

The True Meaning of Universality of the Qur'an

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Prologue

This is the fourth edition of the original article. 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 find that my understanding needs alteration or correction. Note, an abridged version of this article can be found [here](#).

In the third and this fourth edition, some further explanations are added, some statements are made clearer, some typos are corrected and some new illustrations of the concepts are added in the form of tables. I would like to take this opportunity to show my appreciation and express my thanks for all the helpful questions and constructive feedback that I have received so far.¹

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

a. Throughout this writing, I am making reference to the 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 will explain here what I mean by them so that there are no misunderstandings about these terms:

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

The Qur'an was sent for the Arabs (*Ummi'in*) in Arabia and those willing to join them then or in the future, to become part of their religious community (Muslims) by adopting the shari'ah of Islam. While primarily aimed at these individuals, the Book also naturally contains a message that is universal and relevant to every human being. This is the message of Monotheism (tawhid), being mindful of the hereafter and doing righteous things. This is a message that almost all religions that exist on the face of the earth have in common.

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

The Qur'an was sent for all of 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 nor scholarly opinion should be allowed to contribute in our understanding at the same level as that of the Qur'an. Only after understanding the concept from the Qur'an can we 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

¹ In particular I would like to thank Veronica Polo for her feedback and help in editing this version of the article. This reminds me that I should also thank Waseem Aslam and Nikhat Sattar for their feedback and help for editing the original version.

interpreting it correctly/accurately. Of course any helpful sources, including scholarly views and authentic hadith, should be used for understanding the Qur'an. Nevertheless the primary source of understanding the Qur'an should be the Qur'an Itself.

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 continue to share my views on any questions with regard to what sources other than the Qur'an may suggest about this subject, in other writings.

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.

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 explore what the Qur'an says about the subject. It is important for me that the readers of this article know that although the above is the logical sequence by which my arguments need to be presented, for me the sequence was reversed. 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 at 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, aside from some classical scholars of the past, I have made references in particular 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. Also some of the works of these scholars can be seen as my departure point from where I moved on and reached a fundamentally different understanding compared to that of these scholars. This does not indicate any preference for or against the scholars mentioned.

f. In most cases I have quoted an entire verse of the Qur'an. In some cases to avoid prolonging this writing or to emphasise that part of the verse that I use as evidence, I have quoted only part of a verse. In all these cases I have used '...' to indicate that this is part of the quoted verse.

Finally, a few of points on my 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 (descendants 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.

Also in this article, in line with the usage of the word in the Qur'an, I have differentiated between shari'ah (as a whole religious path) and the form of the shari'ah (as the laws and rituals of a particular shari'ah).

Finally, when referring to the Qur'an, I have used 'It' (with capital). I am fully aware that this is not usual but this is my personal preference.

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. This is why the Qur'an Itself has emphasised so much and so many times on using our rationality (to refer to only a few out of many: 2:164, 2:170, 2:171, 3:65, 5:58, 10:16, 10:100, 12:2, 21:67, 25:44, 43:3). Once our rationality convinces us about the Qur'an, then we will rely on the Qur'an for our religious inquiries, while using a rational basis to understand It. 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 is 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 the 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.

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

- a. The Qur'an was revealed as 'the' guidance for the whole of mankind.
- b. As a corollary of the above, all the instructions in the Qur'an, including the religious law (the form of the shari'ah) are meant to be eternal and universal.
- c. The above means that 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 arise. Only a few of them are listed here:

(Disclaimer Note: Please note, the following points are not criticising the Qur'an. They are criticising the above scenario.)

1. If the Qur'an was sent as 'the' guide for all nations, then why is it relying on a very complex style of the 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 residents of the world. There are many verses of the Qur'an for which scholars have never arrived on an agreed upon basic interpretation and as a whole, despite many theories on the coherence of the Qur'an, it is still quite difficult to see and appreciate coherence in the Book. While it is understandable to have different views about the meaning of a text, the very unique and complex style of the Qur'an has definitely contributed to these disagreements.
2. If the Qur'an was supposed to be Specifically Universal, meaning to be 'the' guide for all mankind, then why are the vast majority (if not all) of the issues that the Book addresses local issues? Why are the addressees in most of the verses local? Why (as Amin Ahsan Islahi noted), are even the apparently general titles like *mushrikin* (polytheists), *ahl alkitab* (People of the Book) and *alladhina amanu* (believers) in most cases referring to the *mushrikin*, *ahl al-kitab* and *alladhina amanu* at the time in Arabia? Why, as the same scholar in my view correctly argues, the whole theme and the agenda of the Qur'an and the theme and agenda of every chapter of the Qur'an is with regard to warning (*inzar*) and completing the reasoning (*itmam al-hujjah*) for the people in Arabia at the time? Why is

there not much guidance for those who were not and are not among the primary addressees of the Qur'an? Why are the other nations and faiths almost completely ignored? How can a book that only covered the local issues of a limited group of people at a certain point of history with a very local theme and agenda be said to be sent as 'the' guide for all nations at all times?

3. If the shari'ah and its form were supposed to be for all nations and all times, then why was the majority of the form of the shari'ah arranged in a way that matched the already in practice laws among the Arabs at the time? In other words, why was the form of the shari'ah that was supposed to be universal and eternal, so tailored for a particular time and culture (more on the form of the shari'ah is discussed in the second supplementary note later)?
4. If the shari'ah of Islam is the only set of rules that leads to *tazkiyah* (spiritual purification), then why does this particular form of the shari'ah not seem to be the necessary prerequisite for *tazkiyah*? 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 form of shari'ah, or any form of 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 an 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 and challenges in understanding the not very easy Arabic of the Qur'an'. For a non-Arab, there are two obstacles: the above plus 'the shortcoming of the translator in understanding and expressing the Arabic of the Qur'an'. While he/she may have control over the first obstacle, there will be no control for him/her over the second obstacle.
6. Where in the Qur'an is there any guidance for the Arabs of the time on how to preach Islam to people who do not understand the Qur'an (i.e. non-Arabs at that time)? Why is there not a single verse in the Qur'an to instruct the Arabs to go beyond Arabia in order to preach Islam to non-Arabs? Where in the Qur'an has God made it the duty of non-Arab Muslims to learn Arabic, or where has it instructed Arab Muslims to translate the Qur'an for nonArabs?

As human beings we have all been involved in managing events, projects, producing artwork or arranging programmes (e.g. training courses, festivals, exhibitions, civil projects, artistic products, etc.). 'Suitability and Coordination' have always been among the main components of any managing affair. We are creations of God and any suitability and coordination we put into our work is nothing compared to the suitability and coordination that God has in His own work. The question is, do we really see much suitability and coordination in the above scenario?

With such a complex style of language in 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?

As a student of Islam whose partial duty for more than a decade 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 view. I was involved in answering very similar questions and can still provide answers to them based on the traditional scenario. This type of answering questions is often referred to as an apologetic approach. With the apologetic approach, the assumption is that your belief is one hundred percent correct. Therefore your aim 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 make any assumptions, these answers may not have the same appeal.

The point is, we can hold a scenario to be true. When that scenario is criticised 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. 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 a rational 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 unsuitable and contradictory set-up, itself, points to only two possibilities: a. that the commonly held scenario of Specific Universality of the Qur'an cannot be true, or b. that the author of the Qur'an cannot be the All-Wise God!

The objective of the next section is to illustrate, by referencing the Qur'an itself, that the first of the above two possibilities is indeed the case. 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 one to appreciate why the Qur'an has heavily used such local and culturally specific tone and references.

Two important clarifications before moving to the next section:

- I would like to reemphasise on the disclaimer point that I made at the start of this section. I consider myself to be a loyal and devoted student of the Qur'an and one who is in love with the Book and tries to follow It. None of the above statements should be seen as blaming or criticising the Qur'an. The purpose of the above points is to show the incompatibility between the Qur'an and the traditionally held view of the Specific Universality of the Qur'an. If there are any blame and criticism, it is on this traditional scenario, not the Qur'an.
- Many of the above points also apply to other available scriptures of other religions. In other words, I am not just pointing out features specific to the Qur'an. I am pointing out some of the inevitable features of any text that is to be used by human beings.

