The Qur'an and Social Inclusivism: An Analysis of Q 5:51

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Abstract

Although the Qur'ān contains many verses that express positive attitudes towards the People of the Book (primarily Jews and Christians), at times, it criticises them. Q 5:51 is believed to be one of the Qur'ānic verses that appears to forbid Muslims from entering into friendly relationships with Jews and Christians. It has been often used by many classical and contemporary Muslim scholars to support social exclusivism – the notion that Muslims must not maintain friendly relationships with people of other faiths. This article analyses Q 5:51, arguing that, despite its apparent literal meaning, it does not forbid a friendly relationship between Muslims and the People of the Book, and by implication, people of other faiths as well. By interpreting the verse in light of other relevant Qur'ānic verses pertaining to the People of the Book and applying a contextual approach, the authors argue that the verse in question does not support social exclusivism.

Introduction

One of the most oft-quoted verses of the Qurʾān that seems to forbid Muslims from entering into friendly relationships with Jews and Christians is Q 5:51, which reads, "You who believe, do not take the Jews and Christians as *awliyāʾ* (allies or friends); they are *awliyāʾ* only to each other. Anyone who takes them as an ally becomes one of them – God does not guide such wrongdoers."[1] Oliver Leaman considers this an obstacle to genuine relations and trust between Muslims and the People of the Book.[2] According to Johanna Pink, the verse has also been interpreted during the contemporary period in a way that conveys "ideological implications concerning the attitude towards the West, the state of Israel and non-Muslim minorities in Muslim majority societies."[3] Given the seemingly exclusivist tone of the verse in question, which may have certain ideological and political implications for the relationship between Muslims and People of the Book (in particular, Jews and Christians), it is important to analyse the verse and ask whether, or to what extent, it endorses social exclusivism.

Considerable scholarly attention has been paid to Q 5:51. Jane Dammen McAuliffe explores how the verse has been interpreted by a range of classical and contemporary Muslim scholars, such as Muḥammad b. Jarīr al-Ṭabarī (d. 310/923), Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d. 606/1210) and Muḥammad Ḥussain Ṭabaṭabāʾi (d. 1981).[4] In recent years, the literature has shifted its focus to interpretations presented by a range of contemporary Muslim scholars, including twentieth century Turkish, Indonesian and Arab reformers.[5] This article contributes to the literature by exploring whether the verse in question precludes friendly relations between Muslims and the People of the Book. To do so, we analyse the treatment of Jews and Christians in other Qurʾānic verses briefly and apply a contextualist method for interpreting the Qurʾān to Q 5:51.

This article is organised as follows: Section 1 defines exclusivism and inclusivism and briefly provides examples of exclusivist ideas developed in the Islamic tradition. Section 2 explores how Q 5:51 is interpreted in classical sources of *tafsīr* (Qurʾānic exegesis). This is followed by section 3 which is an exploration of exclusivist approaches to interpreting the verse developed in the modern period. Section 4 shows how some contemporary Muslim thinkers have adopted socially inclusivist views about Q 5:51 and challenged exclusivist positions. The final section, 5, presents two key contentions that together reject the socially exclusivist approach to interpreting the verse: 1) there is strong evidence in the Qurʾān that the People of the Book cannot be generalised into a single entity and thus the verse in question does not ask Muslims to adopt the same attitude towards *all* the People of the Book and therefore should not be seen as supporting the idea of a hostile attitude to the People of Book as a whole and 2) an examination of the context in which Q 5:51 was revealed lends further weight to the proposition that the verse does not preclude social inclusivism.

1. Inclusivism and Exclusivism: Definitions and Examples

The terms "inclusivism", "exclusivism" and "pluralism" are prevalent in the interreligious relations literature.[6] According to Mohammad Hassan Khalil, exclusivism refers to the idea that a particular religious tradition is "salvific" and thus "adherents of all other beliefs will be punished in Hell."[7] Khalil identifies inclusivism as affirming the idea that a particular religion "is the path of Heaven", but also holds that "sincere outsiders who could not have recognized it as such will be saved." Finally, Khalil asserts that pluralists or those who adhere

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[1] Although other verses also appear to prohibit establishing friendly ties with the People of the Book (see Q 3:28, Q 4:139 and Q 4:144), Q 5:51 is one of the most well-known and most-quoted verses in this regard.

[2] Oliver Leaman, *Jewish Thought: An Introduction*, New York: Routledge, 2006, 70; see also Hakan Çoruh, "Friendship between Muslims and the People of the Book in the Qur'an with Special Reference to Q 5.51," *Islam and Muslim-Christian Relations* 23.4 (2012): 505-513, 505.

[3] Johanna Pink, "Tradition and Ideology in Contemporary Sunnite Qurʾānic Exegesis: Qurʾānic Commentaries from the Arab World, Turkey and Indonesia and their Interpretation of Q 5:51," *Die Welt des Islams* 50.1 (2010): 3-59, 7.

[4] Jane Dammen McAuliffe, "Christians in the Qurʾān and Tafsīr," in *Muslim Perceptions of Other Religions: A Historical Survey,* ed. Jacques Waardenburg, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999, 105-121.

[5] Pink, "Tradition and Ideology;" Çoruh, "Friendship between Muslims and the People of the Book;" Munim Sirry, *Scriptural Polemics: The Qurʾān and Other Religions*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014.

[6] Alan Race, *Christians and Religious Pluralism: Patterns in the Christian Theology of Religions*, London: SCM Press, 1983.

