty that verses like the following start to show their depth of meaning:

وَيَوْمَ نَبْعَثُ فِي كُلِّ أُمَّةٍ شَهِيدًا عَلَيْهِمْ مِنْ أَنْفُسِهِمْ وَ جُنُودًا بِكَ شَهِيدًا عَلَى هَؤُلَاءِ

And the day when we raise from every community a witness on them from their own and will bring you as a witness to these (16:89)

و تَرَى كُلَّ أُمَّةٍ جَانِبَهُ كُلِّ أُمَّةٍ تُدْعَى إِلَى كِتَابِهَا الْيَوْمَ تُجْزَوْنَ مَا كُنْتُمْ تَعْمَلُونَ 45:28

And you will see every community on their knees, every community is called towards its book, this day they will be recompensed for what they have done (45:28)

يَوْمَ نَدْعُوا كُلَّ أُنَاسٍ بِإِمَامِهِمْ فَمَنْ أُوْتِيَ كِتَابَهُ بِيَمِينِهِ فَأُولَئِكَ يَقْرَءُونَ كِتَابَهُمْ وَ لَا يُظْلَمُونَ فَتِيلًا

The day when every people will be called to their leader, so the one whose book (of deeds) is given from his right they will read their books (of deeds) and they will not be wronged a shred (17:71)

Every community will be judged based on their own book of guidance and guides. In the first verse (16:89) it clearly says that each community will have its own witness in the day of judgement. The prophet (pbuh) is going to be witness on *ha'ula* which can only mean the people in Arabia to whom he was sent. This means the prophet (pbuh) would not even be a witness to (say) the Persians at his time, let alone to those non-Muslims who were in the face of the earth after him. In fact, one may even argue that the prophet (pbuh) is not going to be witness to those Muslims who came after him (look at verse 5:117 where it is quoted from Jesus – pbuh – that he was only witness to his people when he was among them). This is a point that needs elaboration in another writing. I pause the flow of the discussion here for a brief but important supplementary note on shari'h in the next page.

A supplementary note on the shari'ah

From the paradigm through which this article has been written, the shari'ah too finds a meaning that is different from its traditionally held meaning. Studying the subject of the shari'ah needs a separate writing and prolongs this article. However since this view on the shari'ah complements and further enriches the above discussions on the scope of the guidance of the Qur'an, therefore without much deliberation on reasoning, this view is briefly presented here, with a hope that I will elaborate separately:

The above analysis argues that the shari'ah was sent locally and based on the culture and circumstances of the place. Once the influence of location on the form of the shari'ah is appreciated, it will be easy to then appreciate the influence of a much more significant dimension, that is, time.

As Javed Ahmad Ghamidi writes:

al-Hikmah has always remained the same in all revealed religions; however, the shari'ah has remained different due to evolution and change in human civilizations and societies" (Mizan, p. 72)

Before going any further, I would like to first differentiate between what I refer to as the shari'ah and what I refer to as the form of the shari'ah. The shari'ah in this terminology refers to a religious path that leads to that spiritual purification that is the goal of the religion. Form of the shari'ah refers to a system of law and rituals that is formulated within the path of the shari'ah. In the above quote from Mizan for instance, I would replace 'the shari'ah' with 'the form of the shari'ah' if I was the author. With this differentiation in mind, I proceed to make a brief note about the form of the shari'ah:

It is irrational to believe that the form of the shari'ah needed to change due to change of civilisations between the time of Jesus (pbuh) and Muhammad (pbuh) but that it does not need to change between the time of Muhammad (pbuh) and our time, and not in any time in future. The evolvement of civilisations, particularly due to the age of technology and knowledge management during the last twenty years has significantly accelerated the rate of change. Passing of a long period during the medieval era brought much less change in the societies when compared to passing of a much shorter period in our modern age. We know that due to the modern technology the rate of change of civilisations will be tremendous in the coming future. On what basis then we can argue that the form of the shari'ah that was given 1400 years ago and was based on the norms and regulations of a particular society at that time is going to stay as the best system of rule forever?

Evolvement of the form of the shari'ah has happened even while the form of the shari'ah was revealed at the time of the prophet (pbuh). This refers to the concept of abrogation. This evolvement or change of the form of the shari'ah kept happening at the time of the first four Caliphs of Islam. To take a literal approach and consider the form of the shari'ah to be timeless is belittling the role of another God given guide, that is rationality (*Aql*). It is imperative that when rationality tells us that any part of the form of the shari'ah does not serve its purpose, it needs to be modified and adjusted to do so. In fact many of our scholars today who insist that the form of the shari'ah remains for ever, do appreciate that some of the instructions of the Qur'an are no longer relevant to our time. For example many do not consider slavery or beating the wife to be appropriate anymore. The only thing is that they do not call this, 'change or evolvement of the form of the shari'ah' rather, they argue that these instructions were not meant to be permanent.

However there is nothing in the wording of these instructions in the Qur'an that would make them any different from other legal verses of the Qur'an. I argue that if the same scholars were living 700 years ago, just like almost all the scholars at that time, they would never thought that these instructions were temporary. I also argue that if the same scholars were living in 700 years from now, they would consider some other instructions of the Qur'an to be temporary as well.

On the other hand a quick look at the social history of the Arabs just before the emergence of Islam reveals that the vast majority of the form of the shari'ah of Islam was already in practice in the Arab society. Some scholars are of the opinion that the Arabs had inherited the sunnah of Abraham (pbuh). Whether this can be established with any degree of certainty is another subject. However whether this is a reliable assumption or not, it does not change the fact that the form of the shari'ah of Islam was mostly the adjusted version of the Arabs civil law at the time. What Islam did was to formulate the shari'ah by adopting what was already practiced, while polishing it where needed, to eliminate any element of injustice or impurity that would go against the goal of religion, that is, purification. As a side note, appreciating this fact also helps to better understand the form of the shari'ah that is given in the Qur'an. Otherwise, if we isolate an instruction from the socio economical context within which that instruction was given, we can easily misunderstand what the instruction is (e.g. understanding and appreciating the social context at the time, can change our interpretation of rules about riba, halal meat, marriage with non-Muslims and zakah).

On the other hand, if we appreciate that the form of the shari'ah that relates to society (including penal law) was an improved and adjusted version of the norms and the laws that were already in place in Arabia, in particular in Mecca and Medina, then this brings us more insights into the subjectivity of the form of the shari'ah. To understand this better, in the impossible imaginary scenario that today a prophet would be sent to, for example, United Kingdom, then the same process can be expected to happen. This means, the social shari'ah, including the penal law, that would be brought to the United Kingdom would be based upon what is already in the British civil law. Changes would have been applied only in the areas that needed improvement in terms of justice and piety (to serve the goal of the shari'ah that is purification).

In other words, the form of the shari'ah never interfered where God given gift of rationality could manage the situation well. While the shari'ah itself is permanent for the community who receives it, much of the form of the shari'ah is adaptable and subject to change. The form of the non-worship shari'ah of the Qur'an was never meant to be permanent. It was a form that suited the primary addresses of the Qur'an at the time and what would make sense rationally to them. The form of the shari'ah in fact was showing the 'direction' of the ruling. This 'direction' was to be followed by the followers of the shari'ah by adjusting the form of the shari'ah were needed to remain rational and therefore to fulfil the objective of the shari'ah.

As Khaled Abou El Fadl writes:

As a text, the Qur'an demands a conscientious and morally active reader—a reader who does not stop where the text concludes but who seeks to understand the ethical path the text is setting out and then proceeds to travel along that path. (Khaled Abou El Fadl, Reasoning with God, p. 386)

Some of the closest companions of the prophet (pbuh), including the first Caliphs, seemed to have appreciated this in practice. If this point is not appreciated then in our zeal to follow the form of the shari'ah we would move away from the

'direction' of the form and would therefore end up far from the path of the shari'ah.

As human rationality develops further, particular areas of the form of the shari'ah will benefit from this God given gift. This benefit will take place by adjusting those forms of the shari'ah that no longer satisfactorily serve the purpose of the shari'ah. This applies primarily to non-worship shari'ah.

Therefore at any time, if the Muslim intellectuals reach an overwhelming agreement on the necessity of discussing and possibly modifying any part of the form of the non-worship shari'ah, religiously it is imperative to do so. Already, in many Muslim countries where there is interest to implement the shari'ah, some of the rules pertaining to penal and social law are practically skipped or manipulated to avoid obvious injustice.

