The Qur’an and tolerance: an interpretive essay on Verse 5:48

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A master narrative on the Qur’an’s attitudes toward non-Muslims dominates both classical Qur’anic exegesis and orientalist studies. During the Meccan period of revelation, according to this narrative, the Qur’an’s message is generally one of tolerance toward non-believers, whether polytheist Arabs or Jews and Christians. This position was dictated by the Muslim community’s military weakness. But when Muhammad relocated to Medina the Qur’an becomes increasingly belligerent towards non-Muslims until finally, near the end of the revelation, it commands war against polytheists until they convert and against Jews and Christians until they submit to Muslim domination. In this essay, the author challenges this master narrative by studying the evolution of Qur’anic views on tolerance. He argues that if the Qur’anic text is considered as a whole, the apparently belligerent verses emerge as limited in scope and application while an ethic of pluralism (best expressed in Q. 5:48) is consistently upheld.

Introduction

To you We sent the scripture in truth, confirming the scripture that came before it, and guarding it in safety; so judge between them by what God has revealed, and follow not their vain desires, diverging from the truth that has come to you. To each among you have We prescribed a law and an open way. If God had so willed, He would have made you a single people, but [His plan is] to test you in what He has given you: so strive as in a race in all the virtues. The goal of you all is to God; it is He that will show you the truth of the matters in which you differ. (Qur’an 5:48)

Hundreds of verses in the Qur’an relate directly or indirectly to the issue of tolerance and intolerance of systems of belief, worship, and conduct other than what it describes as ‘the religion that is with God’ (al-din ‘inda Allah) – al-Islam (3:19). Indeed, we could go so far as to say that the central ‘problem’ with which the Qur’an grapples is the presence of moral and religious diversity among human beings. Other important themes are of course developed at length in the Qur’an, including for example the existence of God, the reality of man as a creation of God, and the ultimate reckoning that each human soul will face for what it has earned in this life. But these theological and eschatological concerns are presented as cosmological givens, not problems. The problem of explaining the stubborn persistence of a diversity of faiths – even after God consistently illuminates the truth – and the proper attitude of believers toward unbelievers are Qur’anic themes requiring far greater elucidation. I begin with verse 48 from the fifth chapter (surat al-Ma’ida) because it best encapsulates, in my view, the full range of types of tolerance evoked in the Qur’an. But beyond this, the verse best crystallizes what I would consider the normative thrust of the
Qur’anic message on diversity of faith. This verse is in a sense the point of departure as well as the final word on an Islamic ethics of tolerance.

The word *tolerance* evokes a range of meanings: The minimalist sense is that of ‘putting up’ in the short term with something or someone with which one disagrees or even finds repugnant, while actively seeking over the long term to eliminate that which is tolerated. This sense may be defined as ‘hostility’. The median position would be a sort of benign neglect, born out of conviction that one’s position is superior, neutral or unaffected by contending positions. This attitude may be summarized as ‘indifference’. A more robust form of tolerance would be ‘respect’ for different positions, and perhaps even a willingness to engage with contending viewpoints, but with the conviction of one’s own superiority or truth. The maximalist position expands on the respect found in the previous definition, but with the difference that the respect is born out of acknowledgement of one’s own limited knowledge of the truth and the possibility of the equal validity of different viewpoints. In this view, contending viewpoints are not tolerated merely as necessary evils, but as necessary goods – necessary to the common pursuit of the truth.

Each of these senses of tolerance may be derived from the Qur’an. Over the past 14 centuries – indeed, contemporaneous to the Qur’anic revelation itself – Muslim exegetes and non-Muslim commentators have cited different verses to arrive at different conclusions regarding Islam’s approach to tolerance. The Qur’an provided the basis for formulating a range of ethical positions on how Muslims ought to treat the Other, and these in turn informed the creation of a web of complex social relations and institutions. Some historians and sociologists would no doubt argue for a reversal of the causation suggested above, that it was the evolution of social relations and institutions in particular patterns that resulted in particular interpretations of the Qur’an. Nevertheless, in both cases, it is the Qur’an that is the final appeal on issues of tolerance.

Taken as a whole, these exegetical exercises, polemics and controversies may leave one utterly confused and concluding that no coherent Qur’anic view is possible, that the Qur’an – like all scripture – contains material to justify whatever preconceived position the reader seeks to justify. Perhaps this is true. But the notion of tolerance suggested in Q. 5:48 is so arresting in its breadth and its self-confidence that it demands elaboration and contextualization. How does one reconcile intolerance or minimalist versions of tolerance in the face of what seems to be the maximalist ethic of this verse?

According to Islamic belief, the Qur’anic revelation unfolded over the course of the last 23 years (610–32 CE) of the prophet Muhammad’s life. During this period, the tone, content and specific audience of the message develop and change. Clearly, the verses revealed in Medina following the Prophet’s *hijra* (migration) in 622 CE bear much more on the mundane affairs of an emerging community than the Meccan verses, whose focus tends toward the life to come. But beyond this obvious difference, does the Qur’anic message itself change over time? In particular, does the Qur’anic approach to the toleration of contending belief systems change?

Most classical interpreters of the Qur’an and the vast majority of Western orientalists are agreed that the Qur’an is not consistent in its prescriptions on dealing with the Other but, rather, it is marked by internal contradictions reflecting changing circumstances as it unfolds. They offer a ‘master narrative’ that runs something like this: In Mecca, Muhammad’s activity was confined to the non-violent propagation of his message. Here, because of his military weakness, he was restricted to an ethic of tolerance that ranged from attempts at accommodation to non-violent opposition to indifference. Tolerance of this ‘intermediate’ sort is enjoined in the bulk of Qur’anic revelations from this period, which deal generally with the pagan Arabs. The Qur’an begins to shift in this attitude around the time of the *hijra*, following
years of escalating violence against the Prophet and his followers, and most importantly when it becomes apparent that the Meccan Muslims could count on the military support of the increasing number of Medinan converts. Once relocated to Medina, the Prophet is transformed from religious preacher to warrior and statesman. Jihad now assumes a violent component as the Prophet first attacks his Meccan opponents and then eliminates the recalcitrant Jews of Medina, who had proved to be a threat both religious and military.

The Qur’anic revelations of Medina reflect this steady progression toward an ethic of hostility and intolerance, leading to the two final injunctions on the subject, the ‘verse of the sword’ (ayat al-sayf, Q. 9:5) and the ‘verse on the poll-tax’ (ayat al-jizya, Q. 9:29). Because these two verses were revealed shortly before the Prophet’s death, they are held authoritative for the community henceforth. These two verses abrogate (nasakha) the hundreds of other verses on the subject of treatment of the Other revealed prior to them.

This outline requires scrutiny if we are to assess cogently the place of Q. 5:48 in the Qur’anic message on tolerance.

Tolerance in the Meccan period

According to Ibn Ishaq, one of the earliest biographers of the Prophet, Muhammad began to preach openly some three years after receiving the first revelation. The fact that he was preaching a religion somehow different from the idol-worship prevalent among the Arabs was already well known in Mecca. A small group of men and women had already declared their adherence to the new faith. Now, as the biographer writes, ‘God commanded His apostle to declare the truth of what he had received and to make known His commands to men and to call them to Him’ (Ibn Ishaq, 1990: 118).

Ibn Ishaq and other Muslim historians mention only a few Qur’anic verses as having been revealed during the first three years. These scattered verses focus on the veracity of Muhammad’s revelatory experience, that he was indeed receiving a message from the God of Creation. They also begin to outline some of the ritual, such as prayer, and the ethics of the new faith, particularly the care of the needy and indigent.

The public phase of the Prophet’s mission is signalled with the revelation of Q. 15:94: ‘So proclaim that which you are commanded, and withdraw from the polytheists.’ What was the Prophet commanded to preach? Ibn Ishaq’s account, though far from clear, leaves open the possibility that Muhammad did not at first directly challenge Arab paganism. It was only when ‘he spoke disparagingly of their gods’ that his townspeople ‘took great offence and resolved unanimously to treat him as an enemy’ (Ibn Ishaq, 1990: 118). The influential historian and exegete al-Tabari amplifies slightly on this view by relating an anecdote not found in Ibn Ishaq:

When he summoned his people to the guidance and light which had been revealed to him and for which God had sent him, they did not withdraw from him at the beginning of his preaching, and were on the point of listening to him. When, however, he spoke of their idols, some wealthy men of Quraysh who had come from al-Ta’if took exception to this and reacted strongly against him, not liking what he said. They instigated those over whom they had influence against him, and the mass of the people turned away from him and abandoned him, except for those of them whom God protected, and these were few in number. (Al-Tabari, 1988: 98)

In both sources, it is the religious motive which catalyzes the Quraysh into opposition.
When they formulated their initial complaint against Muhammad’s activity, they charged that he had ‘cursed our gods, insulted our religion, mocked our way of life and accused our forefathers of error’ (Ibn Ishaq, 1990: 119). The references to their ‘way of life’ and ancestors indicate that the leading Meccans quickly grasped that the challenge presented by the Qur’an to their polytheism was broad ranging and multifaceted. It threatened to disrupt, if not to overthrow, the prevailing economic, political and social structures of their city, structures which had been built up by their fathers and whose benefit these men were now reaping.