[7] Mohammad Hassan Khalil, *Islam and the Faith of Others*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014, 7.

to pluralism include the people who believe that "there are several religious traditions or interpretations that are equally effective salvifically."[8]

In the context of Islam, Abdullah Saeed classifies inclusivism and exclusivism into two types – theological and social – both of which can exist on a continuum from "soft" to "strong".[9] Whereas theological exclusivism is characterised by a negative attitude towards other religions and holds that only one religion (in this case, Islam) is true and all others are false, theological inclusivism entails an appreciation of other religions and considers the door to salvation open to their adherents. Saeed defines social inclusivism as a positive social attitude towards people of other religions. For social inclusivists, people should respect followers of other faiths and be free to establish good social relations with them, even taking them as close friends. This stands in sharp contrast with the socially exclusivist perspective, which adopts the position that followers of a particular religion, in this case, Islam, must not maintain good social relationships with people of other faiths.[10]

There were various examples of social exclusivism in Muslim societies in the past. Many today may consider the notion of *dhimmī* (non-Muslim "citizens" of the Muslim state in the past), restrictions imposed on the People of the Book traditionally (e.g. those that relate to the "Pact of Umar"), and the belief that Muslims should not have friendly relations with the People of the Book, are such examples. Muslim scholars who endorsed such exclusivist ideas lived in a context that is largely different from that of today. This is, for example, relevant to the rule that obliged non-Muslim citizens in earlier times to pay a poll tax to the Muslim state in return for protection and living in a Muslim territory. Khaled Abou El Fadl notes that this rule "was widespread in the medieval age." According to him, "What justified the poll tax system in the medieval age was the existence of reciprocity… Even in the context of concluding peace treaties, the weaker party was expected to pay a tribute to the stronger party." It was in this context that, on some occasions, "Muslims were forced to pay the Crusader states a poll tax."[11] Similarly, Anver Emon argues that the obligation for non-Muslims to pay *jizya* tax corresponded with the context of conflict and conquest that was largely dominant at the time – a condition that no longer exists today: "When Islamic parties and activists invoke the *dhimmī* rules today, whether as political polemic or even as possible bases for constitutional organization, they fail to see that the intelligibility of those rules relied on certain political formations that no longer exist."[12] Despite the incompatibility of the *dhimmī* rules with the contemporary context, some extremist Muslim groups today maintain that such regulations should be part of an Islamic political system and should be enforced upon the People of the Book. For example, upon seizing parts of Iraq and Syria, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) implemented many aspects of the classical *dhimmī* rules, including the obligation to pay the *jizya* tax.[13]

2. Classical Exegetes

Before exploring classical Muslim exegetes positions on Q 5:51, it is prudent to address the context in which the verse is reported to have been revealed. Al-Ṭabarī mentions a number of possible occasions of revelation for the verse. He reports that it was revealed in connection with two figures in Medina – namely ʿUbāda b. al-Ṣāmit and ʿAbd Allāh b. Ubayy – the latter being the head of the group known as "hypocrites" (*munāfiqūn*) in Medina. While ʿUbāda b. al-Ṣāmit publicly renounced his allegiance with the Jews, declaring his loyalty to God and His Prophet, Ibn Ubayy refused to do so due to his friendship and alliance with many Medinan Jews.[14] Al-Ṭabarī reported another occasion of revelation for this verse in which a group of Muslims, after the Battle of Badr, told their Jewish friends to believe in Islam. The Jews refused to accept their advice, warned the Muslims not to become proud of their victory over the Quraysh and reminded them that the Jews were much

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[8] Ibid.

[9] Abdullah Saeed, "Inclusivism and Exclusivism among Muslims Today between Theological and Social Dimensions," *Interreligious Relations* 21 (November–December 2020): 1-15, 1-2.

[10] Ibid.

[11] Khaled Abou El Fadl, *The Great Theft: Wrestling Islam from the Extremists*, New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 2005, 214.

[12] Anver Emon, "Sharia and the Rule of Law," in *Sharia Law and Modern Muslim Ethics*, ed. Robert W. Hefner, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2016, 37-64, 59.

[13] Al-Hayat, "Eid Greetings from the Land of the Caliphate," *Jihadology* (2 August 2014), available at: https://jihadology.net/2014/08/02/al-%e1%b8%a5ayat-media-center-presents-a-new-video-message-from-the-islamic-state-id-greetings-from-the-land-of-the-caliphate/.

[14] Muḥammad b. Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, *Jamiʿ al-bayān fī tafsīr al-Qur'ān*, Commentary on Q 5:51, available at: www.altafsir.com.

stronger than the Quraysh. It was in this context that "Abd Allāh b. Ubayy stated that he would not renounce his confederacy with the Jews.[15] Other occasions mentioned by al-Ṭabarī demonstrate that the verse was revealed in the later period of the Prophet Muḥammad's residence in Medina in the midst of conflict with the Jewish tribes. One occasion mentions "Abd Allāh b. Ubayy's plea on behalf of Banū Qaynuqā", one of the Jewish tribes of Medina expelled from the city.[16] Another relates that the verse was revealed after the defeat of the Jewish tribe of Banū Qurayẓa. According to this version, after the Jews of Banū Qurayẓa were defeated, Abū Lubāba, a Muslim and a companion of the Prophet – but also a friend of the Jews – informed them that they would be beheaded by drawing his hand across his neck. This was considered an act of inappropriate disclosure that revealed the Prophet's plan to his enemies.[17]

Although al-Ṭabarī himself argues that there is no evidence that any one of these stories related to the occasion of the revelation of Q 5:51 is more reliable than the others, his main conclusion is that the verse should be interpreted according to its general meaning, not with specific reference to any of the occasions he identified. According to al-Ṭabarī, the verse refers to all Muslims who consider Jews and Christians as their supporters (*anṣār*) and allies (*ḥulafāʾ*), meaning that al-Ṭabarī supported a socially exclusivist approach to the interpretation of the verse.[18] In line with this approach, another classical scholar, Ibn Kathīr (d. 774/1373), presents a socially exclusivist approach to Q 5:51, stating, much more explicitly than al-Ṭabarī, that the verse warns Muslims not to befriend Jews or Christians:

> Allah forbids His believing servants from having Jews and Christians as awliyāʾ, because they are the enemies of Islam and its people, may Allah curse them. Allah then states that they are friends of each other and He gives a warning threat to those who do this.[19]

Al-Maḥallī (d. 864/1459) and al-Suyūṭī's (d. 911/1505) commentary *Tafsīr al-Jalālayn* states that the verse asks Muslims to avoid considering Jews and Christians their *awliyāʾ* and that Muslims should refrain from showing them affection. Like Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr al-Jalālayn* explains that Jews and Christians are "patrons of each other, being united in disbelief," and that any Muslim who is affiliated with them is one of them. He ends his commentary by stating that "God does not guide the folk who do wrong by affiliating with disbelievers."[20] Another commentator on the Qur'ān, al-Zamakhsharī (d. 538/1074), points to the Christians "and Jews" unity in disbelief, stating that they are each other's *awliyāʾ* when it comes to taking action against Islam and Muslims. For him, it is important that Muslims dissociate themselves from those who are against their religion.[21]