2. Reasoning from the Qur'an

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

The above inquiries in section 1 are in fact pointing to the evidence related to the style of the Qur'an and its context. These evidence are already discussed but 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 little to no 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 form of 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 mention 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 characteristics above those of a Specifically Universal book or a local one? Was there really no other way for the All-Wise God to make a 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 would they have found the Qur'an for themselves, their beliefs and their ordinary life issues and how easily could they have understood many of the verses of the Qur'an that were primarily addressing the Arabs of the time?

The overly 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 residents of Arabia at the time (*Ummi'in* + People of the Book in Arabia) and time other than 1400 years ago, is today one of the challenges of many scholars of Islam.

One may correctly argue that history shows us that people other than the Arabs of the time have embraced the Qur'an and that many of the scholars of the Qur'an are in fact non-Arabs. This however is not at all relevant to the argument provided in this section. The question is not whether the Qur'an can be understood and appreciated by people other than Its primary addressees. The question is, whether the form and the style of the Qur'an fit with a book that is revealed in order to warn and guide the whole of mankind rather than Its primary addressees. To illustrate this point the following example may help: a teacher puts together a textbook suitable for the students of his hometown where all the examples, expressions and illustrations are formulated on the basis of the norms and the lives and the day to day activities of the people in that town. Years later this book has reached other towns and cities and many people recognize its educational benefits and start to promote it with suitable commentaries for people in those towns and cities. Does the fact that the book was welcomed by people in other places change the fact that its authors wrote it primarily for the people of his town?

It is important to note that arguments such as *'the Qur'an focused on its primary addressees so that they could establish themselves as a community – ummah – and then become capable of focusing on the world'* are justifications that hold little practical validity. First, there wouldn't be any harm if, besides 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 on how to deal with some of the other major communities, faiths and religious denominations in the world or at least in the Arabian neighbourhood. Note, this is not about having details about everything. This is simply about acknowledging the existence of others that are supposed to be guided by the book at the time of revelation and in the future. Third, the Qur'an is the word of God, immune to 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 mankind, a fallible mechanism cannot replace an infallible one (i.e. one that is supported by divine revelation). The history of both Christians 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 a universal and sole system of guidance to 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. If the answer is that the Qur'an is preserved but earlier books were not preserved, then I would argue that a fallible ummah needs more than just a preserved holy book, if they are supposed to deliver the message of that book to the whole of mankind. Many Muslims argue that their advantage against other religious communities is that Muslims have their divine book preserved. I argue however that the main issue is not a preserved or a not preserved book, rather, it is the issue of subjective interpretation of the book. We Muslims suffer at least to the same degree as the other Abrahamic communities in having no infallible guidance as a reference to interpret the text of the divine book. The infallible Qur'an does not talk to us, it is the fallible interpreters that talk on behalf of It for us.

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 develops a framework and a premise that does not match 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 purpose the Qur'an was revealed, the answer can easily be taken from the Qur'an:

وَكَذَلِكَ أَوْحَيْنَا إِلَيْكَ قُرْآنًا عَرَبِيًّا لَتُنذِرَ أُمَّ الْقُرَىٰ وَمَنْ حَوْلَهَا وَتُنذِرَ يَوْمَ الْجَمْعِ لَا رَيْبَ فِيهِ فَرِيقٌ فِي الْجَنَّةِ وَفَرِيقٌ 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)

وَهَذَا كِتَابٌ أَنْزَلْنَاهُ مُبَارَكٌ مُصَدِّقُ الَّذِي بَيْنَ يَدَيْهِ وَتُنذِرُ أُمَّ الْقُرَىٰ وَمَنْ حَوْلَهَا وَالَّذِينَ يُؤْمِنُونَ بِالْآخِرَةِ يُؤْمِنُونَ بِهِ وَهُمْ 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). Further, it can be understood from the verses that are referred to in the next page that it was in particular

the *Ummi'in* (the Arabs in Arabia) who were the subject of this mission. Although, as it will be discussed later, the People of the Book in Arabia at the time were also expected to benefit from it.

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 warn the people in Arabia'. Note that 'ل' in *لتنذر* is for *علة* (cause). Therefore the argument that the above only covers the purpose 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). It is my understanding that reading the above verses without any presumptions can only lead the reader to understand that the Qur'an was sent for one reason and that was to warn the 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 addressed why Its message was limited to Arabia and the Arabs in that location in particular:

... لَتَنذِرَ قَوْمًا مَا أَتَاهُمْ مِنْ نَذِيرٍ مِنْ قَبْلِكَ ...

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

لَتَنذِرَ 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 لَتَنذِرَ قَوْمًا مَا أَتَاهُمْ 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)

Note again the use of 'ل' of *علة* (cause) in the above verses which makes it clear what particular community (i.e. the Arabs in Arabia) were the subject of the mission of the Prophet (pbuh) and why the Qur'an was revealed.

Another verse:

وَهَذَا كِتَابٌ أَنْزَلْنَاهُ مُبَارَكٌ فَاتَّبِعُوهُ وَاتَّقُوا لَعَلَّكُمْ تُرْحَمُونَ أَنْ تَقُولُوا إِنَّمَا أَنْزَلَ الْكِتَابَ عَلَيَّ طَائِفَتَيْنِ مِنْ قَبْلِنَا وَإِنْ كُنَّا عَنْ دِرَاسَتِهِمْ لَغَافِلِينَ أَوْ تَقُولُوا لَوْ أَنَّا أُنزِلَ عَلَيْنَا الْكِتَابُ لَكُنَّا أَهْدَىٰ 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 verses, the answer to the question raised at the start of this section, that is, for what purpose Qur'an was revealed, is very straightforward: Because the Arabs did not have a warner before and they could argue that why there were revelations for the two communities of Jews and Christians in the past but not for them. We can understand from another verse of the Qur'an (2:129) that the revelation of the Qur'an to the Arabs was also to fulfill the prayer of prophets Abraham and Ishmael (pbuh):

رَبَّنَا وَابْعَثْ فِيهِمْ رَسُولًا مِنْهُمْ يَتْلُو عَلَيْهِمْ آيَاتِكَ وَيُعَلِّمُهُمُ الْكِتَابَ وَالْحِكْمَةَ وَيُزَكِّيهِمْ إِنَّكَ أَنْتَ الْعَزِيزُ الْحَكِيمُ

Our Lord! and raise up in them a Messenger from among them who shall recite to them your revelations and teach them the Book and the wisdom, and purify them Surely You are the Mighty, the Wise (2:129)

In this way, together, the above group of verses shatters 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, unlike their 'cousins' from Bani Israel who had many warners. This was also fulfilling the prayer of Abraham and Ishmael (pbuh).

It is very important to note the following point:

- This does not mean that the Qur'an did not have functions other than warning and guiding the Arabs. I refer to verses later in this article that make it clear that the Qur'an also had an important function for the People of the Book in Arabia at the time as well. There is however a tremendous difference between 'the purpose or reason for revelation' and 'different functions when revealed'.
- This does not mean that the Qur'an cannot be the book of guidance for non-Arabs. Again, I will discuss later in this article that the Qur'an indeed can be a guide for any individual, Arab or not. However again there is a difference between 'who the Book was intended for' and 'who can benefit from the book'.

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

But why did God not send the Prophet (pbuh) for all human beings? The 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 وَلكلِّ قَوْمٍ هَادٍ

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

إِنَّا أَرْسَلْنَاكَ بِالْحَقِّ بَشِيرًا وَنَذِيرًا وَإِن مِّن 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 رَّسُولٌ فَإِذَا جَاءَ رَسُولُهُمْ قَضَىٰ بَيْنَهُمْ بِأَقْسَطِ أَعْيُنِهِمْ لَآ يَظْلُمُونَ

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)

وَلَقَدْ بَعَثْنَا فِي كُلِّ أُمَّةٍ رَّسُولًا ...

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 the descendants of Abraham (Bani Israel and then Bani Ishmael) who were in charge of preaching to the rest of the world. Such a major change in divine policy however is not explicitly referred to in the Qur'an and is only a heavily opinionbased interpretation. This also does not seem to be in line with the tone of the above verses.

The Prophet (pbuh) was sent about 2500 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 about two and half millenniums ago seems pointless.