Once the breach between the Prophet and Quraysh had opened, Ibn Ishaq chronicles, in a somewhat disjointed fashion, a series of acrimonious encounters between Muhammad and his opponents. First, the leaders of the opposition tried to pressure the Prophet’s uncle, Abu Talib, to revoke the protection given Muhammad by his clan. When this failed, they tried to pressure Muhammad directly: ‘They stirred up against him foolish men who called him a liar, insulted him, and accused him of being a poet, a sorcerer, a diviner, and of being possessed’ (ibid.: 130). There are reports of isolated physical attacks or nearly averted attacks during this period (ibid.: 130, 135), but the majority of the abuse against the Prophet seems to have been verbal insults against his claim to being a prophet and against various aspects of the Qur’anic revelation. With regard to the latter, the attack on Arabian polytheism recurs periodically as the driving motive for opposition, as in the following vignette related by Ibn Ishaq: ‘Abu Jahl met the apostle, so I have heard, and said to him, “By God, Muhammad, you will either stop cursing our gods or we will curse the God you serve.” So God revealed concerning that, “Curse not those to whom they pray other than God lest they curse God wrongfully through lack of knowledge” [6:108]. I have been told that the apostle refrained from cursing their gods, and began to call them to Allah’ (ibid.: 162).

Other stories indicate that for some Meccans at least the Prophet’s preaching and their own beliefs did not seem entirely incompatible:

[Four] men of reputation among their people... said: ‘Muhammad, come let us worship what you worship, and you worship what we worship. You and we will combine in the matter. If what you worship is better than what we worship we will take a share of it, and if what we worship is better than what you worship, you can take a share of that.’ So God revealed concerning them, ‘Say, O disbelievers, I do not worship what you worship, and you do not worship what I worship, and I do not worship what you worship, and you do not worship what I worship; you have your religion and I have mine’ [Q. 109]. (ibid.: 165)

Realizing that they would not be able to stop the messenger, the Quraysh turned against his followers. Ibn Ishaq writes: ‘The Quraysh incited people against the companions of the apostle who had become Muslims. Every tribe fell upon the Muslims among them, beating them and seducing them from their religion’ (ibid.: 120). The worst afflicted were Muslims at the margins of Meccan society, clan members with low social standing and slaves who were outside the protection of the tribal system.

The Prophet himself was in no position to protect these vulnerable converts. He and other prominent Muslims escaped the worst physical abuse because of the fear of violating their clans’ guarantees of security. But their position was hardly secure, and the Prophet’s own uncle, Abu Lahab, had refused to join others in the Prophet’s clan to protect him. Realizing the precariousness of his followers’ condition, Muhammad directed them to seek refuge in Abyssinia, ‘for the king will not tolerate injustice and it is a friendly country, until such time as Allah shall relieve you from your distress’ (ibid.: 146). It is most likely that this
THE QUR’AN AND TOLERANCE

first hijra in Islam occurred two years after the beginning of the Prophet’s public career and five years after the first revelation (Watt, 1960: 58–59).

When the Quraysh saw that they had been tactically outmanoeuvred, they escalated their attacks upon the Prophet and the Muslims remaining in Mecca. They organized a boycott against the Prophet’s clan, prohibiting marriage with its members and all commercial dealings. The boycott continued for two or three years until it collapsed under the protests of some disenchanted Quraysh (Ibn Ishaq, 1990: 159, 172–173).

Throughout the preceding years, through all the abuse and blandishments directed against him, Muhammad remained steadfast in delivering his message of God’s unity and his warning of God’s impending judgment upon unbelievers and the sinful. This is the firmly held conviction of Muslim popular piety. But there is in some of the most influential historical sources a momentary but extremely significant exception to this view. According to these records, around the time of the imposition of the boycott an incident occurs that purportedly demonstrates the Prophet’s willingness to compromise on the fundamental issue of monotheism. This is the affair of the ‘satanic verses’, which is related by – among others – Tabari in two versions, with two different chains of transmitters but with little variation in content. We find among the transmitters of one version the name of Ibn Ishaq, although the story is not found in Ibn Hisham’s recension of Ibn Ishaq’s biography.

This episode has been highly controversial from early in Islamic history, and of course its notoriety increased recently thanks to the prominent place assigned it in Salman Rushdie’s novel of the same name. If the story is true, it is an important indication of the Prophet’s willingness to tolerate certain aspects of polytheism. This would seem ironic indeed to many people around the world for whom the Muslim uproar over Mr Rushdie’s use of the story for ‘fictitious’ literary purposes defines intolerance. Perhaps the real irony in the entire ‘Rushdie affair’ is that neither side in the modern controversy really bothered to delve into the original affair while advancing many claims allegedly based on it. For this reason, we should begin by quoting at length the story as given by Tabari before we evaluate its merits and its significance:

When the Messenger of God saw how his tribe turned their backs on him and was grieved to see them shunning the message he had brought to them from God, he longed in his soul that something would come to him from God which would reconcile him with his tribe. With his love for his tribe and his eagerness for their welfare it would have delighted him if some of the difficulties which they made for him could have been smoothed out, and he debated with himself and fervently desired such an outcome. Then God revealed [Q. 53:1–3]:

By the Star when it sets, your comrade does not err, nor is he deceived; nor does he speak out of [his own] desire . . .

and when he came to the words [Q. 53:19–20]:

Have you thought upon al-Lat and al-‘Uzza and Manat, the third, the other?

Satan cast on his tongue, because of his inner debates and what he desired to bring to his people, the words:

These are the high-flying cranes; verily their intercession is accepted with approval.
When Quraysh heard this, they rejoiced and were happy and delighted at the way in which he spoke of their gods, and listened to him, while the Muslims, having complete trust in their Prophet in respect of the messages which he brought from God, did not suspect him of error, illusion, or mistake. When he came to the prostration, having completed the surah, he prostrated himself and the Muslims did likewise, following their Prophet, trusting in the message which he had brought and following his example. Those polytheists of the Quraysh and others who were in the mosque likewise prostrated themselves because of the reference to their gods which they had heard, so that there was no one in the mosque, believer or unbeliever, who did not prostrate himself. . . . The Quraysh left delighted by the mention of their gods which they had heard, saying, ‘Muhammad has mentioned our gods in the most favourable way possible . . .’.

Tabari’s narrative continues by claiming that news of this reconciliation between the Prophet and Quraysh reached the Muslim emigrants to Abyssinia, some of whom now decided to return to their homes in Mecca. But soon Gabriel appeared to Muhammad and revealed that the verses he had uttered were of Satan’s design, not God’s. According to one version of the story, it was at this point that Q. 17:73ff, ‘And their purpose was to tempt you away from that which We had revealed to you’ was revealed by way of reproach. Muhammad was ‘much grieved and feared God greatly, but God sent down a revelation [Q. 22:52] to him, informing him that there had never been a prophet or a messenger before him who desired as he desired and wished as he wished but that Satan had cast words into his recitation, as he had cast words on Muhammad’s tongue’. God then expunged the false verses and revealed the correct continuation of the verse ending with the reference to the three goddesses:

Are yours the males and his the females? That indeed would be an unfair division!
They are but names which you have named, you and your fathers. (53:21–23)

When word spread in Mecca that the Prophet had retracted the favourable references to the goddesses, the Quraysh ‘became even more ill-disposed and more violent in their persecution of those of them who had accepted Islam and followed the Messenger of God’. The Muslims returning from Abyssinia received notice of the turmoil in Mecca, so that ‘not one of them entered Mecca without obtaining protection or entering secretly’ (Al-Tabari, 1998: 110).

The list of medieval Muslim scholars on either side of the question of this passage’s authenticity is formidable. The test of authenticity for these disputants is whether or not the chain of transmitters of the story is reliable. Verifying the isnad, or chain of transmission, was the prevalent litmus test for a report’s veracity during the classical period of Qur’anic exegesis; little concern was expressed for appraising the coherence or plausibility of the report itself. Those who accept the story as true cite at least one chain that originates with a companion of the Prophet. Those who reject it argue that all the chains of transmission are suspect because they cannot be accurately traced back to a companion and are sometimes interrupted. The gaps in the chain point, according to these critics, to the likelihood that the story was invented in the second Islamic century by zindiqs, or heretics, in the guise of sincere Muslims (see note 6).