One key line of thought that unites these exegetes' approaches to Q 5:51 is that the prohibition of friendship and alliance with Jews and Christians is connected with their disbelief (*kufr*) and enmity towards Islam. That is, Muslims are forbidden from taking the People of the Book as *awliyāʾ* because of their *kufr*, which inherently leads them towards enmity with Muslims. In interpreting the phrase "*awliyāʾ baʿḍuhum awliyāʾ baʿḍ*" ("they are *awliyāʾ* of each other"), some classical scholars, such as al-Ṭabarī, support the view that Jews and Christians are frequently in strife with each other and thus consider the verse to mean that Jews are Jews' *awliyāʾ* and Christians are Christians' *awliyāʾ*.[22] However, others such as al-Zamakhsharī and *Tafsīr al- Jalālayn* refer to the "unity" of the Jews and Christians, arguing that despite certain differences between them, they are inclined to become each other's *awliyāʾ* against Muslims and their religion. That is, despite the fact that there is an overall tendency among these classical Muslim exegetes on the Qur'ān that the verse in question should be interpreted in a socially exclusivist form, there was no consensus as to how the verse, or some parts of it, should be interpreted.

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[15] Ibid.
[16] Ibid.
[17] Ibid.
[18] Ibid.
[19] Ibn Kathīr, *Tasfīr Ibn Kathīr*, abridged and translated by Shaykh Safiur-Rahman al-Mubarakpuri, vol. 3. Riyadh: Darussalam, 2003, 204.
[20] al-Maḥallī and al-Suyūṭī, *Tafsīr al-Jalālayn*, translated by Feras Hamza, Louisville: Fons Vitae, 2008, 104.
[21] al-Zamakhsharī, *Tasfīr al-Kashshāf*, Commentary on Q 5:51, available: at www.altafsir.com.
[22] See Sirry, *Scriptural Polemics*, 188.

Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī interprets the command not to take Christians and Jews as *awliyāʾ* to mean "do not trust their assistance and do not show any affection towards them" (*lā taʿtamidū ʿalā istinṣarihim wa lā tatawaddadū ilayhim*).[23] Relying on a statement from Ibn ʿAbbās, al-Rāzī interprets the phrase "anyone who takes them as an ally becomes one of them" to mean that it is an obligation for Muslims to avoid approaching those who oppose Islam.[24] Al-Rāzī then draws on a parallel in the second *sūra* of the Qur'ān (Q 2:249: "whoever does not taste it is definitely with me") where Ṭālūt asks his army not to drink from a river, considering this a test of loyalty. Al-Rāzī argues that Q 5:51 and Q 2:249 should be treated as "necessary boundary makers of religious difference."[25] When interpreting Q 5:51, al-Rāzī also draws on an exchange between Abū Mūsa al-Ashʿarī (d. 42/662), the governor of Basra, and the second caliph ʿUmar b. Khaṭṭāb (d. 23/644). According to al-Rāzī, Abū Mūsa employed a Christian secretary, and when he was seeking to convince the caliph ʿUmar of his decision, the caliph recited this verse to him. Abū Mūsa insisted that the secretary had relevant expertise and that governing of Basra would not be effective without his appointment. However, the caliph reasoned that if the secretory dies, he would have to be replaced, urging Abū Mūsa to act as if that were the case and to terminate the secretary's employment.[26]

As already stated, classical interpretive discourses that tended to highlight social exclusivism, encouraging Muslims to avoid friendly relationships with the People of the Book, were shaped in a particular historical context. Indeed, interpretation of religious texts, including the Qur'ān, does not take place in a vacuum and there is a close relationship between an interpretive discourse and its socio-historical context.[27] The socially exclusive interpretation of Q 5:51 presented by many classical scholars is no exception, as it was relevant to the socio-historical context in which they lived – the context wherein, according to Abou El Fadl, at certain times, "the Islamic civilization was in a real state of crisis because Muslim territories and populations were under siege by several outside invaders."[28]

3. Exclusivist Approaches to Q 5:51 in the Modern Period

The aforementioned approaches to Q 5:51 have persisted in the modern era. Many twentieth-century Muslim scholars and thinkers have used the verse to argue that relationships between Muslims and non-Muslims should be restricted. For example, Sayyid Qutb[29] (d. 1966), a key Islamist figure in the twentieth century, states that although "Islam insists that its followers maintain an attitude of maximum tolerance towards the people of earlier revelations," it prevents Muslims from having "a relationship of alliance or patronage with them." For Qutb, this means that the path of a Muslim "to establish his [or her] religion and implement his [or her] unique system" cannot be fulfilled alongside the People of the Book. According to Qutb, there is no difference between the People of the Book and atheists when it comes to fighting against Muslims, given the hostility of both groups towards Muslims and their religion: "It is too naïve to think that we [Muslims] and they [the People of the Book] can ever join forces to support religion in general against unbelievers and atheists. Whenever the fight is against Muslims, they join forces with the unbelievers and atheists."[30] Qutb concludes that "Christians and Jews will be the enemies of the Muslim community in any place and at any time."[31]

Like Qutb, Abul Ala Mawdudi (d. 1979) adopts an exclusivist approach to Q 5:51, stating that believers have been warned in the verse not to make the People of the Book their friends and confidants.[32] Along similar lines, Yusuf Ali (d. 1953), a translator of the Qur'ān in the twentieth century, argues that Q 5:51 warns Muslims not to ask Jews and Christians "for help and comfort" given that Jews and Christians "are more likely to combine against" Muslims than to assist them. The verse, according to Yusuf Ali, considers any Muslim "who associates

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[23] Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī*, al-Tafsīr al-Kabīr*, Commentary on Q 5:51, available at: www.altafsir.com.

[24] Ibid.

[25] Ibid; see also McAuliffe, "Christians in the Qur'ān and Tafsīr," 111.

[26] al-Rāzī*, al-Tafsīr al-Kabīr*.

[27] See Abdullah Saeed, "Some Reflections on the Contextualist Approach to Ethico-Legal Texts of the Qur'an," *Bulletin of School of Oriental and African Studies* 71.2 (2008): 221-237, 223-224.

