



Research Article

The Institutionalization of Social Distance: Reconsidering Classical Islamic Classifications of Non-muslims in Light of the Qur'anic Vision of Humanity

Mark A Gabriel* 

The Gabriel Forum, Ormond Beach, Florida, United States

Abstract

This article examines the historical transformation of the non-Muslim from a human being addressed within the Qur'an's universal moral vision into a legal category defined by later Islamic jurisprudence. Drawing on textual, historical, and conceptual analysis, it argues that classical juristic classifications such as *dhimmī*, *mu'āhid*, *musta'min*, and *ḥarbī* emerged within specific historical contexts shaped by imperial governance, military conflict, taxation, treaty-making, and communal administration. Although these categories served important regulatory functions in medieval Muslim societies, their continued transmission contributed to the institutionalization of social distance between Muslims and non-Muslims. The article distinguishes between revelation and jurisprudence, arguing that the Qur'an's primary vocabulary concerning humanity is ethical and universal rather than administrative and classificatory. The Qur'an speaks of humankind, the children of Adam, human dignity, justice, mercy, freedom of conscience, moral responsibility, and mutual recognition. By contrast, later legal discourse often approached non-Muslims through inherited categories of status and political relationship. The central claim is not that classical jurists acted without sincerity or intellectual sophistication, but that legal frameworks developed for medieval societies should not be treated as timeless definitions of human relationships. In contemporary pluralistic societies shaped by citizenship, constitutional equality, religious freedom, and shared civic belonging, inherited classifications require critical re-examination. The article therefore proposes a Qur'anic framework for Muslim-non-Muslim relations rooted in human dignity, justice, mercy, freedom, accountability before God, and cooperation in goodness. It concludes that sustainable reform must arise from within the Islamic tradition itself, not through the mere importation of external frameworks, and that recovering the Qur'an's vision of the human person offers a more faithful and constructive foundation for human coexistence in the modern world.

Keywords

Islamic Law, Qur'anic Anthropology, Social Distance, Muslim-Non-Muslim Relations, Human Coexistence, Religious Freedom, Legal Classification, Law and Society

*Correspondence: Mark A Gabriel (drmarkgabriel@pm.me)

Received: 18 June 2026; Accepted: 20 July 2026; Published: 30 July 2026



Copyright: © The Author(s), 2026. Published by Science Publishing Group. This is an **Open Access** article, distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

1. Introduction

Relations between Muslims and non-Muslims have occupied a central place within Islamic legal, political, and theological discourse for centuries. Classical Islamic jurisprudence developed a complex set of legal classifications designed to regulate relations between Muslim societies and various non-Muslim communities. Categories such as *dhimmi*, *mu'ahid*, *musta'min*, and *harbi* emerged within specific historical circumstances and served important administrative, legal, and political functions within pre-modern Muslim polities [7, 10, 14].

The historical significance of these classifications has been widely examined by scholars of Islamic law and history. Much of the existing literature has focused on their legal content, historical development, and practical application within Muslim societies. Contemporary scholarship has also explored their relevance for ongoing discussions concerning citizenship, religious pluralism, constitutionalism, and human rights. Yet an important question remains insufficiently explored: What are the long-term social consequences of legal classifications that persist beyond their original juridical context [2, 13, 20]?

This article argues that the significance of classical Islamic classifications extends beyond their legal function. Through centuries of transmission, education, religious instruction, and collective memory, these categories became embedded within broader social consciousness. As a result, classifications originally developed for legal and administrative purposes acquired social and psychological dimensions that influenced how religious difference was perceived and understood. This process is described here as the institutionalization of social distance [4, 6].

By institutionalization of social distance, this article refers to the transformation of legal distinctions into enduring social perceptions that shape relationships between communities. The concept draws attention to the ways in which legal categories may outlive the historical conditions that produced them and continue to influence patterns of belonging, exclusion, trust, and human encounter. The significance of these classifications therefore lies not only in what they prescribed legally but also in how they contributed to the social construction of the religious other [4, 21].

The article further argues that this development stands in tension with the Qur'an's broader vision of humanity. While classical jurisprudence increasingly organized relations through categories of legal status, the Qur'an consistently approaches human beings through the language of creation, dignity, moral responsibility, justice, mercy, freedom, and mutual recognition. The Qur'an's dominant anthropological categories are mankind and the children of Adam rather than juridical classifications based upon communal identity.

The purpose of this study is not to dismiss the historical contributions of classical jurists nor to deny the legal realities they sought to address. Rather, it seeks to distinguish between historically conditioned legal frameworks and the broader ethical vision of humanity articulated within the Qur'an. In doing so, the article proposes a constructive framework for human

coexistence grounded in Qur'anic principles of human dignity, justice, mercy, freedom of conscience, mutual recognition, benevolence, and cooperation in goodness.