It is important here to appreciate that I am not trying to convince the readers that any part of the form of the shari'ah of the Qur'an may need a change at our time. The point of this writing is to argue that such need is indeed possible and that if this is so, then our scholars should not hesitate to act on it. The problem is, the assumption that the form of the shari'ah of the Qur'an is universally and indefinitely applicable, clouds the mind of a scholar when he/she tries to judge whether any modifications are needed. After lifting this assumption, the decision as to whether any part of the form of the shari'ah needs change or not is to be taken by the consensus of a council of local scholars in each Muslim country and is not the job of one individual, and certainly not my job.

To summarise, there are three levels of looking at the form of the shari'ah based on the above presented perspective:

- I. The form of the shari'ah given in the Qur'an needs to be understood on the basis of the social context of the time. Scholars who have done so have arrived on very different understanding of some of these rules, including the meaning of riba (e.g. Fazlur Rahman), marriage with non-Muslims (e.g. Rashid Rida), zakah and tax (e.g. Javed Ahmad Ghamidi and views that go further beyond his definition of zakah), and the concept of halal meat (e.g. Rashid Rida, as quoted from Imam Shafi'i in Tafsir Al-Minar).
- II. The form of the shari'ah as given in the Qur'an, needs to be adjusted when social changes make this necessary, in order to serve the wisdom behind that form. This mostly applies to non-worship shari'ah.
- III. All the above is for Muslims. Non-Muslims are not bound to convert to Islam and follow the shari'ah of Islam, whether it is the original form of the shari'ah or the evolved form of the shari'ah. They are only expected by the Almighty to follow the obvious rules of morality (akhlāq) which includes believing in one God.

In section 2.2.3 I argued based on the explicit verses of the Qur'an that God has appreciated existence of different religious paths at the same time and has never demanded the people of the book to leave their shari'ah and to follow the shari'ah of Islam. A curious mind may ask at this point that if the issue was not to technically convert to Islam by leave their own shari'ah, then what the expectation of the Qur'an and the prophet (pbuh) was from the people of the book in Arabia at the time. The answer is discussed in the next section.

2.2.4. Verses that gave glad tidings to the righteous among the people of the book despite them not being Muslims

The Qur'an has criticised the people of the Book in Arabia in a number of places. The Book however also contains praise and promise of heaven for those people of the book in Arabia at the time who were among the righteous. The interesting point is, when the Qur'an praises these groups, It still refers to them as people of the book and in no verse there is even an implicit indication that they have or they will convert to become Muslims or that this is expected from them or at least preferred.

لَيْسُوا سَوَاءً مِّنْ أَهْلِ الْكِتَابِ أُمَّةٌ قَائِمَةٌ يَتْلُونَ آيَاتِ اللَّهِ آنَاءَ اللَّيْلِ وَهُمْ يَسْجُدُونَ يُؤْمِنُونَ بِاللَّهِ وَالْيَوْمِ الْآخِرِ وَيَأْمُرُونَ بِالْمَعْرُوفِ وَيَنْهَوْنَ عَنِ الْمُنْكَرِ وَيُسِرُّونَ فِي الْخَيْرَاتِ وَأُولَئِكَ مِنَ الصَّالِحِينَ

They are not the same, from among the People of the Book there are people who are upright (in in the path of God), stand up (for worship) read verses of God during the night while in prostration, (they) believe in God and the hereafter and advise to rightness and warn against evil and hasten in goodness and they are from among the righteous (3:113, 114)

وَإِنَّ مِنْ أَهْلِ الْكِتَابِ لَمَنْ يُؤْمِنُ بِاللَّهِ وَ مَا أُنزِلَ إِلَيْكُمْ وَ مَا أُنزِلَ إِلَيْهِمْ خَاشِعِينَ لِلَّهِ لَا يَتَشَتَّرُونَ بِآيَاتِ اللَّهِ تَمَنَّا قَلِيلًا أُولَئِكَ لَهُمْ أَجْرُهُمْ عِنْدَ رَبِّهِمْ إِنَّ اللَّهَ سَرِيعُ الْحِسَابِ

And from among the People of the Book there are those who believe in God and what is sent to you and what is sent to them, being humble for God, (they) do not seel God's verses for cheap price. They have their reward with their Lord. God is quick in reckoning (3:199)

كُنْتُمْ خَيْرَ أُمَّةٍ أُخْرِجَتْ لِلنَّاسِ تَأْمُرُونَ بِالْمَعْرُوفِ وَ تَنْهَوْنَ عَنِ الْمُنْكَرِ وَ تُؤْمِنُونَ بِاللَّهِ وَ لَوْ آمَنَ أَهْلُ الْكِتَابِ لَكَانَ خَيْرًا لَهُمْ مِنْهُمُ الْمُؤْمِنُونَ وَ أَكْثَرُهُمْ الْفَاسِقُونَ

You are the best community that is rising for people, (you) advise to rightness and warn against evil and believe in God, and if the People of the Book believe this will be better for them, from among them there are believers but most of them are transgresses (3:110)

Note the underlined parts in the above verses. These praiseworthy groups are still called people of the book and there are no mentions that they will convert to Islam. Note that if someone from the people of the book chooses to convert to Islam (like the companion, Salman – ra) he is no longer called people of the book in the terminology of the Qur'an.

Paying a close attention to verse 5:82 makes this even clearer:

لَتَجِدَنَّ أَشَدَّ النَّاسِ عَدَاوَةً لِلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا الْيَهُودَ وَالَّذِينَ أَشْرَكُوا وَلَتَجِدَنَّ أَقْرَبَهُمْ مَوَدَّةً لِلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا الَّذِينَ قَالُوا إِنَّا نَصْرِيُّ ذَٰلِكَ بَأْسٌ مِّمَّنْهُمُ قَسِيصِينَ وَرُهْبَانًا وَأَنَّهُمْ لَا يَسْتَكْبِرُونَ وَإِذَا سَمِعُوا مَا أُنزِلَ إِلَى الرَّسُولِ تَرَىٰ أَعْيُنُهُمْ تَفِيضُ مِنَ الدَّمْعِ مِمَّا عَرَفُوا مِنَ الْحَقِّ يَقُولُونَ رَبَّنَا ءَامَنَّا فَآكُتُبْنَا مَعَ الشَّاهِدِينَ وَمَا لَنَا لَا نُؤْمِنُ بِاللَّهِ وَمَا جَاءَنَا مِنَ الْحَقِّ وَنَطْمَعُ أَن يُدْخِلَنَا رَبَّنَا مَعَ الْقَوْمِ الصَّالِحِينَ فَأَنبِئْهُمْ أَنَّ اللَّهَ بِمَا قَالُوا جَنَّتِ تَجْرِي مِنْ تَحْتِهَا الْأَنْهَارُ خَالِدِينَ فِيهَا وَذَٰلِكَ جَزَاءُ الْمُحْسِنِينَ

You will surely find that, of all people, the most hostile to those who believe are the Jews (in Arabia) and those who ascribe partners to God (in Arabia), and you will surely find that, of all people, those who say, "We are Nasara" are nearest in having affection towards believers. This is because there are priests and monks among them, and because they are not arrogant. And when they hear what has been sent to the messenger you see their eyes overflow with tears, due to what they recognize of the truth (in what they hear). They say: "O our Lord, we believe so write us from among the witnesses. And how could we fail to believe in God and in what from the truth that has come unto us, and we desire that our Lord enter us among the righteous?" And for what they say God will reward them with gardens through which running waters flow, therein to abide and such is the reward of the righteous (5:82-85)

In verse 5:82 a group of Christians are referred to as Nasara. Whether Nasara was a Qur'anic term for all Christians or, as some scholars like Imam Hamiduddin Farahi believed, Nasara was the name of the righteous followers of Jesus (pbuh), is beyond the scope of this article. Here and for the purposes of this article the following points should be noted:

- The verse refers to a group who are living at the same time and the same place as that of prophet Muhammad (pbuh) and in a land full of enemies of Islam
- They are living near the end of the mission of the prophet (pbuh) – note the verse is in the chapter of Ma'idah
- They do appreciate and are convinced that the prophet (pbuh) is a true prophet of God. In other words, itmam al-hujjah has been done on them
- They in fact confess that they believe in what they are hearing from the prophet (pbuh)
- They are still Nasara, and are referred to as Nasara, and nowhere has it said that they will become Muslims
- They are being promised no less than what is promised to the believers among Muslims, that is heaven!

If it is possible for a group of Christians at the time of the prophet (pbuh) to remain Christians while knowing the truth about the prophet (pbuh) and then go to heaven in the hereafter, then why this may not be the case for the righteous Christians and in fact righteous among any religious groups at our time?