There can be scholarly discussions on the difference between *rasul* (messenger) and *had* (guide) and *nabi* (Prophet). 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 this by using the generic word *hād* (guide).

Still, a question may be asked, that why would God not send one guide for all nations but instead 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)

فَإِنَّمَا يَسِرْنَآهُ بِلِسَانِكَ لَعَلَّهُمْ يَتَذَكَّرُونَ

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

فَإِنَّمَا يَسِرْنَآهُ بِلِسَانِكَ لَتُبَشِّرَ بِهِ الْمُتَّقِينَ وَتُنذِرَ بِهِ قَوْمًا لَّدَا

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 رَّسُولٍ 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 فِصَّلَتْ آيَاتُهُ ءَاعْجَمِيٌّ 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 guidance to be understood 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 understood and 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:

ولو نزلناه على بعض الأعجميين فقرأه عليهم ما كانوا بة مؤمنين

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 لولا فصلت آياته ءاعجميٌّ وَعَرَبِيٌّ (*why are its verses not clear, a non-Arabic book and Arab addressees?*) a non-Arab too in such a situation could say in his own language something to the effect of لولا فصلت آياته أعرابيٌّ وَعَجْمِيٌّ (*why are its verses 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 classical 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 مِنْكُمْ يَتْلُو عَلَيْكُمْ آيَاتِنَا وَيُزَكِّيكُمْ وَيُعَلِّمُكُمُ الْكِتَابَ وَالْحِكْمَةَ وَيُعَلِّمُكُم مَّا لَمْ تَكُونُوا تَعْلَمُونَ

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 مِنْ أَنْفُسِكُمْ عَزِيزٌ عَلَيْهِ مَا عَنِتُّمْ حَرِيصٌ عَلَيْكُمْ بِالْمُؤْمِنِينَ رَءُوفٌ رَحِيمٌ

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 و سلم رجلا اجنبيا يرسله الله للوعظ، و لكنه الثمرة البانعة من شجرة فطرتهم؛ نشأ من جرثومهم، و تربى فيهم من بين غيهم و رشدهم ...

However the descendants 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 of 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 Mouhammad Hussain Tabataba'i and Amin Ahsan Islahi, 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 the inseparability of warning and guiding functions of the Qur'an, I have no rational problems with the argument that the Qur'an can be a 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.

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 يَتَّخِذُوا مِن دُونِي وَكِيلاً

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 تَكُن فِي مِرْيَةٍ مِّن لِّقَائِهِ 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 was supposed to follow the shari'ah of Bani Israel before coming of the prophet of Islam (pbuh), or that Jews were guilty due to not preaching their shari'ah to the world and due to considering it only their own obligation.

A curious mind may now develop a further question. Such diversity surely results in differences in the paths in a God-conscious life. Is this going to be a problem or has the Qur'an already appreciated and approved of such differences? The next section provides an 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 مَنْسَكًا هُم نَاسِبُوهُ فَلَإِ يَنَازِعُكَ فِيهِ الْأَمْرَ وَ ادْعُ 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 has its own ritual. A 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):

وَ لِكُلِّ وِجْهَةٍ هُوَ مُّوَلِّيٰهَا 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, the 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, footnote 123, 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.

Some may argue that the above verses are referring to the historical evolution of revelation, that is, throughout 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:

وَكَيْفَ يَحْكُمُونَكَ وَعِنْدَهُمُ التَّوْرَةُ فِيهَا حُكْمُ اللَّهِ ثُمَّ يَتَوَلَّوْنَ مِنْ بَعْدِ ذَلِكَ وَمَا أَوْلَاكَ 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)

وَلِيَحْكُمَ أَهْلَ الْأَنْجِيلِ بِمَا أَنْزَلَ اللَّهُ فِيهِ وَمَنْ لَمْ يَحْكَمْ بِمَا أَنْزَلَ اللَّهُ فَأُولَٰئِكَ 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 offer a ruling 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 questioning 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) the Injil. I am very well aware of the background of these verses (*sha'in al-nuzul*) as narrated in many books of tafsir. These background stories indicate that Jews (in particular) had dishonest intentions in seeking a ruling from the Prophet (pbuh). I do not deny this. However no amount of deliberation on the background story can change or neutralise the core message of these verses. These verses do not say that People of the Book in Arabia should be honest when they seek a ruling from the Prophet (pbuh). Rather the verses explicitly instruct People of the Book to follow their own shari'ah instead of seeking an answer from the shari'ah that was brought by the Prophet (pbuh). How is it possible to argue that the people of the book were supposed to abandon their shari'ah and follow the shari'ah of Islam, when these verses (revealed near the end of the life of the Prophet – pbuh) give a categorically different instruction?

Note that the above verses are in the chapter of Ma'idah, the last or one of the last chapters revealed. By the time that Ma'idah was revealed, *itmam al-hujjah* (the 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 because of 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 an 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. If this was not the case then the verse was asking the Jews an impossible task. The same can be said about Christians (or Nasara if we want to be very specific), given that the laws of the Torah were equally applicable to them unless they were revised by the Injil.

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 مَآءَاتِكُمْ فَأَسْتَبِقُوا 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 the 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 makes it clear that God never wanted everyone to follow the same shari'ah (the verses quoted in section 2.2.2. revealed what the reason was). The expression *فَأَسْتَبِقُوا الْخَيْرَاتِ* (*hasten towards goodness*) can only find its true and relevant meaning when the above point is appreciated. The addressees of *فَأَسْتَبِقُوا الْخَيْرَاتِ* are not just Muslims, they are 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 *فَأَسْتَبِقُوا 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 universally applicable criteria for success in the hereafter:

إِنَّ الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا وَالَّذِينَ هَادُوا وَالصَّابِئُونَ وَالنَّصْرَىٰ مَنْ آمَنَ بِأَنَّ اللَّهَ وَالْيَوْمَ الْآخِرَ 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 verse 2:62) has put many traditional scholars in a difficult position, prompting them to come up with a variety of justifications and interpretations to explain or in fact 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 it does affect is what these groups have in common, which is belief in God and the hereafter and in doing righteous things.

It is then in the light of the above verses on the 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 جِئْنَا 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, very similar verse is verse 4:41)

يَوْمَ نَدْعُوا كُلَّ أُنَاسٍ بِإِمَامِهِمْ فَمَنْ أُوْتِيَ كِتَابَهُ بِيَمِينِهِ فَأُولَئِكَ يَقْرَءُونَ كِتَابَهُمْ وَ لَا يَظْلُمُونَ 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)

(Another relevant verse is verse 45:28 however because the popular interpretation of the word *kitab* in this verse is not what I believe it means, I have skipped this verse to avoid unnecessary debate.)

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 on the day of judgement. The Prophet (pbuh) is going to be witness on *ha'ula* ('these') which can only mean the people in Arabia to whom he was sent (as clarified in the previously quoted verses of 3:164, 9:128 and the quoted verses in section 2.2.1). This means the Prophet (pbuh) would not even be a witness to (say) the Persians of his time, let alone to those non-Muslims who were on the face of the earth after him. In fact, one may even argue that based on the aforementioned verses (5:109 and 5:117), the Prophet (pbuh) is not going to be witness to those Muslims who came after his era. This is a point that needs deliberation and elaboration in another writing. Here I will take a pause for a brief but important supplementary note on the shari'ah:

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 would need additional writing which would prolong this article. However since this view of 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 acknowledged, 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, 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, using this terminology, inline with its usage in the Qur’an, refers to a religious path that leads to that spiritual purification that is the goal of religion. The 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 Ghamidi 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 changing 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 evolution of civilisations, particularly due to the age of technology and knowledge management during the last twenty years has significantly accelerated the rate of change. The passing of a long period of time during the medieval era brought much less change in societies compared to the passing of a much shorter period in our modern age. We know that due to 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 remain as the best system of rule forever?