Western orientalists have joined the fray by laying heavy emphasis on the story as a prime example of Muhammad’s personal struggle to define his prophetic mission. Invariably, their position as to the veracity of the tale boils down to the conclusion, expressed by
Maxime Rodinson, that it ‘may reasonably be accepted as true because the makers of Muslim tradition would never have invented a story with such damaging implications for the revelation as a whole’ (Rodinson, 1974: 106).

Naturally, and in large part because of the polemical use of the incident in orientalist writings, modern Muslim authors have felt compelled to devote significant attention to debunking the entire episode. Muhammad Haykal, for example, opens his discussion by decrying the repetition ad nauseam of the tale by orientalists such as William Muir (Haykal, 1976: 105). But the attention devoted to the story also reflects a keen awareness of the broader implications for Muslim faith if the story were true. As Abu'l A'la Mawdudi describes the problem, ‘It is easier for a believer to accept that it was the narrators of the report who were misled by Satan rather than to believe that the Prophet (peace be upon him) was so misguided that he added anything, however insignificant, to the text of the Qur'an’ (Mawdudi, 1988, vol. 6: 58–59). If the Prophet could confuse the words of Satan for those of Gabriel on this occasion and on this fundamental point, then why not on other, less significant points as well?

Haykal and Mawdudi offer us a list of arguments aimed at proving the falsity of the entire story. Unlike their medieval counterparts, their focus is upon the content of the story itself, not upon its narrators. Their critique includes the fact that the story varies in particulars from account to account, that the verse allegedly interpolated by the Prophet violates the linguistic and thematic flow of the *sura*, and that the verses abrogating the interpolated verse are to be found nowhere in or near *surat al-najm* (Q. 53), but in other *suras* revealed five or six years later (see Haykal, 1976: 107–114; Mawdudi, 1988, vol. 6: 55–60). These points have merits, but they are hardly conclusive refutations of the story. Differing accounts of events related to the Prophet’s life and to the occasions of Qur’anic revelation are common. Not all Qur’anic verses grouped into individual *suras* date from the same time, and it is possible that Q. 17:73–75 and 22:52–54 do indeed relate to 53:19–23, as held by some of the earliest traditionists. Finally, the fact that praise of the goddesses is incongruous to the verses of Q. 53:19–23 as they presently read may be explained according to the version of the story which has the Prophet stopping after reciting the false verses, only to have these two later removed by God and replaced by the existing ones.

The more cogent criticism of the story, in my opinion, is the one that relates this episode to our subject of tolerance. The story of the satanic verses is implausible because it is completely opposed to the entire Qur’an and to all other reports on the attitude and behaviour of the Prophet during the Meccan period. From an early point in the revelation, the Qur’an is unwavering in its central proposition, that God is unique, that ‘he begets not, nor is he begotten, and there is none that can compare to him’ (112:3–4). These final lines of *surat al-ikhlas* are dated by both Nöldeke-Schwally and the editors of the 1924 standard Cairo edition of the Qur’an to the early Meccan period, although there is a discrepancy between the two in the relative ordering of this clear proclamation of God’s unity and *surat al-najm.* Whereas traditional Muslim sources (upon which the Cairo edition draws) list the former as chronologically preceding the latter, Nöldeke-Schwally place *surat al-najm* before *surat al-ikhlas*. We should note that in doing so they depart from the ordering of other orientalists, such as J. M. Rodwell and William Muir, and for reasons that are not well spelled out.

The most elaborate defence for the argument that the affair of the satanic verses occurred relatively early in the Prophet’s career, prior to the full development of Islamic monotheism (*tawhid*), comes from Montgomery Watt. In looking at the earliest Qur’anic verses, Watt notices a ‘surprising’ lack of ‘mention of the unity of God’. He has a problem, however, in Q. 51:51, ‘And make not another an object of worship with God’, a verse in a
surah which even Noldeke-Schwally place prior to surat al-najm. Watt, citing Richard Bell, suggests not very satisfactorily that this verse is ‘probably a later addition’. Finally, he has to concede that ‘there is, of course, in the early passages of our list nothing contrary to the doctrine of God’s unity. What is interesting and important is that there is no stress laid on this doctrine and no denunciation of idolatry’ (Watt, 1960: 64).

Two points need to be made in response: First, even though the principle of tawhid is not explicitly or repetitively developed in the earliest verses, it certainly forms the subtext of the entire Meccan period up to the affair of the satanic verses, one that can hardly be missed by even the casual reader. Second, even the Muslim sources agree that condemnation of idolatry was not part of the message in the first three years of the Prophet’s activities, but that once the Prophet began his public preaching, it was his unequivocal condemnation of idolatry that moved Quraysh into bitter opposition. So if we are to accept the veracity of the satanic verses episode, we must attribute to the Prophet a volte-face after having already endured three or four years of intense pressure.

The problem may be solved by moving the incident up in time to the early part of the Prophet’s career. Watt suggests the possibility that the break with Quraysh, and in particular the vehement opposition of certain Quraysh from Ta’if mentioned in Tabari’s account cited above, is somehow related to the abrogation of the satanic verses. According to this view, Muhammad recited the verses initially because affirmation of the intercessionary powers of the three goddesses did not seem to him to compromise his still vague notion of Allah’s divinity. The three goddesses were known to the pagan Arabs as ‘daughters of Allah’, and the Prophet may have felt at this time that their acknowledgement could be accommodated with the existence of other supernatural beings, such as angels, without violating the notion of Allah’s supremacy. Later (the Muslim sources are not clear as to when the abrogation occurred), when he realized the true implications of his compromise for the principle of monotheism, Muhammad retracted the verses and launched his most pointed attacks against idol worship. It was only after this ‘flip-flop’, Watt suggests, that Muhammad incurred the wrath of Quraysh, particularly those who had commercial interests in the nearby town of Ta’if, the location of the shrine of al-Lat (Watt, 1960: 106–107).

This scenario is intriguing, but even Watt deems it unlikely (Watt, 1960: 101). All the Muslim accounts place the affair of the satanic verses near the middle of the Meccan period. Both Ibn Ishaq and Tabari put the story after the emigration to Abyssinia and immediately after the beginning of the boycott against Banu Hashim. The latter event then provides the implicit motive for the Prophet’s concession, namely that he felt grieved over his people’s condition and sought a resolution with his opponents. As news of the reconciliation reached the Muslims in Abyssinia, they hastily prepared to return to their home. Therefore, if the story is to have internal coherence, the events must take place long after the beginning of the Prophet’s mission and following protracted opposition during which he refused any accommodation.

William Muir focuses on the return of the Muslim emigrants after only three months in exile as the most convincing evidence for the story’s veracity. Why would this ‘little band’ return after such a brief interlude in Abyssinia when they had found ‘secure retreat and hospitable reception at the Najashi’s Court’ (Muir, 1923: 80)? Ibn Hisham’s recension of Ibn Ishaq mentions only briefly that the returnees had heard of the Quraysh’s acceptance of Islam (Ibn Ishaq, 1990: 167); could this not refer to the satanic verses even though Ibn Hisham’s edition does not contain the story?

To my mind, a plausible alternative explanation is provided by Muhammad Haykal, who writes that what the emigrants heard was the story of the conversion of ‘Umar b. al-Khattab. The story of ‘Umar’s conversion is given in the traditional accounts just before
the launching of the boycott against Banu Hashim. ‘Umar had been, up to his conversion, a notorious leader of the Qurayshi opposition. Thus, Haykal speculates, when word reached Abyssinia that ‘Umar had become a Muslim, the emigrants assumed that Qurayshi opposition had collapsed. This, combined with rebellion against the rule of the Negus (Najashi), prompted some Muslims to head home. Upon reaching the outskirts of Mecca, they learned the truth: that a general conversion had not taken place, but decided nevertheless to continue into the city. Infuriated by ‘Umar’s conversion and the return of the emigrants, the Qurayshi leaders decided to escalate their attack upon the Prophet by declaring the boycott. Given Haykal’s scenario, for the Prophet to have conceded after this series of favourable developments to his position in Mecca – in spite of any hardships inflicted by the boycott – makes little sense (Haykal, 1976: 108–114).

In short, whatever the relative merits of other arguments regarding the veracity of this tale, the most conclusive evidence against it is its illogic and incongruity. It asks us to accept that after years of a consistent attitude toward polytheism, the Prophet made a near-fatal retreat from his monotheism at a point when his prospects were beginning to improve.