The close link between these groups of verses and the verses that were discussed earlier in this writing, in particular in the last section, is obvious. Every community of God has its own shari'ah. Therefore when it comes to criteria for success, following the shari'ah of the Qur'an remains as the criteria for Muslims and not for all human beings. Even if non-Muslims are convinced about the truth of the prophethood of Muhammad (pbuh) they are not supposed to follow his shari'ah and they can reach heaven by honest belief and righteous deeds. Of course if they do decide to follow the shari'ah of Islam there is nothing wrong with this, but this is neither obligation nor preference for them.

This is where a response to a potential counter argument can be made. There is no doubt that in the Qur'an there are verses that invite and in fact instruct the people of the book to accept the prophet (pbuh) and his message. A potential counter argument

is that if as discussed above every nation is supposed to have its own path and (where applies) shari'ah, then why the people of the book were told to believe in the prophet (pbuh)?

This question is based on an assumption that in my understanding is not true. The assumption is that believing in the prophet (pbuh) and accepting his message necessarily entails converting to Islam and following the shari'ah. This comes from a very limited and ritualistic view about religion. Our traditional mind does not appreciate the objectivity of religious values and the subjectivity of religious law and rituals as part of one system. We therefore spontaneously consider a subjective religious law and ritual as an inseparable part of objective religious values. I have shown verses in the earlier sections of this writing that make this distinction and separation clear.

It is important to understand what the Qur'an actually meant when the Book invited people of the book in Arabia to believe in the prophet (pbuh). This can be established by appreciating what exactly were those things that the people of the book were criticised for in the Qur'an. The main criticism of the Qur'an on people of the book in Arabia is for the following issues: a. not wholeheartedly following their own religious path (e.g. 5:43) b. misusing their religion for their own benefits (e.g. 2:79), c. having sectarian attitude (e.g. 2:111), d. hiding part of their religious directives/guidance (e.g. 5:15), e. exaggerating about their religion (e.g. 4:171), f. enmity towards the prophet (pbuh) and Muslims (e.g. 2:109) and g. all this while they knew the truth of the message of the prophet (pbuh) (e.g. 2:146).

Point 'f' above, (enmity), is particularly very important. The prophet (pbuh) was preaching the religion of Abraham (pbuh) and all the messengers of Bani Israel (2:135-6). It was expected and it would have made perfect sense if the people of the book in Arabia would use this opportunity to correct any mistakes in their religious path and to offer their help and support for the prophet (pbuh), as stated in 7:157. However as soon as Muslims started to establish themselves in Medina, the people of the book started to show jealousy, despise and enmity towards them and the person of the prophet (pbuh). In doing so they even used to ignite and equip the polytheists of the Quraysh with their counter narratives against Islam and the prophet.

Accordingly, all that they were asked to do was to stop all this enmity and also to take the opportunity that is materialising in the land they are living at (that is emergence of a prophet – pbuh – from the lineage of Abraham – pbuh) and to correct their wrong beliefs and practices accordingly.

Therefore in no way I am trying to argue that emergence of an Arab prophet is totally irrelevant to Bani Israel. After all, prophet Muhammad (pbuh) was from the generation of Abraham (pbuh) and his people were also mostly from Bani Ishmael. How is it possible for a nation to ignore a prophet that has come to their cousin nation and from the same ancestor? If I want to illustrate this with an example, it is like you are in the presence of the teacher of another class in your school. Although he is not your teacher, but you do not want to lose the opportunity to correct any mistakes or ask for any clarifications. The emergence of a prophet from among the cousins of Bani

Israel is indeed an important news for them and that is why according to the Qur'an this news was foretold in their books.

In particular the people of the book in Arabia at the time had the advantage of seeing this prophet and understanding his book. This particular group are addressed in the following verse and this wonderful news is given to them:

يَا أَهْلَ الْكِتَابِ قَدْ جَاءَكُمْ رَسُولُنَا يُبَيِّنُ لَكُمْ عَلَى فَتْرَةٍ مِنَ الرُّسُلِ أَنْ تَقُولُوا مَا جَاءَنَا مِنْ بَشِيرٍ وَلَا نَذِيرٍ فَقَدْ جَاءَكُمْ بَشِيرٌ وَنَذِيرٌ وَاللَّهُ عَلَى كُلِّ شَيْءٍ قَدِيرٌ

O people of the book, verily our messenger has come to you who clarifies for you (God's directives) after a gap in appearance of messengers lest you should say, no bearer of good news or warner came to us. So in deed a bearer of good news and warner as come to you and God has power over everything. (5:19)

This is why the people of the book in Arabia were included in the warning mission of the prophet (pbuh). As mentioned earlier the prophet (pbuh) was sent to warn people in Arabia and of course local people of the book were also among them. However, as verses in this section and earlier sections clarify, warning the people of the book was not aimed to make them technically Muslims and followers of the shari'ah of Islam. Rather, the warning was aimed at curbing their enmity towards the prophet (pbuh) and Muslims and to make them use the opportunity to rid themselves of some false beliefs and wrong practices that they were doing in the name of religion.

There is not even a single verse in the Qur'an in which people of the book are told to follow the shari'ah of the Qur'an. As quoted above (5:43, 5:47) they were in fact told that they had to follow and obey their own shari'ah, since according to 5:48, every community has its own shari'ah. This is why according to verses like 3:113, 114; 3:110; 3:199; 5:82-85 (as quoted above), if people of the book are true believers and righteous people then they have nothing to worry about in the hereafter.

In a nutshell, the issue of the Qur'an with the people of the book was not that they did not agree to follow the shari'ah of Muhammad (pbuh). The issue was that they were not really following the principles of God's religion. Even worse, the emergence of a prophet in Arabia instead of making them glad for the opportunity to correct themselves, ignited enmity and more disobedience in them. Note the following verse:

قُلْ يَا أَهْلَ الْكِتَابِ لَسْتُمْ عَلَى شَيْءٍ حَتَّى تُقِيمُوا التَّوْرَةَ وَالْإِنْجِيلَ وَ مَا أُنزِلَ إِلَيْكُمْ مِنْ رَبِّكُمْ وَ لَيَزِيدَنَّ كَثِيرًا مِنْهُمْ مَا أُنزِلَ إِلَيْكَ مِنْ رَبِّكَ طُغْيَانًا وَ كُفْرًا فَلَا تَأْسَ عَلَى الْقَوْمِ الْكَافِرِينَ

Say O People of the Book, you have no basis, unless you adhere to the Torah and the Injil and what has been sent to you from your Lord, and what has been sent to you will increase rebelliousness and rejection by many of them so do not grieve for the people who are disbelievers (5:68)

One interpretation is that Ma Unzila Ilaykum Min Ribbikum refers to other books that were revealed to Bani Israel (like Psalms, etc.). This is also my understanding. Another interpretation is that this refers to the Qur'an. For the sake of discussion I argue based on this latter interpretation here. One should deliberate on the above verse (as well as verse 5:66), how at all is it possible for a person to uphold - اقامه - (not just believe

in) Torah, Injil and the Qur'an at the same time, if this includes the shari'ah mentioned in these three books? The shari'ah of the three books are not the same. However the core religious message of the three books are in fact exactly the same and of course it is possible to uphold this core religious message, while, as 5:48 says, each community adhering to a different shari'ah.

It is appropriate to end this section with a quote from Imam Hamiduddin Farahi who seems to express the same or very similar view as above in his book Tafsir al-Nidham al-Qur'an:

فوجب القتال لا للدفاع بل 1- لفتح الكعبة، ثم 2- لرد الحنيفيه في اولاد اسماعيل (ع) و اما بغير ذريه اسماعيل (ع) 3- فلاقامه القسط، و رفع الفساد عن الارض. فلا اكراه في الدين لاهل الكتاب، و لكل من ليس من ذريه اسماعيل، و عليهم الجزية.

و اما ذريه اسماعيل (ع) فهم محجوج عليهم برجل منهم، و هو قلبهم و لسانهم. و لا تظنن النبي الكريم (ع) رجلا اجنبيا يرسله الله للوعظ ...

So fighting became obligatory not for defence but 1. to free Ka'bah, then 2. to bring the Abrahamic religion (hanifiyya) of Abraham to the generation of Ishmael (pbuh), as for other than the generation of Ishmael (pbuh), 3. for establishing justice and removing anarchy (mischief) from the land. So there is no compulsion in religion for the People of the Book, and for anyone who is not from among the generation of Ishmael, and they should pay tax (jaziyah). As for the generation of Ishmael (pbuh) they are convinced by clear reasoning by a man from among them, and is from their own heart and language and they do not see the respected prophet (pbuh) as a stranger that God has sent for preaching ... (Tafsir Nidham al-Qur'an, 54-5)

A brief supplementary note on the meaning and concept of Islam follows, before continuing the discussion.