The evolution of the form of the shari’ah happened even as it was revealed at the time of the Prophet (pbuh). This refers to the concept of abrogation. This evolution or change in the form of the shari’ah kept happening at the time of the first four Caliphs of Islam. I do appreciate that the changes made were minor and one may argue that they were only pragmatic adjustments in the application of the law. However it is important to note that such (perceived as) minor changes, happening only a few years after the end of revelation of the Qur’an (that is the death of the Prophet – pbuh), are in fact the seeds and clues to acknowledge that the form of the shari’ah was not meant to be set in stone. 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 reason 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 forever, do recognise 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 one’s wife to be appropriate anymore. The only thing is that they do not call this, ‘change or evolution 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 have 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 meant as temporary instructions 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) and therefore these practices had a

divine origin. 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 norms and laws 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. I argue that it is in contradiction with the Wisdom of God to provide a society with a set of laws that is not in line with the norms and the specific socio-economic conditions of that society. 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 clarify the instructions of the Qur'an about the rulings pertaining to riba, halal meat, marriage with non-Muslims and zakah).

Now, 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 gives us more insights into the subjectivity of the form of the shari'ah. To understand this better, in the impossible imaginary scenario in which a Prophet today would be sent to, for example, the United Kingdom, then the same process can be expected to happen. This means, the social shari'ah that would be brought to the United Kingdom would be based upon what is already in the British civil law. Changes would be applied only in the areas that needed improvement in terms of justice and piety (to serve the goal of the shari'ah, which is purification).

In other words, the form of the shari'ah never interfered where the 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 fulfill 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)

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 as social conditions and norms do not normally relate to the rituals of worship.

Therefore at any time, if Muslim intellectuals come to an agreement that there is an overwhelming need for 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 an interest in implementing the shari'ah, some of the rules pertaining to the 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 to change or not is to be taken by the consensus of a council of local scholars in each Muslim country and it is not the job of one individual, and certainly it is 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 original 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 at very different understandings regarding 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 (*akhlaq*) which includes believing in one God when convinced about it.

In section 2.2.3 I argued based on the explicit verses of the Qur'an that God has appreciated the existence of different religious paths at a same time/era 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 two questions here:

- Does this mean that People of the Book in Arabia, even after knowing the truth of the message of the Prophet (pbuh), could remain non-Muslim (i.e. following their own shari'ah) and yet be successful in the hereafter?
- If the issue was not to technically convert to Islam by leaving their own shari'ah, then what was the Qur'an expecting from the People of the Book in Arabia at the time and for what reason were they so seriously criticised in the Qur'an?

The answer to the above two inquiries is discussed in the next section.

2.2.4. Verses that gave glad tidings to the righteous among the People of the Book despite not being Muslims

No doubt the Qur'an has criticised the people of the Book, specifically those 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 is there even an implicit indication that they have converted or they will convert to become Muslims or that this is expected from them or even preferred. Note that in the terminology of the Qur'an the expression 'People of the Book' refers to people who at the time were either Jewish or a Christian (Nasara to be more specific).

ليسوا سواً من أهل الكتاب أمة قائمة يتلون آيات الله أناء الليل وهم يسجدون يؤمنون بالله واليوم الآخر ويأمرون بالمعروف

They are not the same, from among the People of the Book there are people who are upright (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)

وَإِنْ مِنْ أَهْلِ الْكِتَابِ لَمَنْ يُؤْمِنُ بِاللَّهِ وَ مَا أَنْزَلَ إِلَيْكُمْ وَمَا أَنْزَلَ إِلَيْهِمْ خَاشِعِينَ لِلَّهِ لَا يَشْتُرُونَ بِآيَاتِ اللَّهِ ثَمَنًا 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 sell God's verses for a 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 تُوْمِنُونَ بِاللَّهِ وَ لَوْ آمَنَ أَهْلُ الْكِتَابِ لَكَانَ خَيْرًا لَهُمْ مِنْهُمُ الْمُؤْمِنُونَ وَ أَكْثَرُهُمُ 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 is no mention of them converting 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 as one of the People of the Book in the terminology of the Qur'an. I am not aware of any scholar of the Qur'an who would disagree with this.

Verse 5:82 makes this even clearer:

لَتَجِدَنَّ أَشَدَّ النَّاسِ عَدَاوَةً لِلَّذِينَ آمَنُوا الْيَهُودَ وَ الَّذِينَ أَشْرَكُوا وَ لَتَجِدَنَّ أَقْرَبَهُمْ مَوَدَّةً لِلَّذِينَ آمَنُوا الَّذِينَ قَالُوا إِنَّا نَصَارَى ذَلِكَ بِأَنَّ مِنْهُمْ قِسِيَسِينَ وَ رُهْبَانًا وَ أَنَّهُمْ لَا يَسْتَكْبِرُونَ وَ إِذَا سَمِعُوا مَا أَنْزَلَ إِلَى الرَّسُولِ تَرَى أَعْيُنَهُمْ تَفِيضُ مِنَ الدَّمْعِ مِمَّا عَرَفُوا مِنَ الْحَقِّ يَقُولُونَ رَبَّنَا آمَنَّا فَاكْتُبْنَا مَعَ الشَّاهِدِينَ وَ مَا لَنَا لَا نُؤْمِنُ بِاللَّهِ وَ مَا جَاءَنَا مِنَ الْحَقِّ وَ نَطْمَعُ أَنْ يَدْخُلَنَا رَبَّنَا مَعَ الْقَوْمِ الصَّالِحِينَ فَاتَّبِعْهُمْ أَلَّا اللَّهُ بِمَا قَالُوا جَنَّاتٍ تَجْرِي مِنْ تَحْتِهَا أَنْهَارٌ خَالِدِينَ فِيهَا ذَلِكَ 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 is 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 in 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, they have realized *itmam al-hujjah*
- 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. Note Nasara does not refer to a race, it refers to a branch of what we know today as Christianity.
- 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 Christian while knowing the truth about the Prophet (pbuh) and then go to heaven in the hereafter, then why could this not be the case for the righteous Christians and in fact righteous among any religious groups of 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 the 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 success in the hereafter 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 obligatory nor preferable.

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. If as discussed above every nation is supposed to have its own path and (where applies) shari'ah, then why were the People of the Book told to believe in the Prophet (pbuh)?'

This question is based on an assumption that, to 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. As a side argument, a study of verses 72:1, 2 would be helpful. The verses inform us that a group of Jinns said they believed in the Qur'an. So does this then mean that this group of Jinns converted to Islam and followed the shari'ah of Islam?! This again shows that believing in the Qur'an and the Prophet (pbuh) does not necessarily require one to become a Muslim by converting to Islam.

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 Qur'an's main criticism of the People of the Book in Arabia is for the following issues (this is not an exhaustive list): 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 a 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 in and around Medina started to display jealousy, contempt and enmity towards them and the person of the Prophet (pbuh). In doing so they would even ignite and equip the polytheists of the Quraysh with their counter-narratives against Islam and the Prophet and would encourage them to physically attack Muslims.

In reality, all that the People of the Book were asked to do was to stop all this enmity and also to take the opportunity that materialised in the land they were living at (that is the emergence of a Prophet – pbuh – from the lineage of Abraham – pbuh) in order to correct their false beliefs and practices.

Accordingly, in no way am I trying to argue that the 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, the descendants of Abraham (pbuh). How is it possible for a community to ignore a Prophet that has come to their 'cousin community'? If I want to illustrate this with an example, it is as if you were in the presence of the teacher of another class in your school. Although he is not your teacher, you would not want to lose the opportunity to correct any mistakes in your understandings or ask for any clarifications. The emergence of a Prophet from among the cousins of Bani Israel was indeed 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 is 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 the (emergence of) messengers lest you should say, no bearer of good news or warner came to us. So indeed a bearer of good news and a warner has 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 of the Prophet (pbuh). However, as verses in this section and earlier sections clarify, warning the People of the Book was not aimed at making 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 incorrect 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, instead of being thankful for the opportunity to correct themselves, the emergence of a Prophet in Arabia ignited enmity and more disobedience in them.

Note the following verse:

قل يا أهل الكتاب لستم على شيء حتى تقيموا التوراة والإنجيل وما أنزل إليكم من ربكم ولا يزيدن كثير منهم ما أنزل إليك من ربك طغياناً وكُفراً فلا تأسن على القوم الكافرين

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. In fact, any 'person of the book' who decides to adhere to the Qur'an will be directed by the Qur'an Itself to follow the shari'ah of his/her own original religion (5:43, 47, 48 and any other verses listed earlier that give glad news to the People of the Book without demanding that they follow the shari'ah of the Qur'an). Whether this person then decides to follow the shari'ah of the Qur'an instead, is his/her own choice.

