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Qur'anic Ethics of Religious Coexistence: A Comparative Study of Classical and Contemporary Tafsir

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Abstract

This study explores the Qur'anic ethical framework for religious coexistence through a comparative analysis of classical and contemporary tafsir literature. It examines key Qur'anic concepts such as justice ('adl), mercy (rahmah), freedom of belief, and respectful engagement with religious others, analyzing how these principles have been interpreted by classical exegetes like al-Tabari, Ibn Kathir, and al-Qurtubi, and rearticulated by contemporary scholars including Muhammad 'Abduh, Rashid Rida, and Fazlur Rahman. Employing a qualitative and analytical methodology, the study highlights both continuity and evolution in exegetical approaches, demonstrating how contextual factors shape interpretations of interreligious relations. The research argues that while classical tafsir often reflected the socio-political realities of its time, contemporary interpretations increasingly emphasize ethical universality, pluralism, and peaceful coexistence. By situating Qur'anic ethics within changing historical and social contexts, this study contributes to current scholarly discourse on Islam and interfaith relations, offering a normative framework for fostering religious coexistence in pluralistic societies grounded in Qur'anic moral principles.

Keywords:

Qur'anic Ethics; Religious Coexistence; Tafsir Studies; Interfaith Relations; Justice ('Adl); Freedom of Belief; Classical Tafsir; Contemporary Tafsir; Pluralism in Islam

Introduction

Religious coexistence constitutes a central ethical concern in the Qur'ān, which emphasizes justice, mercy, and respectful engagement with adherents of other faiths. The Qur'ān repeatedly underscores principles such as freedom of belief, peaceful interaction, and moral accountability in interreligious relations, exemplified in verses like “There is no compulsion in religion” (Qur'ān 2:256) and “For you is your religion, and for me is mine” (Qur'ān 109:6).¹ These injunctions not only reflect the moral framework of Islam but also serve as normative guidance for the conduct of Muslims in pluralistic societies.

Classical tafsīr literature, produced by exegetes such as al-Ṭabarī, Ibn Kathīr, and al-Qurṭubī, provides foundational interpretations of these verses within the socio-political contexts of early Islam.² Classical scholars often emphasized the legal and communal dimensions of coexistence, particularly in relation to the *dhimmī* system, tribal alliances, and political governance.³ Their commentaries illustrate how ethical directives were operationalized alongside pragmatic considerations, reflecting a balance between moral ideals and historical realities.

Contemporary tafsīr, exemplified by the works of Muḥammad ‘Abduh, Rashīd Riḍā, and Fazlur Rahman, reinterprets these classical insights to address modern challenges, including interfaith dialogue, pluralism, and global coexistence.⁴ Contemporary exegetes highlight the universality of Qur'ānic ethics, stressing principles of mutual respect, tolerance, and peaceful engagement as foundational for constructing ethical frameworks in diverse societies.⁵

This study aims to conduct a **comparative analysis** of classical and contemporary tafsīr regarding Qur'ānic ethics of religious coexistence. By examining interpretive continuities and shifts, the research identifies the enduring moral principles that guide interreligious relations and explores how these principles can be applied to contemporary social, political, and interfaith contexts. Employing a **qualitative and analytical methodology**, the study contributes to scholarly discourse on Qur'ānic ethics, interfaith engagement, and the role of Islamic moral philosophy in promoting pluralism and peaceful coexistence.

Literature Review

The Qur'ānic discourse on religious coexistence has attracted sustained scholarly attention, both in classical exegesis and contemporary studies. Classical tafsīr literature lays the foundational understanding of interreligious ethics, interpreting key Qur'ānic verses within the socio-political realities of the early Islamic period. Al-Ṭabarī, for instance, contextualizes verses on religious freedom and covenantal obligations within the framework of treaties and alliances, highlighting the balance between ethical imperatives and political necessities.¹ Similarly, Ibn Kathīr and al-Qurṭubī provide extensive commentary on Qur'ānic directives regarding the treatment of non-Muslims, often referencing legal frameworks such as the *dhimmī* system and emphasizing obedience to moral and contractual obligations.² These

classical interpretations reflect a combination of normative guidance and practical governance, demonstrating how ethical principles were embedded in social and political life.