According to the traditional narrative, it was not until shortly after the end of the boycott that the Prophet’s position in Mecca took a turn for the worse. Abu Talib, the uncle who had sheltered him for the past nine years, died. Muhammad’s clan, the Banu Hashim, now led by his ardent foe, Abu Lahab, withdrew its protection. The Prophet was forced to seek assurances of support from non-Meccan tribes, including those of the nearby city of Ta’if, where he was rebuffed. Returning to Mecca under a less than enthusiastic guarantee of security, his position remained so precarious that he continued seeking the support of tribes that visited Mecca during various commercial and religious fairs. This situation continued for another two or three years until the search bore fruit: some members of the Khazraj tribe of the northern oasis of Yathrib accepted Islam and began to preach the new faith among their townspeople. By the following year, the Yathrib Muslims had become so numerous that they returned to Mecca offering protection to Muhammad and those of his followers who chose to migrate to their city (Ibn Ishaq, 1990: 192–204).

Seeing the man they had persecuted for 12 years now finding security in another city, the Quraysh finally resolved to murder him. Their schemes were foiled, however, as Muhammad slipped out of Mecca under cover of night to join the other Muslim emigrants who had preceded him to Yathrib, which soon thereafter became known as madinat al-nabi, the ‘city of the Prophet’.

Thus far in our treatment of the traditional Muslim account, we have focused entirely on the Arab polytheists as the object of the Qur’an’s concern. Indeed, the traditional historical sources make little mention of other religious groups throughout the Meccan period. Ibn Ishaq’s history contains only brief references to Jews and Christians at this time, including one account of the Qurayshi leadership turning to the Jews of Medina to find scriptural means by which to confute the Prophet (Ibn Ishaq, 1990: 136). There is also evidence that individual Christians lived in or near Mecca, and that contact with Christians from southern Arabia and Abyssinia was not uncommon. But there is little evidence in the histories to suggest that Muhammad had much interaction with Jews and Christians while in Mecca, nor did he direct much attention toward preaching to them.

Yet it is clear from the Qur’anic text of this period that Muhammad was aware of the basic beliefs of Jews and Christians, and the points of agreement and difference between themselves and with the message that he brought. Q. 26:197, in a sura dating from the middle Meccan period, asks the Meccan rejecters to consider the fact that the ‘learned of the Children of Israel’ accept the new revelation as authentic. And according to Ibn Ishaq, when the Negus asks the Muslim emigrants to tell him what the Qur’an says of Jesus, Ja’far
b. Abu Talib responds by reciting verses from _surat Maryam_, whereupon the Negus responds, ‘Of a truth, this and what Jesus brought have come from the same niche’ (Ibn Ishaq, 1990: 152).

This discrepancy between the Prophet’s biography and the Qur’an has generated endless controversy among the orientalists. Since the mid-nineteenth century, orientalism has expended significant energy probing the ‘original sources of the Qur’an’, as an early contribution to this genre is entitled (Tisdall, 1911). In the absence of more detailed historical information, the investigation is ultimately reduced to conjecture, leading often to wildly divergent conclusions.

For example, on the ‘sources’ of the Qur’an in Mecca, we are told by Charles Torrey that Muhammad was being tutored by a learned Jewish individual throughout the Meccan period (Torrey, 1933: 41–43, 78). While Torrey’s views may take the argument of a Jewish source to an extreme, most scholars, including Abraham Geiger, Abraham Katsh, William Muir and A. J. Wensinck, join him in seeing direct Jewish influences on Muhammad from an early point in his career (Muir, 1923; Katsh, 1962; Geiger, 1970; Wensinck, 1975). Other scholars, including C. H. Becker, Carl Brockelman and Julius Wellhausen, emphasize Christian influences during the formative period of Muhammad’s mission (Brockelman, 1960; Wellhausen, 1961; Becker, 1974). Richard Bell makes the most prominent case for the influence of eastern Christianity ‘in creating the atmosphere in which Islam took shape’ (Bell, 1968: 15). Montgomery Watt writes that ‘there were apparently practically no Jews in Mecca’, and so the most that one can claim about Jewish and Christian influences is that monotheism was ‘“in the air” before the Qur’an came to Muhammad and were part of the preparation of himself and of his environment for his mission’ (Watt, 1960: 29).

From an Islamic perspective, the most curious aspect of this orientalist project is its attempt to prove (on the flimsiest evidence) a point generally conceded by Muslims. Of course, Muslims would not be prepared to admit the authorship of the Qur’an by Muhammad or any other human. But as for the ideas contained within it, Muslim faith readily concedes that all the central tenets of the Qur’an echo Jewish and Christian scriptures because they all stem from a common source. Moreover, Muslim faith has no difficulty in acknowledging those aspects of Jewish and Christian ritual that influenced the development of Islamic ritual. The clearest example is that of the institution of the _adhan_, the call to prayer, which according to all records developed through a combination of inspiration and reaction to Jewish and Christian practice (see Ibn Ishaq, 1990: 235). Even various aspects of pagan Arabian practice, such as the pilgrimage to Mecca and the prohibition of fighting during certain sacred months, were assimilated into Islam. Thus, Islam not only tolerated but actively appropriated concepts, values and practices from previous communities, while situating them in its own moral framework.

To summarize, then, the standard account of the Meccan period: Muhammad’s call to abandon the polytheism of their ancestors produced a vociferous opposition from the Qurayshi leadership. In the face of bitter verbal and physical abuse against himself and his followers, the Prophet remained firm to the unfolding Qur’anic message of the period, which castigated the worship of deities other than Allah and a mindset which refused to question dogma and conventions on the grounds that ‘our forefathers did the same’. In Mecca the Prophet was primarily a ‘warner’ ( _muhit_ ), calling people to the truth and turning aside from those who resisted. The Meccan attitude of the Qur’an is best captured in Q. 109:6, ‘You have your religion, and I have mine’. This tolerance of indifference is disrupted only once, when the Prophet is supposed to have moved briefly beyond coexistence to some form of respectful accommodation of paganism. But as we have seen this lapse is not reflected in the extant Qur’anic text, and the entire episode’s authenticity is doubtful.
Tolerance in the Medinan period

Beginning in the middle to late Meccan period, the Qur’an employs the term *jihad* to describe the Muslims’ struggle against their opponents (25:52; 29:6, 69). Throughout the Meccan period, this struggle was confined entirely to non-violent action. The Prophet prevented his followers from resort to violence against their persecutors, because, in the traditional Muslim view, God had not commanded them to fight (see al-Daqs, 1972: 202; cf. Firestone, 1999: 51–53, 106–109). It is important to note, however, that neither had the Qur’an proscribed in principle the resort to force in self-defense.9

On the eve of the migration to Medina, jihad assumes for the first time a potentially violent content. In the second pledge of *Aqaba* by which the Medinan tribes of *Aws* and *Khazraj* agreed to welcome the Prophet and his Meccan followers, the threat of war between the Muslims and the Quraysh is the paramount consideration. The Prophet concludes the agreement by reassuring the Medinans that in return for their guarantee of security to him, he ‘would war against them that war against you and be at peace with those at peace with you’ (Ibn Ishaq, 1990: 204). This passage is confirmed by most of the historical sources, and yet the indication that the Prophet’s policy on the use of force had changed by this time is at odds with Qur’anic verses on fighting. The majority of commentators agree that the first verse permitting the Muslims to engage in war is Q. 22:39–40: ‘To those against whom war is made, permission is given [to fight], because they are wronged – and verily, God is most powerful in their aid.’ By wide agreement, this verse is supposed to have been revealed either during the *hijra* itself or shortly afterwards (Al-Wahidi, 1992: 309; al-Tabari, 1997, vol. 5: 437–438; cf. Firestone, 1999: 54).