Like the above, all the other verses of the Qur'an that instruct People of the Book to believe in the Qur'an and the messenger (pbuh), praises those among them who do so and condemns those who do not do so, follow the same concept. That is: the People of the Book in Arabia at the time are told to stop enmity towards the Prophet (pbuh) and Muslims, and to support them, while at the same time making use of the opportunity to correct their erroneous beliefs and practices.

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 الحنيفية في اولاد اسماعيل (ع) واما بغير ذرية اسماعيل (ع) 3- فلاقامه القسط، و رفع الفساد عن الارض. فلا اكراه في الدين لاهل الكتاب، و لكل من ليس من ذرية اسماعيل، و عليهم الجزية.

و اما ذرية 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 the Ka'bah, then 2. to bring the Abrahamic religion (hanifiyya) of Abraham to the generation of Ishmael (pbuh), as for those who were not the descendants 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 descendants 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

The Qur'an refers to all the prophets and their followers as muslims (e.g. verses 2:133, 3:52, 5:111, 10:90, 12:101). In most instances the word 'islam' and its derivatives (like muslim) in the Qur'an have been used in their literal (submission and its derivatives) rather than their conventional meaning. This includes the famous verse of 3:85 that indicates that God only accepts the religion of islam (submission). A quick browse through some of the other verses in the same sura can help to understand what 'islam' means in verse 3:85. Verse 3:19 considers the People of the Book to be in principle the followers of islam, a few verses later, at 3:67, Ibrahim is referred to as a muslim, then in 3:80 word *muslimun* (plural of muslim) is used generally for the followers of prophets. Interestingly enough in 3:83, submission is referred to as the way of all creatures. Verse 3:84 again uses the word *muslimun* in its literal meaning (those who submit). Then as a follow up to verse 3:84 and in line with all the previously mentioned verses, verse 3:85 comes. The verse therefore should be interpreted as follows: "and whoever follows a path other than submission this will not be accepted from that person and in the hereafter that person will be among the losers".

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 frequently (submission to God, which in its generic and abstract meaning will be submission to the truth, or to be more precise, submission to what the person is genuinely convinced to be the truth). Islam (with a 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.

Note that in this article such a distinction in writing has not been applied to avoid confusion. 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 and abstract essence is in fact 'acting based on honest conviction'. This is what can save even those who may have a false understanding of the truth (look at verse 5:119 and in line with this, verses like 2:286 and 23:62).

Of course this does not excuse someone from failing to correct a false belief. When such an opportunity arrives, not taking it will be against 'acting on honest conviction'.

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 non-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 are summarised as follows:

- The Qur'an, as the most authentic revealed divine guide, remains as the criteria for truth and falsehood 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, unconditional, infinite 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 the 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 an overarching message overarching 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/her book of guidance, for a similar cause.

The most important thing, however, is that based on the verses that were discussed earlier, the General Universality of the Qur'an is not one of the purposes of the revelation of the Qur'an. The General Universality of the Qur'an is one of the functions of the Qur'an.

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

The scenario that the above analysis provides is very different from the popular traditional 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 vis 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 was given its own guide to provide 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 the ultimate truth (which is known as the One God by most faiths) 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 and unrighteous deeds. Of course if a non-Muslim wishes to convert to Islam then a Muslim should help him/her with that.

Principle Four: The Chosen Communities

The two communities of Bani Israel and *Ummi'in* (otherwise known as Bani Ishmael) have been particularly blessed by the Almighty. Bani Israel was 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 being given 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 as chosen nations and to remain practical illustrations of monotheist God-conscious communities. Any other people who by choice or by birth have entered the same covenant will also enjoy the same privilege. Everyone is expected to follow the obvious rules of morality. Human beings in principle do not need any external guidance to recognise what is moral. Their nature is predisposed to recognise this. Nevertheless there are also references to some of the main moral principles in religious sources. This includes what is known as Noahic rules in the Biblical literature. These are also referred to with minor differences in the Qur'an, e.g. 17:22-39. Not attributing partners with God is included in these rules. This is because once a person believes in God, then attributing partners with God will go against morality in that person's relationship with God.

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 societies evolve or change. This mostly applies to non-worship shari'ah.

Principle Seven: The Advantage of the Qur'an:

The message of monotheism, the hereafter and righteousness in the Qur'an is universal. This includes the wisdom behind the 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 criteria for recognising truth and falsehood in other religions and ideologies.

By way of discussions and questions and answer sessions that I had after publishing the first version of this article, I realised that some of the questions and discussions were based on assumptions that I did not agree with. In fact I was in discussion with some individuals who in principle had appreciated my viewpoint and conclusions however due to these assumptions they had encountered conflicts in their understanding. What I noticed was that after an initial reading of the above seven principles a vacuum would emerge in the mind of those who held such traditionally inherited assumptions. The following supplementary note is a very brief insert to revise these assumptions:

A supplementary note: Revising Traditional Assumptions on God's guidance and revelation

To avoid making this article much longer than what it already is, and to keep discussion focused, I only write here very briefly with the hope to elaborate on this in the future:

I. The Guidance of God is Not Limited to Revelation:

- God's guidance does not come only through prophets and messengers. Rationality is a God-given gift that is the main source of guidance for human beings.
- It is rationality that convinces a community that a Prophet has been sent to them, and after the demise of that Prophet, it is again rationality that is used to interpret, utilise and apply the teachings of that Prophet. When people misinterpret and misuse religious guidance that is because they have interpreted it in an irrational way.
- Rationality therefore is not a 'competitor' to God's revelation. Rationality itself is a revealed resource for human beings (some say it is the *amanah*, trust, that verse 33:72 refers to while some say it closely links to it).
- It seems to be a false understanding that every nation must have a divinely appointed guide. The Qur'an only says that every community (*ummah*) has a messenger (10:47). In the terminology of the Qur'an *ummah* normally refers to a chosen nation, not all nations. Also, history does not seem to show the emergence of messengers among other than Abrahamic nations. The Qur'an however says in 13:7 that every nation has a guide. If the word 'Kull' (every) in this verse can be interpreted literally (that is each and every nation), then my current understanding is that Imam Tabari is correct in explaining this word in the verse. He argues that this guide does not need to be divinely appointed (i.e. Prophet in its technical sense), and that it can simply be a normal religious leader or preacher (Tabari: vol. 13, p.72).
- It is incorrect to think that if God does not send a Prophet to a nation that nation is left out from the guidance of the Almighty. Rationality is that guidance that the Almighty has provided to all nations. History shows us that without a guided Prophet, nations can still show signs of piety, but without rationality, even nations with a guided Prophet can show signs of evil.

II. The Judgement of God is Not Based on Who Got It Right:

- At the time of a messenger, as the result of the preaching of the messenger under the guidance of the Almighty, the evidence for the truth (*hujjah*) will become crystal clear for the immediate addressees of the messenger (*itmam al-hujjah*). This is why this particular community will have their messenger as their witness in this world and the hereafter.
- During 'normal' times, due to the evidence for the truth not necessarily being crystal clear, people may by honest mistake hold false beliefs.
- In the hereafter God does not judge people based on whether they got it right or not. He will judge them based on whether they followed their honest conviction (5:119, 2:286).
- This (submitting to what is found to be the *hujjah*) is the core concept of islam. Submission to honest understanding (even if it is wrong) is islam in its abstract form. When this *hujjah* is found correctly and accurately, then submitting to it means submitting to God.

III. The Pragmatic Sunnah of God's Guidance:

- Much of the criticism of the Qur'an on false beliefs is emphasising the practical consequences of such beliefs (e.g. Trinity: be Christian and you will be safe; Shirk: evil acts in the name of gods, etc.).

- When it comes to criteria for success, the Qur'an emphasises the practical outcomes of beliefs rather than theoretical framework of beliefs (e.g. acknowledging Jews, Nasara and Sabi'in as religious groups).
- In the absence of a Prophet of God, it is perfectly possible that a person holds a false belief while honestly thinking that it is the correct belief. Based on the concept of *itmam al-hujjah*, as derived from the Qur'an, it can be argued that as long as this false belief does not lead to evil deeds such person will be religiously forgiven.
- Unlike false beliefs, in normal circumstances it is less likely that a person commits evil deeds while honestly believing that what he/she is doing is a righteous deed.
- Accordingly, at our time while an opportunity for correcting a false belief should definitely be taken, the main emphasis of a religious person should be on correcting evil deeds.