A supplementary note on Islam vis a vis islam

In this way it becomes evident why the Qur'an refers to the religion of all prophets as islam in verses like 2:132 and 3:52. In most instances the word islam in the Qur'an has been used in its literal meaning (submission) rather than its conventional meaning (the form of the religion that was brought by the prophet – pbuh). This includes those verses that indicate that God only accepts the religion of islam (submission), i.e. 3:19, 85. In verse 3:83 this path (din) of submission (islam) is introduced as the path of all creatures of God.

It is therefore sensible to use two words here: islam and Islam. islam (with lower case) will be that concept that the Qur'an refers to (submission to God, which in its generic meaning will be submission to the truth). Islam (with capital) will be that version of islam, with its own specific shari'ah, that was brought by the prophet (pbuh) through the Qur'an, as indicated in verse 45:18. Nevertheless in this article to avoid confusion such distinction in writing has not been applied.

To conclude, the coming of the prophet (pbuh) does not make other paths towards God invalid, nor do they in principle need to be replaced by the specific path that was brought by the prophet (pbuh). The righteous followers of all the legitimate paths are in the path of islam (submission) but they each

practice it differently. This includes righteous Muslims who follow the path that was brought by the prophet (pbuh) and is now conventionally known as Islam. 'islam' in its generic meaning is in fact 'acting based on honest conviction', and this is what can save even those who may have false understanding of the truth (look at the verse 5:119 and in line with this, verses like 2:286 and 23:62).

2.3. The Generally Universal guidance of the Qur'an

For a person who like myself is fully faithful to the Qur'an, the above writing so far may bring a worrying thought, that is, it tries to argue that the Qur'an is not relevant to our time and to other than Muslims. This is certainly not the case and this is certainly not what I am trying to say. The same perspective that prompts me to see the specific application of the Qur'an for its primary addressees also prompts me to see its general guidance for the whole mankind and for all times. This is what I referred to at the start of the article as General Universality of the Qur'an.

This again needs a separate writing but here different dimensions of the general guidance of the Qur'an is summarised as follows:

- The Qur'an, as the most authentic revealed divine guide, remains as the criteria for truth and false not only for Muslims but also any other person who appreciates the truth of the Qur'an.
- In particular the Qur'an provides an opportunity for the followers of the other Abrahamic religions to correct some of their false beliefs or practices and to understand their own divine books better. Whether this opportunity will be taken and by who and in what way can be different in every case and is beyond this article.
- Behind every specific directive of the Qur'an, whether it is a religious rule or addressing of a local issue, there is the faultless, indefinite wisdom of the Almighty. This wisdom should be used as a torch for Muslims and can be used similarly by any seeker of the truth.
- The Qur'an is very powerful in reminding its reader about God and hereafter. Even the verses that address the most specific local issues in the Qur'an have this feature. The Book therefore continues to be a reminder of the Almighty and the hereafter for any Muslim and anyone who appreciates it.

In fact the appreciation of specific, local dimension of the Qur'an makes its general, universal dimension even more accessible and relevant to people. With the assumption that all human beings are bound to convert to Islam and follow the shari'ah of Islam we are making the Qur'an a sectarian book that is only good for followers of a certain religious path. However once we appreciate that the shari'ah is only for Muslims and that the Qur'an has a generic message behind its specific local agenda, then we are opening the door of the Qur'an to every human being who believes in God. Instead of giving the Qur'an to a non-Muslim to convince him to leave his religious path and to embrace ours (Islam), we may give the Qur'an to a non-Muslim to help him practice his own religious path better, and of course we will also appreciate if that non-Muslim gives us his book of guidance, for the similar cause.

2.4. Summary of the analysis of the verses of the Qur'an

The scenario that the above analysis provides is very different with the popular scenario that was illustrated at the start of this article. This alternative scenario can be summarised by seven principles as follows (note not all the following points are equally elaborated throughout this article):

Principle One: islam vis a vic Islam

There is only one religion that is acceptable by God and that is the religion of submitting to God (islam). The version of this religion that was brought by the prophet (pbuh) is conventionally called Islam.

Principle Two: Variation within Unification

Every nation has its own guide that would provide his people with an illustration of islam that best suits them. While the form and the path may be different, the core concepts and values are the same. The main concepts are belief in one God, belief in the hereafter (no matter how different the description of it might be in different faiths) and doing righteous deeds. This is not exclusive to Abrahamic religions. Abrahamic religions are in fact one mega category of illustration of islam.

Principle Three: Correcting Rather than Converting

Therefore if there is an opportunity for preaching, it should not be aimed at converting people to Islam. Rather it should be aimed at correcting people's false beliefs. Of course if a non-Muslim wishes to convert to Islam there is no problem with this and a Muslim should help him/her to do that.

Principle Four: The Chosen Nations

The two communities of Bani Israel and Ummi'in (otherwise known as Bani Ishmael) have been particularly blessed by the Almighty. Bani Israel were privileged by being given a specific shari'ah and by having numerous prophets. Ummi'in were privileged as well by being given a specific shrai'ah, quite similar to that of Bani Israel, and by having the last prophet of God.

Principle Five: Specific and General Rules

The communities of God who entered a covenant with the Almighty are privileged by being given a shari'ah. This is to maintain their position of the chosen nations and remain practical illustrations of monotheist God aware communities. Any other people who by choice or by birth have entered the same covenant will also enjoy the same privilege. All other people are expected to follow the obvious rules of morality, often referred to as Noahic rules in the Biblical literature. These are also referred to with minor

differences in the Qur'an, e.g. 17:22-39. Believing in One God is included in these rules.

Principle Six: Eternal Shari'ah with a Subjective Form

Shari'ah has an eternal wisdom but its form is temporary and evolves or changes as the societies evolve or change. This mostly applies to non-worship shari'ah.

Principle Seven: The Advantage of the Qur'an:

The message of monotheism, hereafter and righteousness in the Qur'an is universal. This includes the wisdom behind its form of the shari'ah. For a Muslim and for anyone who believes in the Qur'an, the authenticity of the Book makes the Qur'an a criteria for recognising truth and false in other religions and ideologies.

3. Verses Used in the Traditional Understanding

So far I have presented and discussed more than 30 explicit verses of the Qur'an that individually and together make the base and the direct evidence for the scenario that I illustrated above (General Universality of the Qur'an) and against the traditionally held scenario of the Specific Universality of the Qur'an. Throughout my discussions and studies of this particular subject I have seen three verses that are often brought up to justify the traditional understanding.

I argue that the meaning of these three verses can easily be understood by looking at them on the basis of the more than 30 explicit verses that I analysed. On the other hand if anyone is insisting to interpret these three verses (or any other verses) in isolation and in favour of the traditional understanding then that person also needs to fulfil the following tasks in order to make his/her interpretation of these verses rationally convincing:

- Explaining how the wording of these three verses proves the Specific Universality of the Qur'an, i.e. the Qur'an was sent so that all mankind convert to Islam and follow the shari'ah of Islam
- Explaining and justifying the above more than 30 explicit verses that, as I discussed above, reject the scenario of Specific Universality of the Qur'an
- Bringing strong reasons to explain why instead of interpreting these three verses (and any other verses) in the light of the above more than 30 verses, the more than 30 verses need to be interpreted based on these verses
- Answering the eight rational questions about the Specific Universality scenario that were raised in section 1 at the start of this article

As far as I am concerned, until all the above tasks are satisfactory fulfilled, no isolated reasoning or interpretation on its own can prove the Specific Universality of the Qur'an.

Nevertheless to complete this article, in this section I will analyse the meaning of these three verses. My hope is that if I am missing any other verses that may be perceived as evidence for Specific Universality of the Qur'an, I will be reminded about them by serious and well-wishing readers of this article. These three verses that are often brought up to defend the Specific Universality of the Qur'an are 25:1, 6:19 and 2:143 (and 22:78 that is very similar to 2:143).

3.1. The word 'Alamin in the Qur'an (25:1)

The use of the word 'Alamin in relation with the warning of the Qur'an prompts many to jump into conclusion that the Qur'an in its entirety and in every aspect, including shari'ah, is sent for guiding all human beings disregard of their time or location. This is particularly due to the popular translation of the word in English and other languages, that is 'The Whole World' or 'All Worlds'. The verse under discussion is as follows:

تَبَارَكَ الَّذِي نَزَّلَ الْفُرْقَانَ عَلَى عَبْدِهِ لِيَكُونَ لِلْعَالَمِينَ نَذِيرًا

Blessed is the One who sent the differentiator (furqan) to his servant so that he become warner for 'Alamin'. (25:1)

According to some interpreters the verse indicates that the prophet (pbuh) is the warner for 'Alamin while according to others the verse indicates that the Qur'an is a warner for 'Alamin (depending who the object of Yakūna is). The choice between the two does not affect the discussion here although I strongly believe that the first interpretation is correct.