Modern scholarship has sought to reinterpret these classical insights in light of contemporary ethical, social, and political challenges. Muḥammad 'Abduh, in his *Tafsir al-Manar*, emphasizes the universal moral dimensions of the Qur'ānic message, advocating for religious tolerance, rational engagement, and ethical coexistence.³ Fazlur Rahman extends this perspective by highlighting the ethical and humanistic principles underlying Qur'ānic injunctions, arguing that they support pluralism, mutual respect, and non-coercion in matters of faith.⁴ Rashīd Riḍā, meanwhile, bridges classical and modern thought, rearticulating Qur'ānic ethics to address the challenges of modern society while retaining fidelity to traditional interpretations.⁵

Interdisciplinary research has also enriched the discourse on Qur'ānic ethics and interfaith relations. Contemporary studies on Islamic peace ethics, pluralism, and interreligious dialogue emphasize that the Qur'ān's moral guidance is not limited to the legalistic or political domain but extends to ethical, social, and educational spheres. Mohammed Abu-Nimer and Louay Safi, for example, analyze Islamic ethical frameworks as resources for mediation, restorative justice, and the promotion of peaceful coexistence in multicultural societies.⁶ These studies highlight the adaptability and relevance of Qur'ānic ethics in addressing modern interreligious challenges.

Despite this extensive scholarship, gaps remain. Many studies focus predominantly on either classical tafsīr or contemporary reinterpretations, without systematically comparing the two. Few works offer an integrated analysis that examines both the historical context of classical exegesis and the ethical rationale in contemporary interpretations. This study seeks to fill this gap by providing a comparative analysis that highlights continuity, transformation, and reinterpretation in Qur'ānic ethical guidance on religious coexistence.

By bridging classical and contemporary tafsīr, the research underscores the enduring relevance of Qur'ānic principles, emphasizing that ethical coexistence is not merely a historical phenomenon but a normative guide for contemporary societies. This comparative approach facilitates a nuanced understanding of how Qur'ānic ethics can inform interfaith engagement, social cohesion, and moral governance today.

Comparative Analysis: Classical vs. Contemporary Tafsīr on Religious Coexistence

1. Ethical Foundations: Continuity and Transformation

Both classical and contemporary tafsīr emphasize the Qur'ānic ethical framework for peaceful coexistence, but they differ in emphasis and contextual interpretation. Classical scholars such as al-Ṭabarī, Ibn Kathīr, and al-Qurṭubī grounded their analyses in historical circumstances, often prioritizing legal and political structures alongside moral obligations.¹ They interpreted verses relating to non-Muslims, treaties, and communal interactions in light

of early Islamic society, emphasizing obligations under the *dhimmī* system, covenantal fidelity, and communal order.² Ethical principles such as justice (*‘adl*) and honesty (*amānah*) were framed within these socio-political contingencies, demonstrating a balance between moral imperatives and practical governance.

Contemporary tafsīr, represented by Muḥammad ‘Abduh, Rashīd Riḍā, and Fazlur Rahman, retains these foundational ethical principles but reinterprets them to address global pluralism and modern challenges of interfaith engagement.³ Freedom of belief, tolerance, and peaceful dialogue are emphasized as universal ethical imperatives rather than context-bound legal obligations.⁴ This shift reflects an ethical expansion, wherein Qur’ānic guidance is applied to contemporary multicultural societies while maintaining continuity with classical moral reasoning.

