

THE QUR'AN'S UNIVERSAL PERSPECTIVES
ON DIALOGUE OF RELIGIONS AND CIVILIZATIONS
AND ISLAM'S THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATION
OF PEACEFUL COEXISTENCE

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Introduction

To Muslims the world over, who now number as many as 1.9 billions, the Qur'an and *Hadiths*¹ are the two most important sources of Islamic teachings on practically every subject that matters to human life. One subject that now matters a lot to human societies everywhere, especially to the more religiously and culturally pluralistic ones, is the subject of interfaith dialogue, and on a much broader as well as grander scale, the subject of dialogue between civilizations. This latter dialogue of which interfaith dialogue is the core element, is fast gaining popularity these days especially after Samuel Huntington 'shocked' the world with his theory of clash of civilizations;² especially in the light of the September 11, 2001 tragedy.³

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- ¹ Muslims traditionally distinguish between the Qur'an which they believe is God's revelation verbatim to the Prophet Muhammad and the *hadiths* which are merely the documented sayings and actions attributed to the Prophet. In the Shi'ite branch of Islam, the *hadiths* are extended to include the sayings and actions of the Imams.
 - ² The theory first appeared in an article entitled "The Clash of Civilizations?" *Foreign Affairs* 72, no. 3 (Summer 1993): 22-49. This article was subsequently expanded into a book bearing the title *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996). Huntington's controversial thesis has provoked worldwide debates which have helped to generate a global interest on its antithesis, the dialogue of civilizations.
 - ³ The September 11 terrorist attack on America—described erroneously in certain circles in the West as "an attack on Western civilization"—and the subsequent tensions between America and the Muslim world, has tended to

Muslims have participated in many of the interfaith and intercivilizational dialogues that have been organized at both national and international levels, and in various parts of the world over the past decade, often with zeal and admirable attitudes; some of which they themselves have initiated.

Many people in the West who generally know very little of the Qur'an, may be surprised to know that this Muslim holy book actually has a lot of things to offer the contemporary world in the area of interfaith dialogues. Those who have studied the Qur'an in depth, Muslims and non-Muslims alike, would readily testify that there are indeed "pearls of wisdom" on the subject in the Qur'an, which the global Muslim community (*ummah*) can share with the rest of the world. In addition to this scriptural wisdom, there are the exemplary views and moral conduct of Prophet Muhammad, and those aspects of his *Sunnah*, which have a direct bearing on the issue of dialogues of faiths and civilizations.

From the point of view of Islamic theology, however, it would have been surprising if the Qur'an and the Prophet had been completely silent on such an important issue. The Qur'an claims it is the last divine message to have been revealed to humankind as a source of spiritual, moral, and intellectual guidance. As such, the Qur'an has to address itself to not only issues "peculiar" to the time of the Prophet, but also "issues of the future" crucial to humankind of subsequent centuries that would endure until the "end of the world." One "contemporary and future issue" the Qur'an has taken up in the seventh century, in "anticipation" of its growing importance to the global human community in later centuries, is the issue of ethnic and religious pluralism. This issue is hardly separable from the issue of

raise the profile of believers in an imminent clash of civilizations and dampen the spirit of advocates of dialogues of civilization, particularly among Muslims. But we are also reminded by the current dangerous situation confronting our global community that at no other time in human history have we been in greater need of dialogues of cultures and civilizations than we are now.