Before looking at the above verse it is helpful to look at the word 'Alamin in the Qur'an and its possible meanings.

'Alamin (عالمين) is one of the frequently used words in the Qur'an (73 times). The word seems to be a purely Qur'anic word, meaning, it does not seem to be used in any of the ancient Arab literature and the Qur'an seems to be the first Arabic literature that uses the word. It appears that this is the reason why among experts of the Arabic language there is little agreement about what this word actually means. The word certainly denotes a mass, however the extent of this mass seems to be subjective to the context. Where the context does not limit the word, then it can mean the whole world. In most cases in the Qur'an the word 'Alamin does in deed mean the whole world. This is because in most verses of the Qur'an the world is used in relation with God and His creation. For example the expression Rabb al-'Alamin (رب العالمين) due to its context can only mean the Lord of the whole world (or as some prefer the Lord of the worlds). This however is not always the case in the Qur'an. As indicated by some of the most knowledgeable scholars of the Qur'an the word 'Alamin can also have a limited scope in either 'time' or 'quantity' or both.

The following is an example of argument for a time limited 'Alamin:

يَا بَنِي إِسْرَائِيلَ اذْكُرُوا نِعْمَتِيَ الَّتِي أَنْعَمْتُ عَلَيْكُمْ وَأَنِّي فَضَّلْتُكُمْ عَلَى الْعَالَمِينَ

O Bani Israel remind yourself the favour that I gave you and (that was that) I exalted you above 'Alamin. (2:47)

Imam Razi argues here that it cannot be right to say that Bani Israel were privileged over the entire world in the past, present and future. He supports the argument that considers the 'Alamin here to be the whole world at that particular time (Razi, Mafatih al-Ghayb, 3:493). He makes the same argument for verses 6:83-86 to explain that we cannot say that the prophets mentioned in these verses were the best of all prophets.

He writes:

المراد فضلتكم على عالمي زمانكم و ذلك لأن الشخص الذي سيوجد بعد ذلك و هو الآن ليس بموجود لم يكن ذلك الشخص من جملة العالمين حال عدمه لأن شرط العالم أن يكون موجوداً و الشيء حال عدمه لا يكون موجوداً. فالشيء حال عدمه لا يكون من العالمين

It means we have exalted you (Bani Israel) over the world at your time only. This is because anyone who comes after that point in time is not existing at that time so cannot be included in 'Alamin when he is not existing. The condition for 'Alam is that it has to exist and an object that is not yet there, does not exist. So an object in its non-existence state is not among the 'Alamin. (Razi, Mafatih al-Ghayb, 13:53)

Similarly Tabari interprets verse 21:91 to mean giving advantage to Maryam and her son (pbu) over the people at her time only:

يقول و جعلنا مريم و ابنها عبرة لعالمي زمانهما

Says and we made Maryam and her son a lesson for the people of their time (Tabari, Tafsir, 17:67).

The above are examples of arguing for an 'Alamin with a time limited scope. Interestingly enough, in explaining the same verse that Razi commented on (2:47), Zamakhshari who is among the most credited experts in the literature of the Qur'an, gives 'Alamin a quantity limited scope. He explains that 'Alamin here means 'A big group of people'. He then refers to verse 21:71 as another verse in which the word 'Alamin is used in this quantity limited meaning and writes:

أى اذكروا نعمتي و تفضيلي على العالمين: على الجم الغفير من الناس، كقوله تعالى: (بَارَكْنَا فِيهَا لِلْعَالَمِينَ) يقال: رأيت عالماً من الناس يراد الكثرة

It means remind yourself of my favour and exalting (of you) over 'Alamin: (that is) over a large group of people, like the saying of the Almighty: (We made blessing in it for 'Alamin – 21:71), it is said: I saw 'Aliman from among people, which means 'many'. (Zamakhshari, Kashshaf, 1:135)

In explaining this comment of Zamakhshari about verse 21:71, al-Qunawi writes:

فانه ذكر العالمين و المراد به اهل الشام فيكون من باب التعبير عن الاكثر بلفظ الكل

So He (the Almighty) refers to 'Alamin (in 21:71) and it means the people of Sham, so this is of the (linguistic) style of intending many with the word used for all. (Hashiyah al-Qunawi ala Tafsir al-Baydhawi, 3:268)

He then gives examples of two other verses of the Qur'an (27:16, 27:23) where the same style (intending many with the word used for all) is used. Here the examples are for the expression كل شى (everything). He argues that in these two verses too, the expression that literally means 'everything' only means 'many things'.

Similarly, Jalaliddin al-Mahalli, in his commentary on Jam' al-Jawami', while explaining the comment of Zamakhshari, writes:

اراد انه مسلوب الدلالة على معناه الاصلى الى المبالغه فى الكثره

It means that the word drops its original (literal) meaning and assumes an exaggerating style to refer to 'many'.

(Hashiya al-Arrat ala Sharh al-Jalal al-Mahilli, 1:417)

al-Mahalli continues by giving more examples of this style of exaggeration in the Qur'an. Note, exaggeration (مبالغه) here means using a word that literally means 'everything' when in fact the meaning of 'many' is intended.

It is important to note that the intention of the above explanation is not to convince the reader about the views of Razi, Tabari, Zamakhshari and other scholars on these particular verses. The intention is merely to show that some of the most creditable scholars of the Qur'an never hesitated to interpret the word 'Alamin within a limited scope. In other words, arguing that 'Alamin, based on the context. Can mean a limited number of people, is not an alien or rare argument in the scholarship of Islam.

The above respected scholars have argued about the possible limitation of the meaning of the word 'Alamin in the language of their time. In the language of our time, when most people are aware of more than one language, and academic disciplines like hermeneutics are well established, the same argument can be made with a more general wording:

In almost any language, words that literally refer to the whole population, can easily refer to a smaller group within that population as well, when the context demands it. In the Arabic language for instance the word Nas (people) does not always mean every human being in the world (although by definition they are all included in Nas). So for instance in 3:173 we read:

الَّذِينَ قَالَ لَهُمُ النَّاسُ إِنَّ النَّاسَ قَدْ جَمَعُوا لَكُمْ فَاخْشَوْهُمْ فَزَادَهُمْ إِيمَانًا وَقَالُوا حَسْبُنَا اللَّهُ وَنِعْمَ الْوَكِيلُ

Those who people tell them, that people are gathering for (fighting) you so fear them, but this increase their belief and they say God is enough for us and He is a good Guardian. (3:173)

I have not seen any scholar or translator of the Qur'an to translate the above as:

Those who (all) people (of the world) tell them that (all) people (of the world) are coming to fight you ...!!!

With a little sense of language (not even Arabic language) it is not difficult to understand and appreciate that Nas in the above verse simply means those particular groups who were the players within that context. Similarly in English when someone says 'the whole world knows who you are' this does not mean that every person in

the world knows who you are. It simply means, every person who is within your social network knows who you are. Examples of this style of language in the Qur'an are plenty. A few of them were referred to in the above discussion and many more can be listed, as those who are familiar with the Qur'an would appreciate.

Same concept applies to the word 'Alamin as quoted from some very credible scholars above. In fact from the very start, almost all scholars had to limit the scope of 'Alamin within the context. Literally 'Alamin means world and everything in it. The fact is without admitting any contextual limitation and based on a strict literal take from the word, the interpretation of verse 25:1 (This is a warning for 'Alamin) would have to be 'the prophet (or the Qur'an) is a warner for the whole world and everything in it, including animals, plants, mountains, etc.!' No scholar has made this argument. Therefore on the very basic fact that the word 'Alamin in the Qur'an needs to be interpreted and limited within the context is no dispute. The dispute is, in each verse, based on the context, what the extent of limitation is.

I argue here that the word 'Alamin in verse 25:1 simply means entire population in Arabia, that is the scope of the warning of the prophet (pbuh), as explicitly announced in verses 42:7, 6:92 and also 28:46, 32:3 and 36:6. The following factors clearly and strongly set the context to understand what the limits of 'Alamin in 25:1 are:

- a. The Qur'an being in Arabic
- b. Explicit verses of the Qur'an (like 42:7, 6:92 and also 28:46, 32:3 and 36:6) that limit the mission of the Qur'an and the prophet (pbuh) to the Arabia
- c. The main addressees of the Qur'an being local groups
- d. The theme of the Qur'an being a local theme, i.e. warning the polytheists and the people of the book in Arabia.