The article proceeds in five parts. The first examines the Qur'anic vision of humanity and its emphasis upon dignity, responsibility, and shared human origin. The second explores the historical development of legal classifications concerning non-Muslims within classical Islamic jurisprudence. The third analyzes the transition from legal classification to social consciousness through the concept of institutionalized social distance. The fourth examines the contemporary implications of these inherited frameworks within modern pluralistic societies. The final section proposes a Qur'anic framework for human coexistence capable of engaging religious diversity while remaining rooted within the Islamic tradition itself.

2. Literature Review

The relationship between Islamic law and non-Muslim communities has generated extensive scholarly discussion across the fields of Islamic studies, legal history, religious studies, and political theory. Scholars have examined the historical development of legal classifications governing relations between Muslims and non-Muslims, the evolution of Islamic governance, and the implications of these frameworks for contemporary debates concerning citizenship, pluralism, and religious freedom.

A substantial body of scholarship has focused on the historical development of classical Islamic jurisprudence and the legal status of non-Muslims within Muslim societies. Scholars such as Wael Hallaq, Yohanan Friedmann, Milka Levy-Rubin, Sherman Jackson, and Bernard Lewis have provided important analyses of the emergence and operation of legal categories including *dhimmi*, *mu'ahid*, *musta'min*, and *harbi*. Their work has significantly advanced understanding of the historical circumstances in which these classifications developed and the legal functions they served within pre-modern Islamic political orders [7, 10-12, 14].

A second body of scholarship has explored the relationship between Islamic legal traditions and contemporary concepts of citizenship, constitutionalism, human rights, and religious freedom. Scholars including Abdullahi Ahmed An-Na'im, Mohammad Hashim Kamali, Khaled Abou El Fadl, Fazlur Rahman, and Abdullah Saeed have examined the possibilities and challenges of interpreting Islamic sources within modern contexts characterized by constitutional governance, equal citizenship, and religious diversity. This literature has contributed substantially to contemporary discussions concerning reform, pluralism, and the compatibility of Islamic legal thought with modern political realities [1, 2, 13, 17, 20]. More recent scholarship has also examined how Islamic concepts may contribute constructively to citizenship education in liberal dem-

ocratic societies, particularly through the integration of religious identity, legal status, civic participation, and rights [9].

The present study also engages sociological scholarship concerning social boundaries, identity formation, and the construction of collective perceptions. The work of Emory Bogardus on social distance, Georg Simmel's analysis of the stranger, Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann's theory of the social construction of reality, and Pierre Bourdieu's examination of institutional reproduction provides valuable theoretical tools for understanding how legal categories may extend beyond their original juridical function and become embedded within collective consciousness [4-6, 21].

In addition, scholarship in law and society studies has demonstrated that legal concepts often shape social perceptions in ways that exceed their formal legal application. The work of scholars such as Sally Engle Merry, Brian Tamanaha, and John Griffiths highlights the complex relationship between legal frameworks, social practice, and collective understandings of identity and difference. These insights are particularly relevant for examining the long-term social consequences of legal classifications [8, 16, 22].

While existing scholarship has made important contributions to understanding the legal status of non-Muslims, the historical development of Islamic law, and contemporary debates concerning citizenship and pluralism, comparatively little attention has been devoted to the relationship between juristic classification and the production of social distance. Much of the literature focuses either on the legal dimensions of classification or on contemporary questions of reform. Less attention has been given to the sociological processes through which legal categories become embedded within institutions, educational systems, religious discourse, and collective memory, thereby influencing how communities perceive and relate to religious others [4, 6].

This article seeks to contribute to that discussion by introducing the concept of the institutionalization of social distance. It argues that the significance of classical classifications lies not only in their historical legal function but also in their capacity to shape social perception across generations. By examining the transition from legal category to social consciousness and by contrasting this development with the Qur'an's broader vision of humanity, the study offers a framework for understanding both the historical roots of social distance and the possibility of overcoming it through a recovery of Qur'anic principles of dignity, justice, mercy, freedom, mutual recognition, and cooperation.

3. The Qur'anic Vision of Humanity

3.1. Creation, Dignity, and Human Responsibility

The Qur'anic understanding of humanity begins not with religious classification, legal status, or communal identity, but

with the creation of the human being itself. Before humanity appears as divided into nations, tribes, religions, and political communities, the Qur'an presents a universal narrative concerning the origin, dignity, and purpose of human existence. This narrative establishes the foundation upon which all subsequent moral and social relationships are built.