[28] Abou El Fadl, *The Great Theft*, 205.

[29] Sayyid Qutb, *In the Shade of the Qurʾān*, Leicester: Islamic Foundation, 18 vols., 2015, vol. 4, 120-121.

[30] Ibid.

[31] See Pink, "Tradition and Ideology," 48.

[32] Sayyid Abul Ala Maududi, *Tafhīm al-Qurʾān* [The Meaning of the Qur'ān], available at: https://www.searchtruth.com/tafsir/tafsir.php?chapter=5.

with them [Jews and Christians] and shares their counsels" one of them.[33] Echoing many classical works in the field of exegesis, Yusuf Ali and Qutb believe that when it comes to fighting Muslims and opposing Islam, Jews and Christians are likely to join forces. Johanna Pink traces a number of exclusivist approaches to Q 5:51 developed by contemporary Sunni scholars from the Arab world, Turkey and Indonesia. For example, when commenting on Q 5:51, Turkish scholar Bayraktar Bayraklı, as Pink explains, proposes that peaceful relationships between Muslims and all non-Muslims, including the People of the Book, are desirable, but adds that "those who are not deceitful [among them] are… rare exceptions that do not affect the overall relevance of the [Qurʾānic] interdiction."[34] The commentary of the Indonesian Ministry of Religious Affairs, according to Pink, has gone so far as to state that while interaction between Muslims and non-Muslims is permitted, Muslims should be extremely careful because "breaches of contracts and lies are normal behaviour for Jews and Christians."[35]

Among contemporary Shīʿa scholars in the field of exegesis, Muḥammad Ḥussain Ṭabaṭabāʾī's well-known *Tafsīr al-Mizān* also presents a socially exclusivist approach to Q 5:51. According to Ṭabaṭabāʾī, this verse forbids friendship between Muslims and the People of the Book. Had the Qurʾān intended to limit relationships between Muslims and the People of the Book only in matters of political alliance or sworn allegiance, as some contemporary scholars maintain, Ṭabaṭabāʾī explains, it would have used the term *ḥulafāʾ* instead of *awliyāʾ*.[36] For Ṭabaṭabāʾī, the phrase "*lā tattakhidhū al-yahūd wa al-naṣāra awliyā*" should be interpreted to mean that any close and enduring relationship between a Muslim and a person from the People of the Book must be avoided. He reasons that any friendship between a Muslim and a Jew or a Christian would lead to the rise of love and affection between them, thereby creating a situation that would lead the Muslim to be influenced by the religio-ethical values of the People of the Book. Such friendship, if it were to take place on a large scale, could distance Muslims from their religious values.[37] From Ṭabaṭabāʾī's perspective, engaging in a friendly relationship with someone from the People of the Book is equivalent to leaving the path of guidance and joining the "wrongdoers."[38] Similarly to Qutb, Ṭabaṭabāʾī argues that despite all the discordance and hostility that exists between Jews and Christians, they are united in their enmity towards Islam and Muslims – another point that should make Muslims wary of entering into friendly relationships with them. Ṭabaṭabāʾī states, "Despite their internal division and cleavages, they are united and close to each other in enmity with Islam; this common aim would lead them to take each other as friends… There is no benefit in taking them as friends and becoming close to them in affection and love."[39]

4. Socially Inclusivist Approaches during the Modern Period

Despite such socially exclusivist interpretations of Q 5:51, several scholars in the modern period have argued that Muslims can establish good social relations with people of other faiths including the People of the Book. Indeed, during the modern period, we have witnessed a radical scholarly departure from socially exclusivist approaches to the verse in question and the rise of inclusivist approaches to the verse. The socially inclusivist interpretations of Q 5:51 presented by some contemporary scholars, as will be covered below, reflect the current emphasis on interfaith dialogue and understanding and the promotion of better relationships between Muslims and non-Muslims.

For the scholars who adopt inclusivist approaches, the Qurʾān prohibits Muslims from having friendly relations only with those Jews and Christians who fight Muslims or display antagonistic behaviour towards Muslim communities. For example, Muhammad Asad (d. 1992) argues that this verse "does not constitute an injunction against normal, friendly relations with [those] of them [who] are well-disposed towards Muslims."[40] Similarly, Turkish scholar Said Nursi (d. 1960) argues that Q 5:51 does not ask Muslims to refuse to befriend

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[33] Yusuf Ali, Translation of the Qurʾān, Commentary on Q 5:51, available at: www.altafsir.com.
[34] Pink, "Tradition and Ideology," 44.
[35] Ibid.
[36] Ṭabaṭabāʾi, Muḥammad Ḥussain, *al-Mīzān fī Tafsīr al-Qurʾān*, Qom: Howza Association Publication, 2011, vol. 5, 608.
[37] Ibid., vol. 5, 610.
[38] Ibid.
[39] Ibid., vol. 5, 612.
[40] Muhammad Asad, *The Message of the Qurʾān*, Translation of Q 5:51, available at: www.altafsir.com.

the People of the Book. He reasons that such an interpretation contradicts the Qur'ānic permission for a Muslim man to marry a Christian or Jewish woman. Indeed, the Qur'ān permits intermarriage: "And permissible for you in marriage are chaste believing women as well as chaste women of those given the Scripture before you" (Q 5:5). According to Nursi, the relationship between married spouses exceeds friendship, as it is based on love and affection; thus, the prohibition in Q 5:51 does not simply mean friendship.[41]

Some scholars have argued that the term *awliyāʾ* used in Q 5:51 should not be interpreted to mean friends and confidants but rather political allies, leaders and authorities, which would suggest that the verse in question is not an obstacle to friendship or to sincere relations and trust between Muslims and the People of the Book. Indonesian scholar Haji Abd al-Malik Karim Amrullah, known as Hamka (d. 1981), argues that the term *awliyāʾ* has a variety of meanings, including manager, guardian and leader. Given the historical development of Islamic polity in Medina, Hamka argues that the term *awliyāʾ* should be interpreted to mean "political leaders." Based on this idea, Hamka argues that although Muslims are not allowed to accept non-Muslims as their political leaders and authorities, presumably in Muslim-dominated contexts, social relationships between Muslims and people of other faiths are not prohibited from an Islamic perspective.[42] Similarly, Mohsen Kadivar argues that the term *awliyāʾ* in Q 5:51 should be interpreted to mean the guardianship, leadership or legal power of non-Muslims over Muslims. That is, the verse does not prohibit Muslims from entering into friendly relations with people of other faiths.[43] This line of thought has been supported by some Western scholars of Islam, such as Leaman:

> The translation of awliyāʾ as "friends" is misleading . . . [and] it should be rendered perhaps as "protectors" or "guardians" in the strict military sense of these terms. The verse should be read as, "Do not take Christians and Jews as your protectors" [not as friends].[44]

Asma Afsaruddin explains that the Qur'ān invites believers to come to the aid of each other, be they Christians, Jews or Muslims, and calls on them to work cooperatively towards the realisation of basic moral and ethical principles. Referring to verses such as Q 22:40 ("If God did not repel some people by means of others, many monasteries, churches, synagogues, and mosques, where God's name is much invoked, would have been destroyed"), Afsaruddin argues that the Qur'ān promotes social inclusivism.[45] Similarly, Tariq Ramadan argues that although it is absolutely normal for people who follow different religions not to achieve complete concordance in terms of their beliefs, this should not prevent them from establishing good and friendly relations with one another: "One can feel and manifest deep and sincere respect toward a human being with whom one does not share this full spiritual communion."[46] This means that Muslims and people of other faiths can live in peace and harmony despite having different religious beliefs. Ismail Albayrak takes a somewhat similar approach, arguing that the Qur'ān respects the People of the Book: "[T]he Qur'ān is characterised by a degree of lack of rigidity and an overall attitude of amity and even a degree of respect" towards Christians, Jews, Sabeans and Zoroastrians.[47] He takes a contextualist approach to interpreting the Qur'ānic verses pertaining to Jews and Christians, arguing that Qur'ānic criticisms of the People of the Book reflects the tensions that existed between Muslims and them especially in Medina: "Qur'ānic discourse about the People of the Book changes in accordance with the nature of their relationship with the Muslims."[48] This latter approach adopted by Albayrak is also employed in this article with a particular reference to Q 5:51.

Beyond interpretive discourses, the notion of social inclusivism has also appeared in some interesting documents of the modern period developed by Muslim scholars. For example, the Charter of Moderation in

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[41] Çoruh, "Friendship between Muslims and the People of the Book," 510; see also Zeki Saritoprak, "Said Nursi's Teachings on the People of the Book: A Case Study of Islamic Social Policy in the Early Twentieth Century," *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relation*s 11.3 (2000): 321-332, 327.
[42] Pink, "Tradition and Ideology," 45; see also Sirry, *Scriptural Polemics*, 184.
[43] Mohsen Kadivar, "Friendship with non-Muslims," [in Persian], available at: https://kadivar.com/13297/.
[44] Leaman, *Jewish Thought*, 71.
[45] Asma Afsaruddin, "Valorizing Religious Dialogue and Pluralism Within the Islamic Tradition," in *Pluralism in Islamic Contexts: Ethics, Politics and Modern Challenges*, ed. Mohammed Hashas, Cham: Springer, 2021, 35-45, 39.
[46] Tariq Ramadan, *Western Muslims and the Future of Islam*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004, 207.
[47] Ismail Albayrak, "The People of the Book in the Qur'ān," *Islamic Studies* 47.3 (2008): 301-325, 301.
[48] Ibid., 308.

Religious Practice was initiated by the Singapore Islamic Scholars and Religious Teachers Association (PERGAS) and adopted at their convention in 2003, with the theme of "Moderation in Islam in the Context of the Singapore Muslim Society."[49] The charter states that "Muslims should base their relationship with non-Muslims on a positive foundation, not on negative ones," such as revenge and hatred. "This positive foundation," according to the Charter, "nurtures various other types of relationships such as cooperation, and feelings such as love and affection. Islam recognizes that it is natural to form various types of relationships and alliances with people."[50]

The remainder of this article presents two key arguments which support the view that Q 5:51 does not forbid Muslims from establishing friendly relations with Jews and Christians and that, therefore, the verse can be interpreted from a social inclusivist perspective.

5a. Generalisation and the People of the Book

Although some Qur'ānic verses condemn certain beliefs of the People of the Book, as Farid Esack notes, the Qur'ān "naturally dealt only with the behaviour and beliefs of those of the People of the Book with whom the early Muslim community were in actual social contact."[51] In addition, the Qur'ān avoids generalisation when it comes to the beliefs of the People of the Book. For example, immediately after the Qur'ān mentions the transgressions of the Jews and criticises them for disregarding key principles of their religion (Judaism), including breaking their pledge with God (Q 4:153-61), the subsequent verse (Q 4:162) indicates that such transgressions should only be attributed to impious Jews.[52]

In many verses, the Qur'ān uses qualifiers such as "some" or "a group of" when criticising the beliefs and acts of the People of the Book. In Q 3:76-77, the Qur'ān distinguishes between "those who keep their pledges and are mindful of Him [God]" and those "who sell out God's covenant and their own oaths for a small price." This distinction is immediately followed by Q 3:78, which claims that "some" People of the Book have distorted their scriptures. Adding to this, when it comes to the notion of distortion (*taḥrīf*), the Qur'ān castigates only "a section of the People of the Book," not all of them.[53] This idea is confirmed by Q 4:46: "Some Jews distort the meaning of [revealed] words: they say, "We hear and disobey.""