Whatever the actual date for the change in the nature of jihad, the sources present a dramatic transformation of the Prophet and the Muslims soon after they arrive in Medina. An inexorable progression occurs in the level of hostilities between the Muslim community of Medina and the Qurayshi opponents they had left in Mecca. In the succinct formulation of Ibn Ishaq, Muhammad ‘went forth raiding . . . at the beginning of the twelfth month from his coming to Medina’ (Ibn Ishaq, 1990: 281). Following a series of small-scale reconnoitring missions and skirmishes, the Muslims and Quraysh fought their first pitched battle at Badr toward the end of the Prophet’s second year in Medina. The defeat of the large Qurayshi contingent at the hands of the smaller Muslim force provoked them to further aggression against the Muslims, a war that eventually drew in numerous other Arab tribes of the Hijaz, as well as the Jewish tribes of Medina and of neighbouring settlements. In all, according to Ibn Ishaq, the Muslims had fought 38 engagements with their enemies by the time of the Prophet’s death in 632 CE.10

The Qur’anic revelations mirror the escalating violence.11 The Prophet who had been commanded earlier to ‘invite all to the way of your Lord with wisdom and beautiful preaching, and argue with them in ways that are best and most gracious’ (16:125) is now commanded to rouse the believers to war. The Qur’anic permission to fight is soon supplemented by the command to fight a defensive war against ‘those who wage war against you’ (2:190).12 Ultimately, the progressive escalation in the Qur’an’s belligerency toward the polytheists reaches its conclusion with the revelation of *ayat al-sayf*, the ‘verse of the sword’:

But when the forbidden months are past, then fight and slay the pagans wherever you find them, and seize them, beleaguer them, and lie in wait for them in every stratagem [of war]. But if they repent, pray regularly, and give the alms-tax, then let them go their way, for God is forgiving, merciful. (9:5)
This verse follows four others which renounce the agreements that the Prophet had concluded in the previous years with pagan tribes in the vicinity of Mecca. The annulment of the alliances after a four-month period of immunity (bara’a) was announced by ‘Ali during the hajj of the year AH 9, a pilgrimage in which the Prophet did not participate because of the continuation of pagan rites in Mecca during the season. ‘Ali was told by the Prophet to announce to the assembled pilgrims that henceforth ‘no unbeliever shall enter Paradise, and no polytheist shall make pilgrimage after this year, and no naked person shall circumambulate the temple [Ka’ba]’ (Ibn Ishaq, 1990: 619).

But the repudiation of the polytheists does not end here. Ayat al-sayf begins by providing a hiatus during the ‘forbidden months’ (al-ashhur al-hurum) before stronger measures are undertaken – a hiatus that posed exegetical problems for commentators. Some held that the reference was to the four months held sacred by the Arabs before the rise of Islam, meaning that this verse also repudiates the very notion of a time when bloodshed is prohibited. The majority, however, connected the phrase to the four-month interlude announced at the beginning of the sura in Q. 9:2 (see Firestone, 1999: 61–63).

A second problem was the identity of the tribes whose alliance was repudiated. Were they all the remaining pagan tribes, or simply those who had demonstrated an unwillingness to abide by the terms of the agreement? The consensus tended toward the latter interpretation, that is, the respite of four months was provided only to those tribes who had breached their obligations; the faithful tribes would continue unmolested until the full term of their agreements according to the stipulation in Q. 9:3 (see Rubin, 1984: 27–32). As Ibn Ishaq reports: ‘Ali gave the men a period of four months from the date of the proclamation to return to their place of safety or their country; afterwards there was to be no treaty or compact except for one with whom the apostle had an agreement for a period, and he could have it for that period’ (Ibn Ishaq, 1990: 619).

Following the expiration of either the general or any special periods of immunity, ayat al-sayf commands unconditionally, in the view of many exegetes, that all polytheists be fought until they accept Islam, as demonstrated by their performance of the three things stipulated at the end. Moreover, according to these interpreters, this verse is the final, most authoritative statement in the Qur’an on Islam’s relation to the polytheist Arabs and more generally to all those who refuse to accept the Islamic call. To it belongs ‘the distinction of abrogating the greatest number of verses in the Qur’an’, no less than 124 other verses which had preceded it (Powers, 1988: 130–131).

Unfortunately, the medieval commentators do not dwell on the justification of their view that a single Qur’anic verse could obliterate so many others revealed over the preceding 21 years of the Muslim community’s life. Some no doubt genuinely believed the ayat al-sayf to be God’s final instruction to His Prophet, and found confirmation for their view in prophetic hadiths conveying a similar message, the most well-known stating: ‘I have been commanded to fight the people until they say, “There is no god but God and Muhammad is the messenger of God”, and they establish prayer and pay the alms-tax’ (Ibn Kathir, 1966, vol. 3: 364–365). But the fact that such a general interpretation of this verse troubled many early commentators is also well attested. Some scholars refused to accept the very notion of its abrogating quality. Even for many of those who did subscribe to this view, the ruling contained in it required some restricting. As the Islamic empire expanded during the two centuries following the Prophet’s death, all organized religious communities with which the Muslims came into contact were assimilated under Islamic law not on the basis of 9:5 but under the provisions of 9:29, the verse speaking directly to the condition of the People of the Book, which we shall discuss below. Thus, the scope of ayat al-sayf was effectively limited to the intransigent and rebellious Arab Bedouin tribes who are clearly the focus of the series

Apart from the changed policy toward the pagan Arabs, the most important development in the traditional account of the Prophet’s life in Medina is the arrival on the stage of new groups of actors: the munafiqun (Medinans who openly professed loyalty to Muhammad while working covertly to undermine him), and the ahl al-kitāb (‘People of the Book’, i.e. Jews, Christians and Sabaeans). The troubled relations with the hypocrites and the Medinan Jews dominated much of the Prophet’s attention during the Medinan years. Ibn Ishaq chronicles Muhammad’s policies in some detail throughout his history of this period. But curiously, he opens his discussion of the post-hijra period with a lengthy account of the machinations of the hypocrites and Jews, sometimes in collusion with one another according to their pre-Islamic tribal confederations. This is mixed in with descriptions of inter-faith polemics that occurred among Muslims, Jews and Christians, the most important taking place when a Christian delegation from the south Arabian city of Najran visits Medina (Ibn Ishaq, 1990: 239–279). The discussion is topical, not chronological, with events that occurred years apart described in a jumble of vignettes. Interspersed in the narrative are references to the occasions of revelation for various Medinan verses that criticize these groups. It is as if the historian is anxious to lay the theological foundation for his primary purpose, to provide the casus belli for the series of escalating conflicts against these groups parallel to those directed against the polytheist Arabs.

The most serious conflict within the community of Medina involved the Muslim confrontation with three Jewish tribes, the Qaynuqa’, Nadir and Qurayza. Ibn Ishaq records that soon after Muhammad arrived in Medina, he ‘wrote a document concerning the emigrants and the helpers in which he made a friendly agreement with the Jews and established them in their religion and their property, and stated the reciprocal obligations . . .’ (ibid.: 231). While Western Islamicists generally agree on the document’s authenticity, they disagree on various points of interpretation of the text and the dating of what is generally believed to have been different agreements presented as a unified text by Ibn Ishaq (Watt, 1994: 225–228). With regard to the status of the Jews of Medina, the document’s ambiguous phrasing that they are an umma ‘along with the believers’ (ma’a al-mu’minin) has created interpretive problems (see Denny, 1977: 44). One could argue that Muhammad envisioned the umma quite expansively, to include Jews and polytheists residing in Medina. The Medinan umma emerges in this reading as some sort of overarching, secular identity, subsuming within it a number of confessional groups, joined together in a political and military alliance. The more likely reading, however, is that the Jews form a separate umma alongside the Muslim community. This understanding accords well with the Qur’an’s frequent and consistent use of the term umma in Medina to denote separate religious communities (e.g. 2:143; 3:104, 110; 4:41; 22:34) (see Denny, 1975: 34–70, esp. 45) as well as the Prophet’s treatment of the Jewish tribes as separate and autonomous groups distinct from the unified body of Muslims that he sought to develop.

The dating of the sections dealing with the Jewish tribes is also quite important in ascertaining Muhammad’s attitude toward them. If, as the traditional Muslim view holds, the document dates from early in the Medinan period, then the Muslims’ relations with the Jews went from an early position of not only toleration but cooperation and inclusion to progressively stringent measures beginning with the expulsion of Banu Qaynuqa’ and Banu al-Nadir, and ending with the destruction of Banu Qurayza and the remnants of Nadir in the nearby settlement of Khaybar. The agreement (or some similar compact) with the Jews must date to an early period, according to the Islamic sources, because, in each of the three
cases, hostilities resulted from the Jews’ violation of their oaths and their plotting against the Prophet.