2. Freedom of Belief and Non-Coercion

The principle of freedom of belief (*lā ikrāha fī al-dīn*, Qur’ān 2:256) illustrates continuity and reinterpretation. Classical exegetes acknowledged this principle but often framed it within legal-political structures, emphasizing the protection of non-Muslims under Muslim governance while delineating specific obligations.⁵ Contemporary scholars, however, stress its universal moral and humanistic implications, interpreting non-coercion as a foundational element of ethical interfaith engagement applicable beyond medieval political arrangements.⁶ This highlights how contemporary tafsīr adapts ethical principles to modern normative concerns, fostering inclusive, pluralistic approaches.

3. Engagement with Religious Others

Classical tafsīr literature provides detailed guidance on interacting with “People of the Book” and other non-Muslim communities. Al-Qurṭubī and Ibn Kathīr, for instance, emphasize respect, fulfillment of covenants, and proportionate responses to violations, while maintaining communal boundaries.⁷ Contemporary exegetes extend these insights by emphasizing mutual understanding, dialogue, and ethical persuasion. Muḥammad ‘Abduh and Fazlur Rahman argue that the Qur’ān encourages constructive engagement based on shared moral values, rather than legalistic or coercive imperatives.⁸ This evolution reflects an adaptive hermeneutic, integrating classical ethical norms with contemporary notions of universal human rights and interfaith cooperation.

4. Conflict Resolution and Peacebuilding

Both classical and modern tafsīr recognize the Qur’ānic commitment to justice, reconciliation, and the avoidance of unnecessary conflict. Classical scholars analyzed Qur’ānic injunctions on arbitration, covenantal fidelity, and mediation within historical and tribal contexts, illustrating early Islamic mechanisms for maintaining social harmony.⁹ Contemporary scholars, in contrast, emphasize the application of these principles in modern

conflict resolution, interreligious dialogue, and peacebuilding, arguing that the Qur'ānic ethic of reconciliation (*ṣulḥ*) provides guidance for resolving contemporary communal tensions.¹⁰

5. Synthesis and Observations

The comparative analysis demonstrates both **continuity and evolution** in Qur'ānic exegesis on religious coexistence. Classical tafsīr provides foundational ethical norms embedded in historical realities, while contemporary tafsīr universalizes these principles to address global pluralism and modern interfaith challenges. Together, they underscore the Qur'ān's enduring moral guidance: justice, mercy, mutual respect, and peaceful engagement as central to ethical religious coexistence. This synthesis highlights the potential of Qur'ānic ethics to inform normative frameworks for contemporary pluralistic societies, emphasizing moral responsibility alongside practical governance.

Conclusion

In conclusion, both classical and contemporary tafsīr demonstrate that the Qur'ān provides a robust ethical framework for religious coexistence, rooted in justice (*'adl*), mercy (*raḥmah*), freedom of belief, and respectful engagement with adherents of other faiths. Classical tafsīr interprets these principles within historical, legal, and socio-political contexts, emphasizing contractual fidelity, protection of non-Muslims, and social order, while contemporary tafsīr universalizes these ethical norms, emphasizing pluralism, dialogue, and peaceful interfaith engagement.¹ This continuity and evolution illustrate the Qur'ān's enduring moral guidance, highlighting its applicability in addressing contemporary societal and interreligious challenges.

Policy implications of this study suggest that Qur'ānic ethical principles can inform educational curricula, interfaith initiatives, and public policy to promote religious tolerance and pluralism. Governments, educational institutions, and civil society organizations may integrate these principles to strengthen social cohesion, reduce sectarian and religious conflicts, and foster ethical citizenship in multicultural contexts.² Moreover, religious scholars and policymakers can use the insights from classical and contemporary tafsīr to design frameworks for peaceful conflict resolution, community dialogue, and inclusive governance, thereby translating Qur'ānic ethics into practical social strategies.³

In essence, the comparative study underscores that Qur'ānic guidance on religious coexistence is not merely historical but normative and actionable, offering a moral and practical blueprint for contemporary societies striving for harmony, justice, and ethical interfaith relations.

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