Similarly, when the term *kufr* (disbelief) is used in the Qur'ān to refer to the beliefs of the People of the Book, it does not refer to all of them, acknowledging that it is only some among them who have disbelieved. Q 2:105 reads, "Neither those People of the Book who disbelieve nor the idolaters would like anything good to be sent down to you from your Lord." The phrase "those People of the Book who disbelieve" mentioned in this verse shows that the Qur'ān does not treat all the People of the Book equally. Juan Cole argues that this verse refers to "some groups from among the biblical communities [who] had allied politically with the militant groups."[54] According to Cole, this verse shows that the Qur'ān does not consider all Jews and Christians *kāfirūn* (disbelievers): "If all Jews and Christians were always *kāfirūn*, it would be redundant to identify this group "from among the People of the Book" as "those who *kafarū*.""[55] The idea that *all* Jews and Christians should not be treated in the same way is reiterated in another verse in which disbelieving individuals among the People of the Book and idolaters are condemned to hell in the afterlife: "Those who disbelieve among the People of the Book and the idolaters will have the Fire of Hell, there to remain. They are the worst of creation" (Q 98:6; see also Q 98:1). Therefore, not all the People of the Book have the same destiny in the afterlife. This is echoed in the following passage:

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[49] Muhammad Hashim Kamali, *The Middle Path of Moderation in Islam*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015, 72.
[50] Ibid., 73.
[51] Faird Esack, *Qur'an, Liberation & Pluralism: An Islamic Perspective of Interreligious Solidarity against Oppression*, Oxford: Oneworld, 1997, 152.
[52] See Haris Aziz, "Anti-Semitism among Muslims," in *Islamic Political Radicalism: A European Perspective*, ed. Tahir Abbas, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007, 71-82, 78.
[53] See Esack, *Qur'an, Liberation & Pluralism*, 173.
[54] Juan Cole, "Infidel or Paganus? The Polysemy of kafara in the Qur'ān," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 140.3 (2020): 615-635, 630.
[55] Ibid.

> But they are not all alike. There are some among the People of the Book who are
> upright, who recite God's revelations during the night, who bow down in worship, who
> believe in God and the Last Day, who order what is right and forbid what is wrong,
> who are quick to do good deeds. These people are among the righteous and they will
> not be denied [the reward] for whatever good deeds they do: God knows exactly who
> is conscious of Him. (Q 3:113-115; see also Q 3:199)

It is in this sense that the Qurʾān emphasises that anyone among the People of the Book who performs good deeds will receive rewards from God (Q 2:62; Q 5:69) and that anyone among them who does wrong will be responsible for his or her actions in the afterlife and will find no protector against God (Q 4:123). In several verses, the Qurʾān states that the People of the Book intend to lead Muslims astray and that, therefore, Muslims should not trust them; however, in such verses, the Qurʾān again refers only to some of them. Q 3:72 reads, "Some of the People of the Book say, "At the beginning of the day, believe in what has been revealed to these believers [the Muslims], then at the end of the day reject it."" Q 3:69 emphasises that it is some of the People of the Book – not all of them – who seek to lead Muslims astray. Another verse states that it is some among the People of the Book who would seek to turn the Muslim community into disbelievers (Q 3:100). It is in this context that the Qurʾān encouraged Muslims to "argue in the best way with the People of the Book, except with those of them who act unjustly" (Q 29:46). The Qurʾān explains to Prophet Muhammad that some People of the Book are trustworthy to the extent that "if you [the Prophet] entrust them with a heap of gold, [they] will return it to you intact," while others should not be trusted: "If you entrust them with a single dinar, [they] will not return it to you unless you keep standing over them" (Q 3:75). Therefore, the People of the Book should not be judged (trusted or mistrusted) only because they do not share a religion with Muslims. That is, the religious beliefs of the People of the Book do not determine their trustworthiness. This conforms with the verses in the Qurʾān which state that those People of the Book who perform good deeds and believe in God and the Last Day are guaranteed salvation in the afterlife (Q 2:62; Q 5:69).

The same trend of avoiding generalisation is evident in some of the verses in which the Qurʾān uses the terms "Jews" and "Christians" instead of "People of the Book." For example, Q 9:30 states that "the Jews said, Ezra is the son of God." The verse then condemns them, stating that they have gone astray. Despite this apparent generalisation, the verse seems to "mean that there was a concrete group of people who called themselves Jews and attributed sonship to a person called "Uzayr."[56] According to Firestone, certain Jewish scriptures associated a near-divine status with the biblical figure of Ezra; some of the Jews living in Medina at the time of the Prophet espoused this belief and the verse in question refers to them – and thus not to all Jews.[57] Similarly, when referring to Christians, the Qurʾān at times distinguishes those who truly followed Jesus from those who did not, again demonstrating that not all Christians should be considered as having the same set of beliefs: "God said, "Jesus, I will take you back and raise you up to Me: I will purify you of the disbelievers. To the Day of Resurrection I will make those who follow you superior to those who disbelieved"" (Q 3:55). According to Cole, this verse demonstrates that Christians should not be considered *kāfirūn* "under ordinary circumstances, just as they are not doomed to hell under ordinary circumstances. Still, just as they can commit moral sins and so depart from righteousness into perdition, so they can . . . join the damned."[58] Indeed, from the Qurʾānic perspective, Christians are naturally divided into good and bad. The Qurʾān speaks of Christian monks and priests in both a positive and a negative manner in the following two passages:

> You are sure to find that the closest in affection towards the believers are those who
> say, "We are Christians," for there are among them people devoted to learning and
> ascetics. These people are not given to arrogance, and when they listen to what has
> been sent down to the Messenger, you will see their eyes overflowing with tears
> because they recognize the Truth [in it]. They say, "Our Lord, we believe, so count us
> amongst the witnesses." (Q 5:82–83)

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[56] Moshe Sharon, "People of the Book," in *Encyclopedia of the Qurʾan,* vol. 4., ed. Jane Dammen McAuliffe, Leiden: Brill, 2004, 38.
[57] Reuven Firestone, *Children of Abraham: An Introduction to Judaism for Muslims*, Hoboken: Ktav, 2001, 35-36.
[58] Cole, "Infidel or Paganus?" 630.