As for the last point (d), it is worth browsing through the very same chapter of the Qur'an that starts with this verse, that is the chapter of al-Furqan (25) to see the heavy local tone and agenda in this chapter (like other chapters of the Qur'an). Note in particular the expression قومی (my people) in 25:30.

As for the second point (b) a typical justification that is provided based on the traditional scenario of Specific Universality of the Qur'an is that these verses are referring to different stages of the warning function of the Qur'an. This means the above five verses (in point 'b' above) refer to the stage within the life time of the prophet (pbuh) while 25:1 refers to the stage after him that was supposed to be carried out by his ummah. This justification of course is on the basis of the assumption that verse 25:1 says that the Qur'an is the warner for 'Alamin. As I pointed out at the start of this section I strongly believe that the verse says that the prophet (pbuh) is the warner for 'Alamin. However for the sake of discussion I proceed to analyse this justification disregard of the fact that I disagree with the whole premise on which this justification is built.

This above justification has a number of problems:

First, Verses 42:7 and 6:92 clearly inform us that not only the Qur'an only warns people in Arabia, it was in fact sent for this purpose (again note the Lam in the verses above is Lam of Illah, i.e. indicating reason). In other words, verses 42:7 and 6:92 are

not just saying what the Qur'an does (so that one may argue that this was only part of what the Qur'an does). These verses are in fact informing us about a much more fundamental subject, that is, why the Qur'an was revealed. Verses 28:46, 32:3 and 36:6 explain the reason for choosing Arabia as a land to send a warner in. This was because Arabs never had a warner. How can the Qur'an at one point say that the reason for its revelation was to warn the people in Arabia since they never had a warner, and then at another point it says the reason was in fact to warn the entire human kind? There cannot be abrogation (naskh) here as abrogation only applies to rulings (ahkam). If 'Alamin in 25:1 means the entire mankind then this will be a contradiction with the above five verses.

Second, it is not in line with the eloquence of the Qur'an to make two separate references like this to inform about this alleged two stages of the function of the Qur'an (i.e. warning the people in Arabia, warning the entire mankind). Elsewhere the Qur'an, when referring to different stages of a same mission, simply and logically list them in one place. For instance in verse 6:19 it says that the Qur'an was revealed to the prophet (pbuh) so he would warn 'You' and whoever the Qur'an reaches him/her (the meaning of this verse is discussed later in section 3.2). Two stages of the guidance of the Qur'an is listed in sequence and in one verse. Likewise in each of the verses 2:143 and 22:78, two stages of the mission of guidance are coming in sequence, again within one verse. One stage is the prophet (pbuh) being witness to 'You' and the second stage is 'You' being witness to 'people'. (Discussion on who 'You' and 'people' in these verses are takes place later in section 3.3). The question is, why then this logical and rational way of expression is not followed? If the Qur'an was revealed as the warner for the Arabs at the first stage and then the whole world at the second stage, then why unlike the above mentioned verses there are verses that explicitly say that the Qur'an was revealed to warn the people in Arabia and then there is a single verse 25:1 that supposedly says that the Qur'an was revealed for warning the entire mankind? The eloquence of the Qur'an demands such information to be given within one verse or two linked consecutive verses. The Almighty could simply reveal a verse saying that the Qur'an was revealed so that it first warns people in Arabia at the time (ummulqura wa man haulaha) and then warn the rest of the world ('Alamin).

Third, it is worthy of noting that verses 42:7 and 6:92 that limit the warning of the Qur'an to Arabia and verse 25:1 that refers to 'Alamin as the scope of warning of the Qur'an are all in the Macci chapters of the Qur'an. If we agree with the popular chronological order that is proposed for the Qur'anic chapters, verse 25:1 chronologically came before verses 42:7 and 6:92. This again does not make sense if 'Alamin in 25:1 means the whole world. It would have made much more sense if the verse about (supposedly) global warning of the Qur'an would have come in the latter stages of the revelation in Medina rather than at the earlier stages. In particular it would have made much more sense if the verse about (supposedly) global warning of the Qur'an would have come after (not before) those verses that say that the Qur'an was revealed to warn people in Arabia.

Forth, beside contradiction with the above five verses, if we interpret 25:1 to mean that the Qur'an was a warner for the whole world it also makes this verse and what assumingly it suggests in contradiction with verses that emphasise on the suitability of the language of the Qur'an for its addressees (12:2, 44:58, 19:97, 14:4, 41:44,

26:198-9). These verses, as discussed earlier, remove any excuses from the people in Arabia at the time, on the basis of the fact that the Qur'an was revealed in the language that they could understand. These verses are implying that it would have been inappropriate to send the Arabic Qur'an to warn a non-Arab person or a person who does not speak the same language due to residing in Arabia.

Fifth, I found it amazing that the same scholars who strongly (and in my view very correctly) argue that the whole Qur'an has one theme, that is warning of the polytheists and the people of the book in Arabia at the time, would find it reasonable to also argue that the Qur'an is warner for all mankind. Some scholars have very rightly put much effort to clarify for Muslims that the rather harsh language of warning of the Qur'an does not entirely apply to our time and that this tone was only for the Arabs and the people of the book in Arabia at the time. It is puzzling that the appreciation of this local feature of the Qur'an does not make these respected scholars to see the fundamental contradiction if they then argue that the Qur'an was sent to warn the mankind. Interestingly enough, some scholars do appreciate and preach that the mechanism and the implications of warning of the Qur'an for its primary addressees and other addressees are significantly different. In other words, while they argue that the Qur'an is a warner for the mankind, by warning they mean something that is practically totally different from that warning that the Qur'an refers to.

It is worth noting that how in verse 81:27 where it says that the Qur'an is a reminder for 'Alamin, the verse after (81:28) immediately clarifies the scope of 'Alamin to be the primary addressees of the Qur'an, i.e. the limits of Arabia:

ان هو الا ذكر للعالمين لمن شاء منكم ان يستقيم

This is a reminder for 'Alamin, for those among you who want to go straight (81:27, 28)

In verse 81:27, if 'Alamin meant the entire mankind, then the pronoun Kum (you) should have been eliminated or replaced with Hum (them, i.e. the mankind).

It is also worth mentioning that the Qur'an even considers the Torah and Injil to be sent only for the community from which the Biblical prophets mostly raised, that is Bani Israel:

وَآتَيْنَا مُوسَى الْكِتَابَ وَجَعَلْنَاهُ هُدًى لِّبَنِي إِسْرَائِيلَ أَلَّا تَتَّخِذُوا مِنْ دُونِي وَكِيلاً 17:2

And we gave Moses the book and made (that book) a guide for Bani Israel that they do not take a guardian other than Me (17:2)

وَ لَقَدْ آتَيْنَا مُوسَى الْكِتَابَ فَلَا تَكُنْ فِي مِرْيَةٍ مِنْ لِقَائِهِ وَ جَعَلْنَاهُ هُدًى لِّبَنِي إِسْرَائِيلَ

And verily we gave Moses the book, so do not be in doubt in meeting Him, and we made It a guide for Bani Israel. (32:23)

Nowhere in the Qur'an there is any indications that Torah or Injil were sent for the entire mankind or that all mankind were supposed to follow the shari'ah of Bani Israel, or that Jews were guilty due to not preaching their shari'ah to the world and due to considering it only their own obligation. It will make this writing longer than what it

already is, otherwise I could also bring verses from the Bible to show how in Bible too, in line with the Qur'an, there are no signs of a universal religious path or shari'ah and there are explicit verses that introduce the shari'ah to be specific to Bani Israel.

The above was specifically about verse 25:1 that associates 'Alamin with the very severe and determining word of warning (inzar). The word 'Alamin has also been used in some other verses of the Qur'an in relation to the prophet (pbuh) being rahmah (compassion), i.e. 21:107, or the Qur'an being a zikr (reminder), i.e. 6:90, 12:14, 38:87, 68:52 and 81:27. Based on the above discussion my current understanding is that the word 'Alamin in these verses too means all people in Arabia.