IV. Revelation is a Humanised Reflection of the Divine:

- Human beings are not capable of fully understanding the divine. The revelation has to formulate itself in a form that is understandable by a human being.
- Every revelation/inspiration therefore is a reflection of the truth, and not the exact (pure) or the whole truth. This reflection is tailored to suit the cultural and cognitive profile of its local addressees.
- Similarly, religious rules that relate to the social sphere of life were revealed in a way that they were suited for the time and location.

Therefore:

- A religious concept may be an authentic reflection of the truth but it is never the exact or the whole truth.
- Not all religious laws can be considered to be permanent.

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. There are of course verses of the Qur'an that are referred to by the traditional understanding to support their view on Specific Universality of the Qur'an. I have already discussed one of these verses, that is 3:85, in the supplementary note on Islam vis a vis islam. There I explained what the word 'islam' meant in this verse, and this is something that is also appreciated by many scholars. In fact throughout my discussions with some of the learned scholars of the Qur'an verse 3:85 was never brought up. Instead I have seen three particular verses that are often referred to as the main evidence for the traditional view on the universality of the Qur'an.

In this section I discuss these three verses and some other similar verses. I, of course, appreciate that there are other verses of the Qur'an that the traditional view may consider to be evidence for their views on Specific Universality of the Qur'an. My understanding of those other verses is on the basis of the same understanding that I am presenting for these three verses. I therefore believe by discussing these three verses I am also clarifying my views on any other verses of the Qur'an that may be brought up in favour of Specific Universality of the Qur'an. I am of course more than happy to discuss any other specific verses in future writings.

For the three verses under discussion and any other similar verses, I argue that the meaning of these verses can easily be understood by looking at them on the basis of the overall local theme of the Qur'an as well as more than 30 explicit verses that I analysed. On the other hand if anyone insists in interpreting these three verses (or any other verses) in isolation and in favour of the traditional understanding, then that person also needs to fulfill the following tasks in order to make his/her interpretation of these verses rationally convincing:

- Explain how the wording of these verses proves that the Specific Universality of the Qur'an was the intended meaning, i.e. the Qur'an was sent so that all mankind convert to Islam and follow the shari'ah of Islam
- Explain and justify the more than 30 explicit verses that, as I discussed previously, reject the scenario of the Specific Universality of the Qur'an
- Justify that why instead of interpreting these verses in light of the more than 30 verses above, the more than 30 verses need to be interpreted based on these verses
- Answer the six 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 of a verse of the Qur'an 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 there are any other verses that may be perceived as evidence for Specific Universality of the Qur'an, and my explanation of these three verses does not apply to them as well, then I will be reminded about these verses by serious critics and well-wishing readers of this article. The 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 to the conclusion that the Qur'an in its entirety and in every aspect, including Its shari'ah, is sent with the purpose of guiding all human beings on the face of the Earth. This is particularly due to the popular translation of the word in English and other languages, that is 'The Whole World' or 'All the Worlds'. The verse under discussion is as follows:

تَبَارَكَ الَّذِي نَزَّلَ الْفُرْقَانَ عَلَى عَبْدِهِ لِيَكُونَ لِلْعَالَمِينَ نَذِيرًا

Blessed the One who sent the differentiator (furqan) to his servant so that it/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 significantly 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 an argument for a time-limited '*alamin*:

يا بني إسرائيل اذكروا نعمتي التي أنعمت عليكم و أني فضلتكم على العالمين

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 was 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 لان الشخص الذي سيوجد بعد ذلك و هو ا لان ليس بوجود لم يكن ذلك الشخص من جملة العالمين حال عدمه لان 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 (pbut) 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: باركنا فيها للعالمين 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 where '*alamin* is limited by 'quantity', 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 that literally can mean 'all') is used. Here the examples are for the expression كل شيء (everything). He argues that in these two verses too, the expression that literally means 'everything' only means 'many things'.

Similarly, Jalaluddin 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 credible 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 credible 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 and linguistics are well established, the same argument can be made with a more general wording:

In almost any language, words that literally refer to a whole population can easily refer to a smaller group within that population as well when the context demands it. 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. When a person invites guests and then asks 'is everyone here', he does not mean literally 'everyone', rather, he means everyone that was supposed to be his guests that day. Similarly, in Arabic 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 to whom people say that people are gathering for (fighting) you so fear them, but this increases 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 to whom (all) people (of the world) say 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.

Many other instances of the usage of the word *nas* in the Qur'an are also for a limited group of people. Without appreciating the above point, for instance, one may consider verse 7:158 to be an indication that the Prophet (pbuh) was sent to all human beings:

قُلْ يَا أَيُّهَا النَّاسُ إِنِّي رَسُولُ اللَّهِ إِلَيْكُمْ جَمِيعاً الَّذِي لَهُ مَلَكُوتُ السَّمَاوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ لَا إِلَهَ إِلَّا هُوَ يُحْيِي وَيُمِيتُ فَأَمِنُوا بِاللَّهِ وَرَسُولِهِ النَّبِيِّ الْأُمِّيِّ الَّذِي يُؤْمِنُ بِاللَّهِ وَكَلِمَاتِهِ وَاتَّبِعُوهُ لَعَلَّكُمْ تَهْتَدُونَ

Say O People! I am a messenger of God to you all, (the God) to Whom belongs the dominion of the heavens and the earth. There is no deity but Him. He alone gives life and death. So believe in God and in His unlettered Prophet, who himself believes in God and His words and follow Him so that you may be guided. (7:158)

However, again, by seeing this verse in the light of the previously quoted explicit verses like 2:129, 6:92, 42:7, 43:44, ... it can be appreciated that people (ناس) in this verse refers to the same people in those verses, that is, people in Arabia, in particular the Arabs (note the verse is revealed in Mecca). The word 'all' (جميعاً) therefore means all the people in Arabia, not all the people on the face of Earth. The verse itself clarifies this by the use of the word 'say' (قل) and linking it with 'to you' (اليكم) which can only refer to people who due to living at the same era and same place could be addressed by the Prophet (pbuh). Also the word 'unlettered' (الامى) refers to a feature of the Prophet (pbuh) that was of primary interest to the Arabs, since they were called *Ummi'in*, implying that the Prophet (pbuh) was one of their own (in line with verses 3:164 9:128).

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.

The same concept applies to the word '*alamin*' as quoted from some very creditable scholars previously mentioned. In fact from the very start, almost all scholars had to limit the scope of the meaning of '*alamin*' within a certain context. Literally '*alamin*' means the 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 there is no dispute on the very basic fact that the word '*alamin*' in the Qur'an needs to be interpreted and limited within the context. The dispute is the extent of the limitation within that context.

The following factors clearly and strongly set the context to understand what the limits of '*alamin*' in 25:1 are:

- a. The Qur'an investing in its language as a suitable language for Its addressees (12:2, 44:58, 14:4, 16:103, 19:97, 26:195,198-9, 39:28, 41:3, 41:44, 43:3, ...)
- 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 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.

Starting from point 'a', 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 a contradiction with verses that emphasise on the suitability of the language of the Qur'an for Its addressees (as listed in point 'a'). 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 person who does not understand Arabic. Note that the argument that the Qur'an can be translated is not relevant here. The point under discussion is not about whether the

Qur'an, after translation, can be understood by every person. The point is, whether the Qur'an introduces Itself as a book that has universal agenda and scope to suit all human beings or as a book that has local agenda and focus, to suit a particular group of people.

As for the second point, (b), a typical justification that is provided based on the traditional scenario of the Specific Universality of the Qur'an is that these verses are referring to different stages of the warning of the Qur'an. This means the above five verses (in point 'b' above) refer to the stage within the lifetime 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, not the Prophet (pbuh), 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 this discussion I will analyse this justification disregarding the fact that I disagree with the whole premise on which this justification is built.