However, in another verse, it says:

> Believers! Many rabbis and monks wrongfully consume people's possessions and turn people away from God's path. [Prophet], tell those who hoard gold and silver instead of giving in God's cause that they will have a grievous punishment. (Q 9:34)

In sum, a key message of the Qur'ānic verses dealing with the People of the Book is that Jews and Christians should not be treated as a single entity: while some are people who perform good deeds and are trustworthy, others are not. In other words, when the Qur'ān castigates the beliefs, attitudes and trustworthiness of the People of the Book, it avoids generalisation. As Fathi Osman argues, the Qur'ān avoids "unfair and erroneous generalization, oversimplification, and stereotyping."[59] Applying this approach to Q 5:51, the Qur'ān does not forbid Muslims from establishing friendly relationships with all Jews and Christians at all times and in all places. Indeed, unlike the interpretations of many classical commentators on the Qur'ān and some Muslim scholars of the modern period who argue that the verse in question prevents social and friendly relations between Muslims and the People of the Book, the intention of the verse, most likely, is not to generalise about the People of the Book. This idea is strengthened by Q 60:8: "He does not forbid you to deal kindly and justly with anyone who has not fought you for your faith or driven you out of your homes." Reading Q 5:51 in light of Q 60:8, as also noted by other Muslim scholars, including Tariq Ramadan,[60] the Qur'ān distinguishes between those People of the Book who fight Muslims and those who do not and thus does not forbid Muslims from establishing relations with People of the Book who fall into the latter category. In other words, the Qur'ān only forbids Muslims from establishing friendly relations with those People of the Book who fight Muslims, and not with all of them.

The Qur'ān also appears to preclude relationships with those People of the Book who mock Islam. Q 5:57 reads: "You who believe, do not take as allies those who ridicule your religion and make fun of it – whether people who were given the Scripture before you, or disbelievers." Therefore, the Qur'ān does not prevent Muslims from establishing relationships with Jews and Christians who do not ridicule or belittle Islam. Q 5:57 is of particular significance to the interpretation of Q 5:51, as both verses belong to the same *sūra* and seem to have been revealed around the same time.

5b. Contextualisation

Some contemporary Muslim scholars who are identified as contextualists have argued that the context of Qur'ānic revelation is highly relevant to the Qur'ān's content. Scholars such as Fazlur Rahman (d. 1988), Naṣr Ḥāmid Abū Zayd (d. 2010), Abdolkarim Soroush (b. 1945), Muhammad Shahrur (d. 2019) and Abdullah Saeed (b. 1960) argue that the Qur'ān stands in a dialectical relationship with the socio-historical context of its emergence, maintaining that any hermeneutics of the Qur'ān should take into full account the culture, history and context of the Arabian Peninsula at the time of revelation.[61] To establish a link between the events that took place during the Prophet Muhammad's prophetic career and the Qur'ān, some of the aforementioned scholars argue that the message of the revelation changed along with the circumstances encountered by the Prophet and the nascent Muslim community. According to Abū Zayd, revelations had to be commensurate with the various conditions encountered by their first addressees.[62] This means that the Qur'ān reflects the relationship between the text and the realities of the early Muslim community, representing Prophet Muḥammad's response

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[59] Fathi Osman, *The Other: A Restructuring of the Islamic Concept*, Los Angeles: Pharos Foundation, 2008, 112-114.
[60] For Ramadan's ideas about this issue, see Tariq Ramadan, *Western Muslims and the Future of Islam*, 204.
[61] See Fazlur Rahman, *Islam & Modernity: Transformation of an Intellectual Tradition*, Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1982; Naṣr Ḥāmid Abū Zayd, *Mafhūm al-naṣṣ: Dirāsa fcʿulūm al-Qurʾān,* Beirut: al-Markaz al-Thaqāfī al-ʿArabī, 1998; Abdolkarim Soroush, *The Expansion of Prophetic Experience: Essays on Historicity, Contingency and Plurality in Religion*, translated by Nilou Mobasser, Leiden, Brill, 2009; Muhammad Shahrur, *The Qur'ān, Morality and Critical Reason*, translated by Andreas Christmann, Leiden: Brill, 2009; Saeed, "Some Reflections on the Contextualist Approach".
[62] Elizabeth Suzanne Kassab, *Contemporary Arab Thought: Cultural Critique in Comparative Perspective*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2010, 188.

to the needs of his community and the challenges Muslims encountered.[63] Some such responses in the Qur'ān could only be relevant to the context of revelation and the Prophet's immediate addressees and thus not necessarily relevant at other times or in other places.

Based on the aforementioned reports provided by al-Ṭabarī of the possible occasions for the revelation of Q 5:51, we cannot determine whether the verse was revealed in the early Medinan period of Prophet Muhammad's life (around the time of the Battle of Badr) or somewhat later (in the midst of the conflict between Muslims and the Jewish tribes).[64] However, one of the common features found in all reports narrated about the occasion of the verse is that it was revealed in connection with relations that existed between some Jews of Medina and some Muslims. Medinan Jews are reported to have settled in the oasis long before the emergence of Islam and even before the two prominent Arab tribes of Medina, the Aws and Khazraj, settled there.[65] The Jewish tribes, prominent among them Banū al-Naḍīr, Banū Qaynuqāʿ and Banū Qurayẓa, gradually became allies of the Aws and Khazraj. Therefore, before the migration (*hijra*) of the Prophet Muḥammad and the early Muslims from Mecca to Medina, the Arab and Jewish tribes of Medina had established strong ties.[66] As is evident from al-Ṭabarī's aforementioned reports, ʿAbd Allāh b. Ubayy – who is known in Islamic sources to be the head of the religious hypocrites (*munāfiqūn*) in Medina – publicly announced his allegiance with the Jews, which confirms this strong relationship.

After the Prophet Muḥammad migrated to Medina, as reported by Muḥammad b. Isḥāq, one of the earliest biographers of the Prophet's life, he made an agreement with the Arab tribes and the Jews: "The apostle 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."[67] The agreement considered the Jews as one community with the Muslims, stating that "the Jews have their religion and the Muslims have theirs."[68] Despite such an agreement, as Peters notes, even from the beginning of the settlement of Prophet Muḥammad and his followers in Medina, the Prophet's "relations with the Jews of the place began to deteriorate."[69] Jews challenged Muḥammad's prophethood from the very commencement of his settlement in Medina. As Watt points out, "In Muhammad's first two years at Medina the Jews were the most dangerous critics of his claim to be a prophet."[70] Indeed, tensions existed between Jews and Muslims long before the two groups engaged in war, even before the Battle of Badr. Moreover, the Battle of Badr was immediately followed by a raid on the Muslims led by Abū Sufyān – a leader and merchant from the Quraysh tribe of Mecca and a prominent opponent of the Prophet. At the time, Abū Sufyān was reportedly hosted by a chief of one of the Jewish tribes, Banū al-Naḍīr. This demonstrated that some of the Jews were willing to support Muḥammad's enemies and become their allies. As Gordon Newby notes, "While the raid itself was insignificant from a military standpoint, it did serve to point out the relationship between the Jewish tribe of an-Nadir and Muhammad's Meccan enemy."[71]

Friction between Muslims and Jews of Medina is evident in the early Qur'ānic verses revealed to the Prophet in Medina, in which the People of the Book, especially the Jews, are strongly criticised. In other words, Qur'ānic verses related to the relationship between Muslims and the People of the Book, which were revealed in the early Medinan phases of Muḥammad's prophetic mission, are indicative of the hostile conditions in which early Muslims found themselves. Accordingly, while in the Meccan period the Qur'ān took a generally positive position vis-à-vis Jews and Christians, Medinan verses are marked by "a more polemical discourse."[72] However, as previously stated, the Qur'ān uses qualifiers such as "some" or "many" when referring to the People of the Book in some of these verses.