Among the orientalists, Wellhausen supports the idea of the early provenance of the constitution (Wellhausen, 1975: 134). For others, including Watt, this scenario is implausible because it is inconceivable that the document omits to mention the three main Jewish tribes of Medina. Rather, Watt suggests that the inclusion of the Jews within or alongside the Muslim umma refers to the smaller Jewish clans remaining in Medina after the elimination of the last of the three main tribes, that of Qurayza in AH 5 (Watt, 1994: 227). If this is the case, the constitution casts doubt on the standard view that relations between the Muslims and the Jews of Medina steadily deteriorated over time.\(^{14}\)

The Qur’an makes no direct reference to this document. But the existence of some formal arrangement or pact between the Muslims and Jews may be inferred from Q. 8:56 which speaks of a pact (‘ahd) violated by the Jews. Tabari, Wahidi and other exegetes claim that the unfaithful group mentioned here is the Quayya tribe, which if true makes these verses relatively late. They are located, however, in surat al-anfal, which deals mainly with events relating to the battle of Badr in AH 2, much earlier than the conflict with Qurayza. In this event, the unfaithful group is most likely Quayya’, the tribe expelled from Medina in AH 2.\(^{15}\)

The identity of the Jewish tribe is not significant, according to the orientalists, because by the time of the battle of Badr, Muhammad’s policy had already hardened toward all Jews in Medina. Following the Muslim historians, these scholars suggest that Muhammad made conversion of the Jews to Islam a priority during his first months in Medina because he assumed that they would recognize the essential similarity between his message and their own faith (see e.g. Muir, 1923: 150 ff; Wensinck, 1975: 94). But when the Jews rejected his claims to prophethood, and moreover actively joined his enemies among the hypocrites and Quraysh to undermine him, he turned against them with even greater zeal than that exhibited toward the Quraysh, who now became a party to be one day won over rather than eliminated (see Wensinck, 1975: 94–95).

By general agreement, the decisive ‘break’ with the Jews comes within the first 16 or 17 months of the Prophet’s sojourn in Medina. It is signalled by the change in the qibla (direction of prayer) from Jerusalem to Mecca, an event that Ibn Ishaq relates in terms analogous to the earlier rejection of Meccan polytheism. Realizing that Muhammad has turned away from them when they hoped to ‘seduce’ him to adopt their faith, the Jewish leaders ask Muhammad why he has abandoned the qibla of Abraham (Ibn Ishaq, 1990: 259). The Qur’anic verses relating to this incident indicate that the controversy was heated. The Qur’an’s response to the critics echoes in both content and rhythm its Meccan riposte to the polytheists who would have had Muhammad embrace certain aspects of their faith (i.e. surat al-kafirun):

\[
\text{If you were to bring to the People of the Book every sign, they would not follow your qibla, and you would not follow their qibla, nor indeed would they follow each other’s qibla. (2:145)}
\]

At this point Muhammad strikes upon an ingenious means of avoiding the charge of compromising his original teachings, while simultaneously distinguishing himself from Judaism and Christianity and appealing to the Quraysh: He links himself to Abraham, ‘who was neither a Jew nor a Christian’ but a true monotheist (hanif) (3:67; cf. 2:135). And it is Abraham and Ishmael who are now clearly designated as the founders of the Ka’ba, the first shrine of the hanif’s faith (2:125) (cf. Rodinson, 1974: 186–188; Wensinck, 1975: 94–97).

Following this putative ‘declaration of independence’ from the other peoples of the
Book, the Qur'an becomes, we are told, progressively more accusatory against the Jews and Christians. The attack is directed at both their faith as well as their deeds. The Jews' rejection of Muhammad conforms to an age-old pattern of 'rejecting the signs of God and slaying His messengers without just cause' (2:61). The Jewish rabbis who were in the forefront of the attempt to discredit the Prophet are charged with corrupting the texts of the scriptures to suit their own designs; they do so by changing words (2:59, 7:162) or by concealing the original revelation (e.g., 2:75, 4:46, 6:91). By making their false interpretations authoritative in their communities, they have arrogated for themselves God's authority and compromised the strict monotheism they profess (9:31). Likewise, the Christians have invented the idea of Jesus' divinity and distorted the pure monotheism that he as a prophet taught his followers (e.g. 2:116, 138; 4:144).

As religious polemics give way to hostility and confrontation, the Muslims are admonished to withdraw from and to repudiate associations with the People of the Book (5:51), again parallel with earlier injunctions regarding the polytheists and hypocrites (e.g. 3:28, 118; 4:144). Ultimately, we reach the logical conclusion of this process, with the *ayat al-jizya*, the verse commanding war against the People of the Book:

> Fight against those who – despite having been given revelation before – do not believe in God nor the last day, and do not consider forbidden that which God and His Messenger have forbidden, and do not follow the religion of truth, until they pay the *jizya* with willing hand, having been subdued. (9:29) (cf. Muir, 1923: 152–153; Bell, 1986: 159)

The majority of commentators hold this verse to have been revealed in the month of Rajab, AH 9, prior to the Muslim expedition against Byzantine forces at Tabuk. It is the first verse directly enjoining forceful action against scripturaries, and because it is also chronologically the last, it is held to abrogate all previous verses urging patience, cooperation and coexistence. The only form of tolerance permitted to the People of the Book, according to the overwhelming majority of commentators, is that of the victor to the vanquished (see e.g. Ibn Kathir, 1966, vol. 3: 381–384; al-Tabari, 1997, vol. 4: 144–145; cf. Firestone, 1999: 64).

The Meccan period of the Prophet’s career lasted some three years longer than the Medinan period. Yet it is the Medinan period that receives the greatest amount of attention in the Muslim histories. And within the Medinan period, it is instances of conflict that bulk largest in the earliest records of his life. This was largely the intention of the compilers of these early histories, to produce books on *maghazi* (military campaigns) that continued the pre-Islamic oral tradition extolling the martial valour of heroes (Jones, 1983, 344). The *maghazi* literature fit well with related genres, including Qur'anic exegesis and jurisprudence, to support a particular viewpoint – that of a militarist, triumphant, expansionist Islam. This view in turn fitted well the political and military ambitions of the Umayyad and early Abbasid rulers. But the resulting view of Muhammad as an individual and the Qur'an as an ethical system cannot but be coloured, limited or distorted. The fact that abrogation of much of the Qur'an was deemed necessary by the medieval exegetes to support their conclusions is, I believe, sufficient evidence of this contention.

**Interpreting Q. 5:48**

I do not claim that the master narrative painted in broad strokes above is entirely spurious. Based as it is on the most authentic historical records available to us, the events described and
the occasions of revelation for most of the Qur’anic verses cited must be accepted as at least plausible, unless otherwise demonstrated. But the main problem with the traditional narrative is that it omits or discounts other material considerations which, if taken into account, considerably alter the conclusions drawn. To paraphrase Fazlur Rahman’s words: the traditional account may contain truths, but it is not the whole truth (Rahman, 1980: 133).

The following alternative construction of the Qur’an’s approach to the problem of moral diversity rests on a few basic hermeneutic principles. First, the Qur’an must be read as an integrated whole. The notion that it contains self-contradictory ethical injunctions militates against the Qur’an’s own claims about its internal coherence and consistency (4:82, 39:23), a claim borne out by the text itself when it is approached as a unity and not divided into scattered, isolated bits of ethical-legal rulings, as done by the majority of early exegetes.

Second, the verses of the Qur’an and their moral import must be understood within their historical context. When certain verses, such as the ayat al-sayf and ayat al-jizya are detached from their context, they do indeed read as general, unrestricted commands, allowing many commentators to conclude that, because of their generality, they override the injunctions of more restrictive verses, such as in this case the verses on jihad which clearly stipulate that a Muslim fights only in response to clear, prior cases of aggression: ‘Fight in the way of God those who fight you, but do not transgress limits, for God loves not the transgressors’ (2:190). If verses are read according to the historical conditions in which they were revealed and the thematic context in which they appear in the Qur’an, then frequently the verses which appear most general emerge as quite restricted in their significance, and the verses containing restrictions emerge as binding.

Third, the Qur’an is foremost a book of practical morality, containing broad guidelines on how Muslims should relate to God, to each other, and to their fellow human beings. These broad guidelines may be discerned by their frequency and their pervasiveness through the entirety of the revelation. It is these principles that are universally binding upon the Muslim community and indeed humanity at large, and from them may be derived specific rules of conduct for particular historical and social contexts.

Thus, on the basis of these three points, we can accept both the possibility that the Qur’an was revealed in time and that it was revealed for all time. We can accept the general chronology of revelation – although this will always remain imprecise at best – as a means for understanding the Qur’anic message. Yet we must at the same time reject the notion of abrogation as an interpretive tool of the first resort. If we approach the Qur’an according to the three principles outlined above, abrogation not only becomes unnecessary in the vast majority of cases cited by medieval scholars, it does violence to what is a consistent, coherent Qur’anic message on the issue of religious and moral diversity. For this message, we return to the verse with which we began, Q. 5:48:

*To you We sent the scripture in truth, confirming the scripture that came before it, and guarding it in safety; so judge between them by what God has revealed, and follow not their vain desires, diverging from the truth that has come to you.*

From its earliest verses, the Qur’an begins to grapple with the reality that most human beings will reject its conception of the truth. In Mecca, not in Medina, it begins to differentiate among the polytheist unbelievers, recipients of previous scripture and the believers in the new revelation. Its appeal is directed to both the polytheists and to those who believe in earlier scriptures, although clearly the content of the appeal differs according to the group.
The polytheists are the focus of much of the Meccan revelations because they were the immediate audience for the Prophet. The Qur’an is an admonition to ‘a people whose fathers had received no admonition’ (36:5). This is not to say that the Quraysh were ignorant of the essential truth of what Muhammad brought. The Qur’an alludes in several early passages to the fact that all human beings have a primordial instinct to acknowledge the truth of God’s existence and His moral authority (e.g. 23:68, 31:25, 46:9, 106), and that in fact the rejecters of the Prophet remain mired in their polytheism not out of conviction but out of obdurate clinging to convention (e.g. 37:69, 43:22–25). These two assumptions – that there is a trace of the Abrahamic monotheism embedded in the religious consciousness of the Arabs, and that their polytheism is spiritually shallow – underlie the Qur’an’s attitude on how the Muslims should respond.