The above justification has a number of problems:

- First, Verses 42:7 and 6:92 clearly inform us that not only the Qur'an warns people in Arabia, it was in fact sent for this very 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, the whole reason 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 to. This was because the 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 all of humankind? There cannot be abrogation (*naskh*) here as abrogation only applies to rulings (*ahkam*). If '*alamin* in 25:1 means all of mankind then this would 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 these two alleged stages of Qur'anic warning (i.e. warning the people in Arabia, warning the entire mankind). Elsewhere the Qur'an, when referring to different stages of the same mission, simply and logically listed 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 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 is this logical and rational way of expression not followed? If the Qur'an was revealed as the warner for the Arabs initially and then to the whole world later on, then why, unlike the above mentioned verses, are there 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 as a warning for all of mankind? The eloquence of the Qur'an demands such information be given within one verse or two linked consecutive verses. The Almighty could have simply revealed 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 worth 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 the (supposedly) global warning of the Qur'an would have come in the latter stages of the revelation (e.g. in Medina) rather than at the earlier stages. In particular it would have made much more sense if the verse about the (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 the people of Arabia.

Points 'c' and 'd' have been discussed before. In my understanding the local addressees, the overall local theme and the local sub-themes of the Qur'an are clear from both text and context in nearly every chapter of the Qur'an. Many scholars have explained and listed these local addressees and local themes in their writings. In particular it is worth browsing through the very same chapter of the Qur'an that starts with the verse under discussion, that is the chapter of alFurqan (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.

Based on the above analysis, I argue here that the word 'alamin in verse 25:1 simply means the entire population of 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. My interpretation of verse 25:1 is as follows:

تَبَارَكَ الَّذِي نَزَلَ الْفُرْقَانَ عَلَى عَبْدِهِ لِيَكُونَ لِلْعَالَمِينَ نَذِيرًا

Blessed the One who sent the differentiator (furqan) to his servant so that he becomes warner for all (in Arabia) (25:1)

It is worth noting how in verse 81:27 where it says that the Qur'an is a reminder for 'alamin, the following verse (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). This would have been more in line with the eloquence of the Qur'an.

As quoted at the end of section 2.2.2, the Qur'an similarly introduces Torah and Injil as books that were sent to guide Bani Israel. Nowhere in the Qur'an any of these books are introduced as universal books to guide the entire mankind.

The above was specifically about verse 25:1 that associates 'alamin with the very serious 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* (mercy), i.e. 21:107, or the Qur'an being a *ziker* (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 also means everyone in Arabia. I however can also appreciate that it can be argued that 'alamin in these particular verses may mean all human beings. The Qur'an, once understood and appreciated overall, can be a very effective book in reminding everyone about God and the hereafter. People can be reminded about God and the hereafter from many sources and one of the effective ones can be the Qur'an. Similarly there is no doubt that the Prophet (pbuh), like any other God-sent guide, was a mercy for mankind. I have already referred to this in section 2.3. as well as at the very start of this article. This relates to 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 of mankind. This however does not mean that all of mankind is supposed to become Muslim and follow the shari'ah of the Qur'an. That would be the Specific Universality perspective, which, as discussed above, goes 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:

... وَأَوْحِيَ إِلَيَّ هَذَا الْقُرْآنُ لِتَذَرِكُمْ بِهِ وَمَنْ بَلَغَ أَنْكُمْ لِتَشْهَدُونَ أَنْ مَعَ اللَّهِ آلِهَةٌ أُخْرَى ...

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

The argument used in the traditional viewpoint 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 all of mankind. From here they conclude that therefore whoever the Qur'an reaches is among the addressees of the Qur'an.

Almost all the reasoning that I provided in the last section about the meaning of *'alamin* in verse 25:1, also applies here and therefore I conclude that *man balagh* in verse 6:19 does not refer to all human beings and is limited to those in Arabia.

Here I only add some points that are specific to 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):

أن حقيقة معنى هذه المادة: هو الوصول الى الحد الاعلى و المرتبة المنتهى. و هذا هو الفرق بينها و بين مادة الوصول

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 *وصلت و انتهت* (reached and ended/completed) and then writes: *بالشيء: وصل إلى مراده: (balagha bi al-Shay'* means 'reached its objective') also *وتبلغ أي كفاية و بلغة و بلاغ* (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 (pbuh) 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, for the same reason.

Also the important role of the Prophet (pbuh) in communicating the message to his companions, and in a lesser 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 key result of such effective *iblah* was *itmam al-hujjah* (completing the reasoning). As learned scholars of the Qur'an have explained, it was due to *itmam al-hujjah* that the rejecters of the time were warned against punishment not only in the hereafter but also in this very world. The warning that the Qur'an refers to in verse 6:19 refers to this very warning, not warning in its general sense. The above conditions were specifically applied for the residents of Arabia, and not the whole of mankind.

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 those (in Arabia) to whom it may reach ... (6:19)

Note the verse is Macci, so 'you' (كم) in the above interpretation primarily means Quraysh, and 'whoever' (من) refers to the rest of Arabia. This nicely matches with the meaning of verse 6:92 where ام القرى و من حولها are referred to. So ام القرى (Mecca) in 6:92 matches with كُمْ (you) in 6:19, and من حولها (those around it) in 6:92 matches with مَن بَلَغَ (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. For better clarification I try to illustrate this point here:

	Verse 6:92	Verse 6:19
The intended group	<p>وَ هَذَا كِتَابٌ أَنْزَلْنَاهُ مُبَارَكٌ مُّصَدِّقٌ الَّذِي بَيْنَ يَدَيْهِ وَ لَتُنذِرَ</p> <p>And this is a Book We have revealed, with blessings, confirming what came before it and so that you warn</p>	<p>... وَ أُوحِيَ إِلَيَّ هَذَا الْقُرْآنُ لِأُنذِرَ</p> <p>And this Qur'an was revealed to me so that I</p>
The companions	<p>أم القرى</p> <p>the Mother City (Mecca)</p>	<p>كُمْ بِهِ</p> <p>warn you with it</p>
The rest of the Arabia	<p>وَ مَن حَوْلَهَا...</p> <p>and those around it ...</p>	<p>وَ مَن بَلَغَ ...</p> <p>and those who it reaches</p>

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 do appreciate that the message of the Qur'an can reach through translation as well and that there are many non-Arabic speaking individuals who have understood this message better than many Arab speaking individuals. However this is not the point under discussion here. The point is whether in verse 6:19, the phrase 'those who it reaches' intends to expand the scope of specific warning of the Qur'an to the entire mankind or if it refers to the same scope that is specified elsewhere in the Qur'an (i.e. within Arabia). My argument based on the reasons that I put forward in this and last section is that the latter is correct. The warning that any human beings may receive from the Qur'an is in a totally different category than the warning through *itmam al-hujjah* (completing the reasoning) that verse 6:19 refers to. Verse 6:19, in line with other verses of the Qur'an is referring to people within the same geographical scope.

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

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

And in this way we made you an intermediate community so that you be witnesses 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 note that there is less agreement on 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 maintaining 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 proof for the Specific Universality of the Qur'an and as proof that all of 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*).

In my understanding this interpretation is incorrect and conflicts with the logic that the verse presents. I try to explain this here:

Verse 2:143 is referring to two relationships. One is the relationship between the Prophet (pbuh) and a group that is referred in the verse as 'you' (يَكُونَ الرَّسُولُ عَلَيْكُمْ شَهِيدًا). Another one is the relationship between this same group and a population that is referred to as 'people' (لِتَكُونُوا شُهَدَاءَ عَلَى النَّاسِ).

The group in the first relationship had the Prophet (pbuh) as their witness and are directly addressed in the verse. This group therefore cannot include anyone but the companions of the Prophet (pbuh) who met the Prophet (pbuh). The Prophet was a direct witness to this group. This same group have been referred to in 22:78 as the descendants of Abraham (pbuh).