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[63] See for example, Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd, "The 'Others' in the Qur'ān: A Hermeneutical Approach," *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 36.3-4 (2010): 281-294, 287-88.

[64] Nöldeke considers the fifth chapter of the Qur'ān to be the final chapter revealed to Muḥammad.

[65] Francis E. Peters, *Muhammad and the Origins of Islam*, Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994, 192.

[66] Ibid., 193.

[67] Muḥammad ibn Isḥāq, *The Life of Muhammad: A Translation of Ibn Ishaq's Sirat Rasul Allah*, translated by Alfred Guillaume, New York: Oxford University Press, 1955, 231.

[68] Ibid., 233.

[69] Peters, *Muhammad and the Origins of Islam*, 202.

[70] William Montgomery Watt, *Muhammad at Medina*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1956, 217.

[71] Gordon Darnell Newby, *A History of the Jews of Arabia: From Ancient Times to Their Eclipse under Islam*, Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1988, 87.

[72] Sirry, *Scriptural Polemics*, 45.

If we contextualise Q 5:51 within the Medinan context and the tensions that existed at the time between Muslims and the People of the Book, we can attain a better understanding of the content of this verse.[73] Indeed, Q 5:51 was revealed in the aforementioned context and reflects the contextual and extant enmity between Muslims and the People of the Book, and the proscription against Muslims taking the People of the Book as *awliyāʾ* reflects this combative nature of the interactions between them at the time. In Medina, the nascent Muslim community encountered dangers and threats on various fronts; thus, any friendly relationships or bonds of loyalty between Muslims and people of other faiths in that context could be considered acts likely to weaken and threaten the integrity, safety and security of the emerging Muslim community. Indeed, Q 5:51 should be understood within the broader context of the conflict between Muslims and the People of the Book in Medina. Rashid Rida argues that "the verse [Q 5:51] should be understood within the general context of its revelation, namely, the hostile environment."[74] According to Haris Aziz, "when this verse was revealed, Muslims were in a precarious position in Medina, with the Meccans planning to attack the Muslims and some of the Christian and Jewish tribes conspiring against them."[75] This means that rather than prescribing that Muslims at all times and in all places must avoid accepting Jews or Christians as friends, the verse reflects the antagonistic situation in which the nascent Muslim society took shape in Medina. As Fathi Osman notes, Q 5:51 addresses "the situation in Arabia at the time of the Prophet, rather than determining Muslims' relations with non-Muslims at all times all over the world."[76]

Furthermore, the nascent Muslim community in Medina was both a religious and a political community, and much like in many other religious communities, religion and politics were inseparable then. Newby notes that "Jewish opposition to Muhammad appears from our vantage to be a combination of religious and political motives, which were not separable in the minds of the Jews and Arabs of sixth-century Arabia."[77] Indeed, in a manner quite different from today's world, during the Medinan period of Prophet Muḥammad's mission, religious belief was a "marker of inclusion within a political community."[78] Any instruction warning Muslims not to establish good relations with non-Muslims should be interpreted in light of the potential hostilities this could have caused; such relationships could have had significant negative political implications for the entire community, given the inseparability of religion and politics. In today's context, which drastically differs from that of the Medinan period of Prophet Muḥammad's mission, a friendship between a Muslim and a Jew or a Christian would have no significant political implications in most cases and would be unlikely to lead to the weakening of the Muslim community as such.

6. Conclusion

In line with the ideas of Muslim scholars who support social inclusivism, in this article, we argued that Q 5:51 does not preclude friendly relationships between Muslims and the People of the Book. To support this position, we presented two key arguments. First, if Q 5:51 is interpreted in light of other Qur'ānic verses pertaining to the People of the Book – in which their ideas, beliefs and attitudes are not generalised or stereotyped – the verse in question neither pertains to all Jews and Christians, nor does it call for hostility towards them. When interpreting Q 5:51, two other Qur'ānic verses should be taken into consideration, namely Q 60:8 and Q 5:57; the former imposes the condition that friendly relationships cannot be established only with those who fight Muslims and the latter warns Muslims against relations with those People of the Book who ridicule Muslims' religion and beliefs. Therefore, instead of instructing Muslims to avoid relationships with all Jews and all Christians, the Qur'ān limits its interdiction to *certain* Jews and Christians. Second, a contextualist approach to interpreting the Qur'ān reveals that Q 5:51 reflects the tensions that existed between Muslims and

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[73] Such tensions, of course, were not limited to political issues, but was also related to religious differences.
[74] Cited in Sirry, *Scriptural Polemics*, 186.
[75] Aziz, "Anti-Semitism among Muslims," 79.
[76] Osman, *The Other: A Restructuring of the Islamic Concept*, 112; the same approach can be applied to the other Medinan Qur'ānic verses that appear to prohibit establishing friendly ties with the People of the Book (see Q 3:28, Q 4:139 and Q 4:144).
[77] Newby, *A History of the Jews of Arabia*, 86.
[78] Abdullah Saeed, "Pre-Modern Islamic Legal Restrictions on Freedom of Religion, with Particular Reference to Apostasy and Its Punishment," in *Islamic Law and International Human Rights Law*, ed. Anver M. Emon, Mark S. Ellis and Benjamin Glahn, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012, 226-246, 241.

the People of the Book in Medina at the time of revelation. Therefore, the verse applies to the circumstances in which the nascent Muslim community was taking shape and does not prescribe an eternal commandment that applies to all times and places.

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