In Mecca, as we have seen, the Prophet was commanded to turn away from the cultic rites of his townsmen and to endure their enmity with patience. His avoidance of force in self-defense is neither purely prudential, based on awareness of the Muslims’ relative weakness, nor is it pacifism. Rather, I would argue, it is grounded in the unfolding Qur’anic message that self-control and perseverance in the face of adversity are the preferred course, and force is to be used only after its avoidance is obviated by the continued aggression of others. This moral position is clearly outlined in verses from the late Meccan period (42:40–43), and the same message echoes into the Medinan period when war breaks out between the Muslims and their opponents. In the earliest verses enjoining war, the rationale is that ‘tumult and oppression [fitna] are worse than killing’ (2:191). But the Qur’an continues to preach the virtues of peace over war in numerous Medinan verses: ‘If they cease, let there be no hostility except to those who practice transgression’ (2:193); ‘If they incline toward peace, incline you toward it as well and trust in God’ (8:61). It refers to the treaty of Hudaybiyya (AH 6), which provided for a 10-year peace between the Muslims and Quraysh, as ‘a manifest victory’ (48:1) – this in response to protests from some companions that the Prophet had conceded too much (Ibn Ishaq, 1990: 504). And in the clearest rejection of the view that the Muslims are to consider all polytheists as enemies, we find the principle of reciprocity still maintained in a very late Medinan verse:

God does not forbid you, with regard to those who do not fight you because of your faith, nor drive you out of your homes, from dealing kindly and justly with them, for God loves those who are just. (60:8)

By the time we reach the end of the Medinan period, the struggle between the Muslims and the Quraysh and other Arab tribes had surpassed the strictly religious dimension. The conflict was now between two rival sociopolitical systems, each supported by its own ideology and identified by it. In this war, the general injunction to fight the polytheists found in Q. 9:5 was in fact not a change in tactics or strategy, not a call to rid the world of polytheism, but a command to conclude a 23-year struggle against an inveterate foe.

The Jews and Christians also emerge relatively early in the Qur’anic discourse. Several verses from the middle to late Meccan period ask the polytheists to consider the fact that some of the previous recipients of the Book acknowledge the Qur’an as stemming from the same source (e.g. 26:197–98, 28:51–53, 29:47). These verses do not suggest, however, that the Qur’anic message is identical to the faith of either the Jews or the Christians of seventh-century Arabia, that Muhammad assumed he was either a Jewish or Christian prophet sent specifically to the Arabs. Already in Mecca the Qur’an begins to develop the view that the Prophet is bringing a continuation of the same message brought by all the prophets, including Abraham, Moses and Jesus (e.g. 87:18–19, 19:34–37). It is not the prophets who
create the distinctions among the recipients of the Book; it is their followers who over time divide themselves into sects (ahzab) (19:37). Thus, by the time the Qur’an begins to address the ahl al-kitab more directly and in depth in the Medinan revelations, its essential approach to them had already been established for quite some time. 

The main difference between the Meccan and Medinan suras is not in their content but in their audience. In Medina, with contacts between Muslims and Jews, and to a lesser extent Christians, assuming far greater frequency than they had in Mecca, the appeal to the ahl al-kitab assumes far greater prominence. Abrahamic monotheism, which is a mere glimmer in the consciousness of the polytheists, is obviously far stronger in the consciousness of the People of the Book. Therefore, the expectation that they will acknowledge the veracity of Muhammad’s mission is all the greater.

This expectation of course is not borne out except in a very small number of individual cases. The opening lines of Q. 5:48 clearly reflect an awareness that most Jews and Christians have failed to respond to Muhammad’s call. According to the asbab al-nuzul (occasions of revelation) literature, Q. 5:42–49 relate to incidents in which some Jews of Medina refer legal disputes among themselves to the Prophet for adjudication (see Mawdudi, 1988, vol. 2: 163–169; Burton, 1990: 128–133). The fact that they bring these cases for less than sincere purposes is indicated in the query, ‘Why do they come to you for decision, when they have [their own] law before them?’ (5:43).

The reference to Mosaic law in this verse and the verse that follows is not, however, a validation of the differences that separate Muslims and Jews. In fact, as we see in the progression of the argument from Q. 5:44 to 5:47, the law brought by Moses in the Torah is confirmed in all its essential points by that brought by Jesus in the Gospel. In Q. 5:48, Muhammad is commanded to affirm the truth as revealed to the previous prophets, and not to take the corrupted forms of the law as practised by contemporary Jews and Christians as valid. Thus, this verse opens by striking the same self-confident tone that runs throughout the Revelation: It is not the denial, but the affirmation (tasdiq), elaboration (tafsil), and finally the summation of all previous scripture. It is the ultimate criterion (furqan) for judging between right and wrong.

To each among you have We prescribed a law and an open way. If God had so willed, He would have made you a single people, but [His plan is] to test you in what He has given you. Though the majority of the People of the Book turn away from it, the Qur’an does not abandon hope in them. As in Mecca, so also throughout the Medinan period, we find that the Qur’an repeatedly differentiates between the righteous and the wrongdoers within particular religious communities, between those who respond positively to its message without embracing it and those so inured in convention and worldly pursuits that they calumniate against it (e.g. 3:75–78, 110, 113–15; 7:159, 168; 5:66). The latter harp on sectarian differences, levelling mutual recriminations that the others ‘have nothing to stand on. Yet they [profess] to study the [same] Book’ (2:113). In the same vein, a late Medinan verse declares: ‘O People of the Book! You have no ground to stand upon unless you stand fast by the Torah, the Gospel, and all the revelation that has come down to you from your Lord’ (5:68).

Nor does the Qur’an ever turn against the People of the Book with the hope of winning over the polytheists. Indeed, the opposite is true, for one of the main charges the Qur’an levels against the Jews in Medina is that instead of supporting their fellow monotheists – or at least abstaining from opposing them – they support the pagans (4:51; 5:80–81).

Instead of steadily progressing toward war with all Jews and Christians, the Medinan
chapters contain ample evidence that the Muslims’ response is to be governed by how they are treated by the People of the Book, and indeed forbearance in the face of enmity is the better course (e.g. 2:109, 5:13). In these chapters we also find the most significant verse specifically addressing tolerance: ‘Let there be no compulsion in religion; truth stands out clear from error. Whoever rejects evil and believes in God has grasped the most trustworthy handhold that never breaks’ (2:256). The historical context of this key verse leaves little doubt that its obvious reading is its true meaning. The medieval commentators suggest several different occasions of revelation, some making the subjects of the verse to be Jews, others Christians. One of the most specific narratives allows us to date the revelation of this verse to the middle of the Medinan period, the year AH 4:

When the children of a woman of the Ansar [Muslim converts from the population of Medina] all died in infancy, she vowed that if a child were to live, she would bring it up as a Jew. Thus when the Jewish tribe of al-Nadir was evicted from Medina, there were among them sons of the Ansar. The Ansar said, ‘O Apostle of God, what will become of our children!’ Thus God sent down this verse. Sa’id ibn Jubayr said, ‘Therefore whoever wished to join them did so, and whoever wished to enter Islam did so likewise’. (al-Tabari, 1997, vol. 2: 118–119; trans. Ayoub, 1984, vol. 1: 252–253)

For many who accepted this occasion of revelation as accurate, the verse was held to be among all those enjoining toleration toward *ahl al-kitab* that were later abrogated by *ayat al-jizya*. Other exegetes, including Tabari, agreed that the verse related only to the People of the Book, but held that it and *ayat al-jizya* were not in conflict, as the latter does not permit compulsion in religion so long as earlier scripturies pay the poll-tax. Thus, Q. 2:256 is not abrogated, at least not in relation to the People of the Book (al-Tabari, 1997, vol. 2: 119).