The act of 'witnessing' therefore is a direct act in the first relationship, that is, the Prophet (pbuh) was witness to the companions since he lived among them and was in interaction with them. Same concept, that is 'witnessing', is also referred to in the second relationship. Therefore in the second relationship too the act of 'witnessing' has to be a direct act. This means the companions (as a whole) too could only be witness for those who they lived among and had interaction with. The witnessed therefore could not be the entire mankind, but the rest of the people at the time in Arabia. These are the ones that the verse is referring to as *nas*. Accordingly, in my understanding the verse 2:143 should be interpreted as follows:

وَكَذَلِكَ جَعَلْنَاكُمْ أُمَّةً وَسَطًا لِتَكُونُوا شُهَدَاءَ عَلَى النَّاسِ وَ يُكُونَ 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 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 a reference to the word *shahid* (witness):

وَ يَوْمَ نَبْعَثُ فِي كُلِّ أُمَّةٍ شَهِيدًا عَلَيْهِمْ مِنْ أَنْفُسِهِمْ وَ جِئْنَا 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, very similar verse is verse 4:41)

The verse makes it clear that a witness is from the same community, and that the Prophet (pbuh) is a witness to the companions and not the entire Muslim community (this is also what Imam Razi notes in interpreting verses 4:41 and 16:89, Tafsir al-Kabir, 10:84 and 20:258). Verses 5:109 and 5:117 are also in line with this understanding.

Again the consistency and the link between verse 2:143 and verses 6:92 and 6:19 can be illustrated by expanding the table in the last section:

	Verse 6:92	Verse 6:19	Verse 2:143 (rearranged to show the link)
The intended group	<p>وَ هَذَا كِتَابٌ أَنْزَلْنَاهُ مُبَارَكٌ مُصَدِّقٌ لِّ الَّذِي بَيْنَ يَدَيْهِ وَ لِيُنذِرَ</p> <p>And this is a Book We have revealed, with blessings, confirming what came before it and so that you warn</p>	<p>... وَ أُوحِيَ إِلَيَّ هَذَا الْقُرْآنُ لِأُنذِرَ</p> <p>And this Qur'an was revealed to me so that I</p>	<p>وَ كَذَلِكَ جَعَلْنَاكُمْ أُمَّةً وَسَطًا</p> <p>And in this way me made you an intermediate community so that</p>
The companions	<p>أُمِّ الْقُرْىِ</p> <p>the Mother City (Mecca)</p>	<p>كُم بِهِ</p> <p>warn you with it</p>	<p>وَ يَكُونُ الرَّسُولُ عَلَيْكُمْ شَهِيدًا ...</p> <p>And the messenger be witness upon you</p>
The rest of the Arabia	<p>وَ مَن حَوْلَهَا ...</p> <p>and those around it ...</p>	<p>وَ مَن بَلَغَ ...</p> <p>and those who it reaches</p>	<p>لِتَكُونُوا شُهَدَاءَ عَلَى النَّاسِ</p> <p>you be witnesses upon people</p>

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, then this will be within the premises of what I referred to as General Universality of the Qur'an and it does not prove anything for what I referred to as Specific Universality. In other words, arguing that the Qur'an was sent to warn the whole of mankind and that the community of Muslims are supposed to be witnesses to the whole mankind does not necessarily lead to the conclusion that 'therefore the whole of mankind is supposed to or is expected to become Muslim by following the shari'ah of Islam'. As I discussed in section 2.2.3, the Qur'an makes it clear that every community (umma) has their own shari'ah and that every nation (qaum) has their own guide. Because of 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.

4. Summary and Conclusion

Throughout this article I have 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 whole of mankind. Rather, He sends guides for every nation, from that nation. Similarly God does not expect all of mankind to follow one religious path. He indeed allows every nation to have a religious path that best fits their own norms and culture.

Accordingly, the Qur'an never demanded all of 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 evidence 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 some of the verses that are often brought up in favour of the Specific Universality of the Qur'an and through analysis have rejected such interpretation of these verses and other similar verses of the Qur'an.

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 form of the shari'ah. These rules themselves were very much on the basis of the norms and regulations of the Arabian society at the time.

History has given other nations the opportunity to embrace Islam and to 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 does this article try to deny this advantage or to argue that such joining of other nations to *Ummi'in* should have not happened. 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 of 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. This is that islam (with lower case) that 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) is conventionally called Islam (with capital case) and the followers of this version are conventionally 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 has 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 responsibility of a Muslim's preaching should therefore be 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, adhering to universal norms of morality is the lowest-level requirement for any human being. 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.

In this way, the Qur'an becomes even more relevant and universal. The obsession with converting people to Islam, which basically means 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 many more human beings, Muslim or non-Muslim. That message is none but the message of monotheism (*tawhid*) which leads to belief in the hereafter, and its practical implication, that is doing righteous deeds and therefore becoming a pious and a highly moral person.

This article contained three supplementary notes which I think are very instrumental in clarifying my understanding. I encourage the serious readers of the article to read these notes carefully.

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 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 as sectarian as 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 on 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.

About the Author:

I have a long time passion for the subject of theology, in particular Islam, interpretation of the Qur'an and spiritual purification:

Education:

During the past 30 years I have studied Islam in four different but complementary approaches:

- Formal traditional studies: I have been studying Islam on a part time basis in the Islamic Seminary (Hauza) of Chizar (Tehran - Iran) from 1984 to 1989, during which I studied classical Arabic, Science of Logic, Principles of Jurisprudence, Jurisprudence and Intra-faith beliefs and debates.

- Self Studies: From 1989 I continued my own independent studies on Islam and Muslims. This included studying the Qur'an, Hadith, Theology (Kalam) and Islamic sects.

- Tutelage: In between 2004 to 2015, while continuing my own studies on Islam, I carried out an in-depth studying of the methodological approach of a group of scholars from the Indian sub-continent who were following the scholarly works of a genius scholar of his time, [Hamiduddin Farahi](#) (d.1930). In 2006 I continued my study of the Farahi approach, in particular the coherence of the Qur'an, its implications in interpretation (tafsir) of the Qur'an and the approach of deriving religious law from the Qur'an and the Established Sunnah under the supervision of a renowned scholar of the Qur'an and the Islamic law, Javed Ahmad Ghamidi - a pupil of one of the most respected Islamic scholars in the Sub-Continent and a commentator of the Qur'an - [Amin Ahsan Islahi](#) (d.1997) who himself was one of the two direct students of Hamiduddin Farahi. While I benefited a lot from the principles of understanding the Qur'an that I learned from these scholars and remain hugely grateful for this opportunity, my own understanding gradually developed to become significantly and fundamentally different and put me in an entirely different paradigm. This is the understanding that I am now presenting in this website.

- Formal Academic studies: In 2016 I obtained my (second) PhD in University of Edinburgh on the subject of Interpretation of the Qur'an. My PhD was on different approaches to understanding the Qur'an, aiming to systematically formulate the features of the Farahi approach in understanding Islamic concepts and rules. This was done by the use of case studies on four controversial subjects: Hijab, Stoning, Return of Jesus and Apostasy. This formal academic study also familiarised me with the thoughts and viewpoints of some of the contemporary Muslim thinkers and reformists that significantly expanded my views on Islam and religion.

Each of the above approaches to understanding Islam has provided me with a specific perspective to the subject. Each of them has encouraged me to develop a different set of skills. I am trying to apply these and obtain benefit from them in understanding the truth and in teaching and preaching what I believe to be the truth.

I have benefited extensively from great thinkers that I never met, but consider them to be my indirect teachers in studying Islam. To name a few out of many: Muhammad Hussain Tabatabayee (the author of Tafsir al-Mizan), Mahmoud Taleqani (the author of Partovi az Qur'an - a shining ray from the Qur'an), Ahmad Qabil (a contemporary Shia jurist), Fazlur Rahman (a reformist Indian - Pakistani scholar) and Hamiduddin Farahi (a scholar that to me was like a treasure who was never fully discovered and is still not fully appreciated).

In parallel with my religious studies, I have a BSc and an MSc in Industrial Engineering from Iran and a PhD in Management Science from University of Strathclyde. I have more than twenty years experience of teaching and research within the academia on this subject and am now working as a senior lecturer in Management in University of Glasgow. Despite the apparently very different two subjects (Theology and Management Science) I have found that the two are benefiting from each other. I feel that my studies in engineering and Management Science have equipped me with thinking tools that help me in my attempt to remain logical in analysis of religious subjects and in my attempt to express my religious thought in a reasonable and clear way. On the other hand I can see that my religious studies are benefiting me in improving my abstract thinking and synthesis view in Management and Management Science.

My writings in English can be found on my website: www.exploring-islam.com