However for these particular verses there may be another interpretation that can be considered:

The Qur'an, once overall understood and appreciated, can be a very effective book in reminding all about God and the hereafter. People can get reminder about God and hereafter from many sources and one of the effective ones can be the Qur'an. Similarly there is no doubt that the prophet, like any other God sent guide, was a compassion for the entire mankind. I have already referred to this in section 2.3. as well as the very start of this article and have referred to this as the General Universality of the Qur'an. Within the scope of General Universality of the Qur'an, the word 'Alamin in the above mentioned verses may be interpreted to mean the whole mankind. This however does not mean that the entire mankind is supposed to become Muslims and follow the shari'ah of the Qur'an. This would be Specific Universality which, as discussed above, is against the Qur'anic verses.

3.2. The verse of Man Balagh (6:19)

Another verse that is sometimes used to argue for Specific Universality of the Qur'an is the following verse:

... وَأُوحِيَ إِلَيَّ هَذَا الْقُرْآنُ لِأُنذِرَكُمْ بِهِ وَمَنْ بَلَغَ أَلَيْسَ لَكُمْ لِمَنْ تَشْهَدُونَ أَنَّ مَعَ اللَّهِ إِلَهًا أُخْرَى ...

... and this Qur'an was revealed to me so that I warn you with it and anyone who it reaches, do you bear witness (despite this) that there is a god beside God ... (6:19)

The argument here is that while Kum (you) means the primary and direct addressees of the Qur'an, Man Balagh means whoever this Qur'an reaches, so that can potentially be the entire mankind.

Almost all the reasoning that I provided in the last section about the meaning of 'Alamin in verse 25:1, also apply here. I am not going to repeat them. Here I only add a point specific for this particular verse:

The key point in the above verse is the word Balagh (reached). The advocates of the above argument seem to be of the view that as soon as a person is aware of the existence of the Qur'an and reads a translation of the Qur'an (or its original Arabic text) then the Qur'an has reached that person the same way that it reached the Arab speaking companions of the prophet and that this therefore is Iblagh (reaching).

Noting the meaning of the word Balagh, that comes from Iblagh, can shed some light here. We read in Al-Tahqiq fi kalamat al-Qur'an al-Karim (1:360):

أَنَّ حَقِيقَةَ مَعْنَى هَذِهِ الْمَادَّةِ: هُوَ الْوَصُولُ إِلَى الْحَدِّ الْأَعْلَى وَالْمَرْتَبَةِ الْمُنْتَهَى. وَ هَذَا هُوَ الْفَرْقُ بَيْنَهَا وَ بَيْنَ مَادَّةِ الْوَصُولِ

The root meaning of this word is 'reaching in its ultimate and complete level'. This is the difference between this word and the word al-Wusul (الوصول)

Similarly in Lisan al-Arab (8:419), Ibn Mandhur explains balagha to mean وَصَلَ وَ انْتَهَى (reached and completed) and then writes: وَصَلَ إِلَى مُرَادِهِ: تَبَلَّغَ بِالشَّيْءِ (Balagha bi al-Shay' means 'reached its objective') also كَفَايَةَ أَي تَبَلَّغُ أَي كِفَايَةً وَ بُلُغَةً وَ بُلَاغًا (When it says something is balagh, bulgha or tablagh for another thing, it means it is enough for it).

It is a well-known fact, as quoted above, that iblagh does not simply mean to pass something to someone. It actually means to make something fully and effectively reach someone. The Qur'an could fully and effectively reach those who then became the companions of the prophet for one major reason: The Book contained the same language and the same cultural and social references as those who It was sent to. The Qur'an could also fully and effectively reach those Arabs in Arabia at the time who never saw the prophet (pbuh) himself, due to the same reason. Also the important role of the prophet (pbuh) in communicating the message to his companions, and in a lower but still effective level, the role of the companions and those who immediately followed them in communicating the message to the rest of the Arabs at the time is undeniable.

The above conditions were specifically applied for the residents of Arabia, and not the whole mankind. This is why, as referred to in section 2.1. there is so much emphasis on the relevance of the Qur'an to those that the Book was sent to.

Therefore in my understanding verse 6:19 should be interpreted as follows:

... and the Qur'an was revealed to me so that I warn you (Quraysh) and whoever (in Arabia) to whom it may reach ... (6:19)

Note the verse is Macci, so 'you' in the above interpretation means Quraysh, and 'whoever' refers to the rest of Arabia. This nicely matches with the meaning of the verses 6:92 and 42:7 where مِنْ حَوْلِهَا وَ مِنْ الْقُرَى are referred to. So ام القرى (Mecca) in 6:92 matches with كُمْ (you) in 6:19, and مِنْ حَوْلِهَا (those around it) in 6:92 matches with مَنْ بَلَّغَ (whoever – in Arabia – to whom It may reach) in 6:19. Note the two verses of 6:19 and 6:92 are in the same chapter of the Qur'an.

I need to explain a delicate point here. The above does not mean that I believe the Qur'an can never 'reach' anyone but Arabs or those who fully understand Arabic. I believe there can be chances that It may reach a non-Arab person who relies on translations even better than an Arab person. However this is not the point under discussion here. The point is whether in verse 6:19, we can take the word 'reaching' to be referring to such chances or we should interpret it based on the other verses of the Qur'an that explicitly limit the mission of the prophet and the Book. My argument is that the latter route is the correct one. The Qur'an was sent to the prophet (pbuh) so that those who saw the prophet (pbuh) and anyone else in Arabia would be warned.

This is the meaning of the verse 6:19. This however does not mean that others cannot get general warning from the Qur'an.

3.3. The verses of shuhada (2:143, 22:78)

وَكَذَلِكَ جَعَلْنَاكُمْ أُمَّةً وَسَطًا لِتَكُونُوا شُهَدَاءَ عَلَى النَّاسِ وَيَكُونَ الرَّسُولُ عَلَيْكُمْ شَهِيدًا ...

And in this way we made you an intermediate community so that you be witnesses (to the truth) upon people and the messenger be witness upon you ... (2:143)

There is also a similar verse in chapter of Hajj (22:78). First, it is important to know that there is less agreement in what exactly the above verse means (the verse is a good example of how complex the style of the language of the Qur'an is). Most scholars, while having their own differences about the exact meaning of the verse, agree that it is about the day of judgement. Some scholars, consider it to be primarily for this world and consequently for the day of judgement as well.

I cannot see how any of the available interpretations can be used as a proof for the Specific Universality of the Qur'an and a proof that all mankind needs to convert to Islam and follow the shari'ah. It seems like the part of the verse that prompts some interpreters to see a universal dimension in it is the part that says لِتَكُونُوا شُهَدَاءَ عَلَى النَّاسِ (so that you be witnesses upon people). For instance Javed Ahmad Ghamidi writes in Bayan:

The Almighty selects a person or a nation to become a symbol of His reward and punishment at a micro level in this world. Through them, the Almighty brings about a lesser day of judgement in this very world before the greater Day of Judgement. This individual or nation is told that if they choose to remain with God they would be rewarded in this world otherwise punishment will await them. The consequence of this exercise is that the mere existence of such people becomes a sign from God as if God has descended on this earth to set up His court of justice. At the same time, these people are told that the reality they have witnessed through the mind's eye should be preached among people and communicate the guidance of God with full integrity of contents and with full certainty. This is indeed شهادته

(Bayan 1:105, translation by Shehzad Saleem)

The point that I would like to make is that even if we agree with the above interpretation, none of it necessarily means that all mankind is bound to convert to Islam and follow the shari'ah of Muhammad (pbuh).

If the above interpretation simply means that through Bani Ishmael or Muslims, misguided people among other communities can also come to acknowledge God and the day of judgement and therefore become God aware nations and lead a life of a God aware nation, then, despite not agreeing with this interpretation, I do not have much problem with it. Such interpretation is not even relevant to the subject of this writing. To some extent a similar concept is also in the New Testament:

*I, the LORD, have called you in righteousness; I will take hold of your hand.
I will keep you and will make you to be a covenant for the people and a
light for the Gentiles (Isiah: 42:6)*

*... I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that my salvation may
reach to the ends of the earth (Isiah: 49:6)*

Throughout the history, as far as I know, no Jewish scholars have ever concluded from the above verses that therefore all gentiles need to become Jew!

It seems like the reason the above verse of the Qur'an is used to make more conclusions than what the verse itself spells out is in fact the assumed interpretation of verse 25:1 plus history of Muslim conquests that is beyond the subject of this article. Without other assumed evidences verse 2:143 (and 22:78) does not connote such a huge implication, i.e. all mankind needs to convert to Islam and follow the shari'ah through witnessing and preaching of Bani Ishmael or Muslims.

This is all that needs to be written about the above verse for now and the rest should be left for when some critical and counter arguments on the basis of this verse are received.