All of the early discussions surrounding the exegesis of this verse symptomize the inherent exegetical difficulties and distortions that result when (a) a single verse is removed from the context of all related Qur’anic revelation, and (b) abrogation is used as a blunt interpretive instrument. Whether the verse was revealed in reference to Jews, Christians or any other group hardly constrains the general and clear moral injunction that it conveys. Belief by compulsion is no belief at all. Moreover, it contravenes God’s own plan, as declared unequivocally in a late Meccan verse: ‘If it had been the Lord’s will, they would all have believed – all who are on earth! Will you then compel mankind against their will to believe!’ (10:99).

The same theme is now reprised in the late Medinan period as Q. 5:48 continues. The opening lines of Q. 5:48 would seem to restrict narrowly the scope for tolerance envisioned by the Qur’an. It is the standard of truth, seemingly to the exclusion of rival conceptions. But then the verse takes a dramatic turn in the other direction, toward a far more inclusive vision of moral diversity. The distinctions among religious communities are not simply the byproducts of human error; they are God’s will. Unlike the case of the Arab polytheists, who as the immediate subjects of Q. 10:99 have chosen their own errant course, it is God in this verse who prescribes for each community a separate path (*shir‘a*) and open road (*minhaj*).

For some commentators, the beginning and the end of Q. 5:48 apparently contradicted each other. One way out of the difficulty was to read the terms *shir‘a* and *minhaj* as referring exclusively to the path charted by Muhammad and the Muslim community (ibid., vol. 3: 247). But this interpretation created some obvious problems with the clear meaning of the sentence that directly follows: ‘If God had so willed, He could have made you a single
community (umma wahida). Ibn Kathir – following a line of reasoning developed by Tabari and others – suggests a possible solution to this dilemma by inferring that the separate paths for each community refer to pre-Muhammadan communities, and that with the advent of the Muslim community, all other, previously valid courses had been annulled by Islam (Ibn Kathir, 1966, vol. 2: 589; cf. al-Tabari, 1997, vol. 3: 248).

This solution, however, still rings hollow against the unambiguous words of the verse. The verse is clearly addressing contemporary communities and embracing their distinctiveness as God’s will. How then to reconcile the apparent tension – if not contradiction – within Q. 5:48?

One answer may lie in Q. 22:67–69, verses revealed slightly earlier in Medina, and whose wording closely parallels that of Q. 5:48:

To every people have we appointed rites and ceremonies (mansak) which they must follow. Let them not then dispute with you on the matter, but invite them to your Lord, for you are assuredly on the right path. If they do wrangle with you, say, ‘God knows best what it is you are doing. God will judge between you on the day of judgment concerning the matters in which you differ’.

The different prescribed paths mentioned in Q. 5:48 may refer simply to different rituals. The terms shir’a and minhaj convey, however, a far weightier and broader sense than religious rituals or ceremonies. The Qur’an in 5:48 is referring to more than mere outward professions of faith; it is discussing something far closer to the essence of true faith. It is pointing to the possibility that while the truth is one, there are a multitude of paths converging upon it. One exegetical tradition related by Tabari expresses this idea well when it describes Q. 5:48 as saying that all religion (din) is one, but that the specific rules, norms, guidelines, laws (shari’a) for each community may vary (al-Tabari, 1997, vol. 3: 247-22). Thus, in reference to its occasion of revelation, the verse is not denying the possibility that Jews, Christians or any other human beings may rightfully pursue their own paths to the truth. It is criticizing the failure of the Jews who came to the Prophet seeking legal judgment to pass ‘the test’ of obeying their own shari’a.

So strive as in a race in all the virtues. The goal of you all is to God; it is He that will show you the truth of the matters in which you differ.

At the height of inter-religious disputes in Medina, the Qur’an entreats the People of the Book: ‘Come to common terms between us and you, that we worship none but God, that we associate no partners with Him, that we erect not from among ourselves lords and patrons other than God’ (3:64). This is a minimalist conception of religious cooperation, the least common denominator uniting the communities. It is, however, not the end of the Qur’an’s engagement with the People of the Book, merely the beginning. For in one of the early Medinan revelations, the notion that religious difference and moral questioning is a good in itself is clearly articulated: ‘To each is a goal to which God turns him. Then strive together [as in race] towards all that is good. Wherever you are, God will bring you together, for God has power over all things’ (2:148).

Now in Q. 5:48, toward the end of the Revelation, we find once again the metaphor of competition, struggling, racing toward a goal, captured in the imperative verb istabiqu. The test mentioned here is not one that goes on merely within the confines of particular religious groups, as suggested above; something far more inclusive is obviously intended here. Though each community advances along its own path toward a common goal, it is not the
goal but the journey that is the real focus of this verse. The journey is the test, and this test is not one of conflict among rival and competing faiths struggling for hegemony. Nor is it a religious cold war, a journey of the deaf and the mute. In this verse, the Qur’an affirms that the problem of religious and moral diversity is not a hindrance to be overcome, but an advantage to be embraced – a necessary facet of God’s unknown plan for humanity. The journey can be meaningful only if there are a number of travellers, for just as human beings urge each other toward evil, so human beings urge each other toward the good.

To the Muslims, the message of Q. 5:48 is – far from the conclusions drawn by most interpreters – a humbling one: They cannot claim any exclusive righteousness in this life, just as they cannot claim exclusive salvation in the next (2:62; 5:69). They have no monopoly on the truth. The Qur’an points to the truth, but only as the beginning of the quest, not the end. As Q. 17:85 states: “They ask you concerning the Spirit [of inspiration]. Say, “The Spirit [comes] by command of my Lord. Of knowledge it is little that is communicated to you [human beings]”.”

When the Prophet arrived in Medina, according to a tradition related by Ibn Ishaq, the Jewish rabbis asked in reference to the previous verse:

When you said, ‘And you have only a little knowledge about it’, did you mean us or your own people? He said, ‘Both of you’. They said, ‘Yet you will read in what you brought that we were given the Taurat in which is an exposition of everything’. He replied that in reference to God’s knowledge that was little, but in it there was enough for them if they carried it out. God revealed concerning what they asked him about that, ‘If all the trees in the world were pens and the ocean were ink, though the seven seas reinforced it, the words of God would not be exhausted. Verily God is mighty and wise’ [31:27]. (Ibn Ishaq, 1990: 139)

Notes


5. The ironic reference here is to the Arab pride in sons over daughters, whereas to Allah, the deity they also worshipped, they ascribed daughters, the three goddesses who are the subject of the verse.


7. For a comparison of the two systems, see Kasis (1983: xxxiv–xxxviii).

8. See the useful comparative chronology provided by Hughes (1995: 490–491); and Welch (2000).


10. Ibn Ishaq (1990: 660). Other historians put the number of military engagements at up to 60 (see al-Tabari, 1990: 118, n. 813).


13. A great deal of discussion focused on whether Q. 9:5 abrogates 2:190, which speaks of fighting only those
who fight the Muslims. Al-Tabari (1997, vol. 1: 582–583) and al-Qurtubi (1967, vol. 2: 347–350), articulate the view that Q. 2:190 is not abrogated, but they limit its application to those who do not have a capacity to fight, such as women, children and old people. The argument that 2:190 limits fighting to actual cases of aggression was a minority view in the classical literature, though now it is embraced by most modern commentators. See also ‘Id (1990: 280–284).

14. The Jewish clauses of the constitution may have been a unilateral proclamation of the Prophet rather than a contract between the Muslims and Jews, as Wellhausen (1975: 137) argues. Even so, it remains a key indicator of Muhammad’s attitude toward Jews and other non-Muslims as the Muslim community continued to grow and strengthen.

15. Ibid., 136, n. 4, cites al-Waqidi as subscribing to the latter view.

16. For discussion of the early development of the theory of jihad in its historical context, see Blankinship (1994); and Bonner (1996).

17. Chapter 106 (surat Quraysh) is typical of many Qur’anic passages which presume the Quraysh’s acknowledgment of Allah, referred to here as the ‘Lord of this house’ (i.e. the Ka’ba), even though their worship has been corrupted by polytheism.


19. See Q. 10:37, from the late Meccan period.

20. Qur’an is used to describe the Qur’an in the middle Meccan period (Q. 25:1).

21. The majority of exegetes agree that the word shari’a is synonymous with shari’a, which literally translates into ‘a path leading to a watering place’. See al-Tabari (1997, vol. 3: 246).


23. As Mahmoud Ayoub points out, these two verses on the question of salvation in the afterlife convey the same message almost verbatim, though one is revealed at the beginning of the Prophet’s mission in Medina and the second near its end (Ayoub, 1991: 175). For a discussion of the quite different, exclusive interpretations rendered by many medieval commentators, see McAullife (1991: ch. 3 and conclusion).

References