However at this point I would like to take this opportunity and briefly offer my current understanding of this verse:

وَكَذَلِكَ جَعَلْنَاكُمْ أُمَّةً وَسَطًا لِتَكُونُوا شُهَدَاءَ عَلَى النَّاسِ وَيَكُونَ الرَّسُولُ عَلَيْكُمْ شَهِيدًا...

*And in this way we have made you (the companions of the prophet) an
intermediate community so that you may be witnesses (to the truth) upon
(the rest of) people (in Arabia) and the Messenger be witness upon you ...
(2:143)*

The above interpretation, that keeps the mechanism of shahadah within Arabia only, is also very much in line with other verses of the Qur'an where there is reference to the word Shahid (witness):

وَيَوْمَ نَبْعَثُ فِي كُلِّ أُمَّةٍ شَهِيدًا عَلَيْهِمْ مِنْ أَنْفُسِهِمْ وَجِئْنَا بِكَ شَهِيدًا عَلَى هَؤُلَاءِ

*And the day when we will raise a witness among every community upon them
from among their own and bring you as a witness to these (people) (16:89)*

Note the emphasis of the verse that a witness is from the same community.

I need to make it clear that I am in full agreement with the concept of miniature day of judgement and worldly reward and punishment, as skilfully illustrated by Javed Ahmad Ghamidi. I praise him for extracting such an important concept from the Qur'an despite many other scholars not paying much attention (if any) to it. The point of dispute is whether this has anything to do with Muslims having to preach Islam to all mankind to convert them to Islam.

3.4. The relevance of the discussion on the above three verses

In the above section I provided my reasoning to argue why I do not consider the verses of 25:1, 6:19 and 2:143 to be referring to a universal application for the Qur'an. I would

like to also point out that even if for the sake of discussion I agree that these verses are referring to a universal scope for the Qur'an, this still does not prove that Islam is supposed to be the religion for every human being and that everyone is expected to convert to Islam and follow the shari'ah. As I discussed in section 2.2.3, the Qur'an makes it clear that every community (ummah) has their own shari'ah and that every nation (qaum) has their own guide. Due to this, as discussed in section 2.2.4, even the people of the book in Arabia were not asked to convert to Islam and to follow the shari'ah of Islam, rather they were expected to follow their own religious path.

The discussion on the above three verses therefore does not even relate to whether all human beings are supposed to convert to Islam or not. The discussion is only on whether the Qur'an was sent to warn the people in Arabia or to warn the whole mankind.

4. Summary and Conclusion

Throughout this article I tried to show based on numerous explicit verses of the Qur'an that God's scheme of guidance is not to send one prophet for the entire mankind. Rather, He sends guides for every nation, from that nation. Similarly God does not expect all mankind to follow one religious path. He in deed allows every nation to have a religious path that fits better with their own norms and culture.

Accordingly, the Qur'an never demanded all mankind to accept Islam and to follow the shari'ah (a scenario that I referred to as Specific Universality of the Qur'an). The local agenda of the Qur'an, Its very complex language and style and also Its local cultural references are strong evidences to this. More than 30 explicit verses of the Qur'an, as quoted in this article, actually spell this out loudly. I also presented and analysed the three verses that are often brought up in favour of the Specific Universality of the Qur'an and through analysis rejected such interpretation of these three verses. I also argued that even the traditional interpretation of these verses is not supporting the Specific Universality theory.

The demand of the Qur'an from the Arabs (Ummi'in) was to abandon shirk (polytheism) and to become another God's community, like Bani Israel. This is why they were bound to follow a set of rules that was referred to as the shari'ah. These rules themselves were very much on the basis of the norms and regulations of the Arabian society at the time.

The history caused some of the other nations to embrace Islam and to enthusiastically or forcefully follow the same shari'ah and become Muslims. This was of course a great advantage that the Almighty gave to Ummi'in and in no way this article tries to deny this advantage or to argue that such joining of other nations to Ummi'in should have not happened (except the ones that were forced to do so). However we need to be careful not to make history the primary source of our understanding of God's scheme of guidance. Obviously that primary source can only be the Qur'an.

No doubt like Bani Israel, the ummah of Islam too can be seen as examples of Godly nations and therefore evidence to God and inspiration for all other nations. This however does not mean that the other nations have to convert to Islam and follow

the same shari'ah. God in the Qur'an explicitly recognises and acknowledges different paths towards Himself and gives the content rather than form due significance. This is exactly why the Qur'an never demanded people of the book in Arabia to convert to Islam and to follow the shari'ah of Islam, but demanded them to truly believe in God and the hereafter and to follow their own shari'ah and to stop enmity against the prophet (pbuh) and Muslims at the time. This is also why the Qur'an praises some of the people of the book at the time and promises them heaven, without any indications that they are converting or they will convert to Islam.

There is only one truth and all true religions adhere to the same truth. They all promote a life submitted to that truth, that is God. This is that islam (with lower case) that in most places the Qur'an refers to and this is that islam that the Qur'an says is the only acceptable religion before God. This truth however has different illustrations to suit different nations and cultures. Therefore every nation has its own version of islam. The version that was given to the people in Arabia and all who joined them later (from Persia, South Asia, South East Asia, Africa, and later, Western Countries, etc.) is conventionally called Islam (with capital case) and the followers of this version are called Muslims.

Based on the above understanding, to a Muslim, followers of the other Godly religions and ideologies are also followers of the path of islam and there is no need for them to convert to Islam. However a Muslim has an advantage that may not be available in all existing religions and ideologies and that is a divine book that even most of the non-Muslim scholars agree that is significantly more authentic than what is remained of the previous religious scriptures. This is the Qur'an. The Qur'an therefore remains as the criteria for right and wrong for anyone who believes in it (Muslim or non-Muslim). It is through the Qur'an that ungodly beliefs and practices can be distinguished from the Godly ones. The preaching responsibility of a Muslim therefore is only limited to trying to correct any such ungodly beliefs and practices among Muslims or non-Muslims where the opportunity comes and in a peaceful manner. Among the possible wrong beliefs are shirk (polytheism), exaggeration about religious concepts and sectarianism (belief that associating with a particular religious group/label is enough to make a person successful in the hereafter). In terms of practices, bounding by universal norms of morality is the least expectation for any human beings. Where appropriate, the Qur'an can be used as a very strong tool to remind even non-Muslims about God and the hereafter. This is the universal function of the Qur'an that is referred to here as the General Universality of the Qur'an.

Certain communities have been given a set of rules to follow. Other communities may not have been given any specific rules, but as a minimum, they are expected to observe some principles. These principles have been referred to in both Biblical literature and the Qur'an (e.g. 17:22-39), with little difference.

In this way, the Qur'an becomes even more relevant and universal. The obsession with converting people to Islam, which basically means them following the shari'ah of Islam, can cloud one's mind against realising the real universal function of the Qur'an. Once it is appreciated that God's religion is not bound by any particular shari'ah, suddenly the real message of the Qur'an becomes available to any human being, Muslim or non-Muslim. That message is none but the message of monotheism

(Tauwheed) and its practical implication, that is righteous deeds, including being aware of God, being aware of the effect of this life on the hereafter and being a highly moral person.

We human beings seem to be very much fond of sectarian views and we seem to be keen to impose this view on the Qur'an and God Himself. During the same days when I was writing this article I happened to pass two Mormons in the street. The two young boys who to me looked very pious and honest, respectfully invited me to become Mormon. I asked them, if a person believes in one God and tries to be a good person accordingly, and where applies, follows the rules that he believes are coming from God, does it then make any difference if that person is labelled as Muslim, Mormon, Christian, Jew or Hindu? The elder boy responded 'yes, everyone needs to be baptised by the church!'. I replied 'To my understanding God is better than that, He is not that sectarian that you think!'

I do not see any differences between those good boys and those three respected members of an Islamic preaching group who approached my Jewish neighbour the other day to convince him that only by following the shari'ah of Islam he can reach success in the hereafter.

We are all like mountain climbers who start from the bottom of the mountain. At the start we do not see any other path to the top but the one that we have taken. However our viewpoint becomes wider as we get higher up in the mountain. We then gradually start to see and appreciate many other paths that people, as convinced as us, are taking towards the top of the mountain. I am proud to follow a Book that tells me from the very start, while I am still at the very bottom of the mountain, that there are indeed many paths to the top.

In this article I tried to share this understanding with the readers. This article will have two follow up writings. One will be to answer any common questions or comment on any counter arguments. The other one will be to explain what I think are the practical implications of the above understanding for a religious person, in particular a Muslim. Ultimately this all will be put together as one coherent piece of work to be published as a book. I pray to the Almighty to have enough time and energy to do this.