According to the Qur'an, the creation of humanity was preceded by a divine announcement to the angels:

"Indeed, I am creating a human being from clay. Then when I have fashioned him and breathed into him of My spirit, fall before him in prostration." (Qur'an 38: 71-72)

In another passage, God declares:

"Indeed, I am placing upon the earth a vicegerent (khalifah)." (Qur'an 2: 30)

The angels immediately express concern regarding the human capacity for corruption and violence:

"Will You place therein one who will spread corruption therein and shed blood, while we glorify You with praise and sanctify You?"

The divine response is both brief and profound:

"Indeed, I know that which you do not know." (Qur'an 2: 30)

These passages establish several foundational principles concerning the nature of humanity. First, human beings are created intentionally rather than accidentally. Their existence forms part of a deliberate divine purpose. Second, humanity is entrusted with a unique role as God's vicegerent upon the earth. Third, human beings possess capacities that distinguish them from the rest of creation, including reason, moral judgment, freedom of choice, and accountability [18, 19].

Most significantly, the Qur'an presents humanity as the recipient of divine honor. This principle is articulated in one of the Qur'an's clearest declarations concerning human dignity [18, 19]:

"Indeed, We have honored the children of Adam." (Qur'an 17: 70)

The importance of this verse lies not only in its affirmation of dignity but also in its universality. The object of divine honor is not Muslims alone, believers alone, or members of a particular community. Rather, the verse speaks of the children of Adam, encompassing humanity as a whole. Human dignity therefore precedes religious affiliation, political identity, legal status, ethnicity, nationality, and social position. It originates in God's act of creation itself.

The Qur'an further presents human beings as morally responsible agents. Humanity is granted the capacity to choose between right and wrong, belief and unbelief, justice and injustice. This freedom is inseparable from accountability. Human beings are not merely creatures; they are moral actors who will ultimately stand before God to answer for their actions. The Qur'anic narrative therefore links freedom, responsibility, and judgment within a coherent moral framework [13].

This vision carries profound implications for human relationships. If every human being is created by God, honored by God, entrusted with responsibility by God, and accountable

before God, then no human classification can fully define a person's worth. Legal, social, and political categories may serve administrative functions, but they remain secondary to the more fundamental reality of shared humanity. The human being comes before the category.

The significance of this principle extends throughout the Qur'an. Again and again, the text addresses mankind (al-nas), the children of Adam (Bani Adam), and humanity as a whole. These universal categories provide the primary framework through which the Qur'an approaches human existence. Diversity of belief and identity is acknowledged, but such distinctions are introduced within the broader context of a common human origin, shared dignity, and collective moral responsibility [18].

The Qur'anic vision of humanity therefore begins with inclusion rather than exclusion, dignity rather than hierarchy, and moral responsibility rather than legal classification. Any attempt to understand Muslim relations with others must begin from this foundational anthropology. It is here, at the level of creation itself, that the Qur'an establishes its most fundamental understanding of what it means to be human.

3.2. Humanity Before Classification: The Children of Adam and Mankind

The Qur'an's anthropology extends beyond the creation narrative and continues through its recurring manner of addressing humanity. One of the most striking features of the Qur'anic text is its repeated use of universal categories when speaking about human beings. Long before discussing religious communities, legal distinctions, or political relationships, the Qur'an consistently addresses humanity as a whole.

Among the most significant of these expressions is the phrase "the children of Adam" (Bani Adam). The Qur'an declares:

"Indeed, We have honored the children of Adam." (Qur'an 17: 70) [19]

The importance of this formulation lies in its universality. The verse does not distinguish between believers and non-believers, Muslims and non-Muslims, or members of different communities. Instead, it identifies all human beings through their shared ancestry and common origin. Humanity is united by creation before it is divided by belief, culture, ethnicity, or social affiliation.

The Qur'an likewise frequently employs the term al-nas (mankind, humanity, or people) when addressing its audience. Numerous passages begin with the expression:

"O mankind" (Ya Ayyuha al-Nas) [18]

This mode of address is significant because it transcends communal boundaries. Rather than speaking exclusively to a particular religious group, the Qur'an repeatedly speaks to humanity itself. The object of moral instruction is often not a specific community but the human family as a whole.

This universal language reveals an important feature of the Qur'anic worldview. Human beings are first approached as

members of a shared humanity. Religious identity remains important and is addressed throughout the Qur'an, but it does not replace the more fundamental category of human existence. The Qur'an consistently acknowledges differences of belief while preserving the deeper reality of common human origin and dignity [13, 18].

The significance of this perspective becomes clearer when compared with later classificatory systems. Classical Islamic jurisprudence developed increasingly detailed legal categories through which individuals were identified according to their relationship with the Muslim political order. Such classifications served important legal and administrative purposes. Yet the primary vocabulary of the Qur'an remains noticeably different. Its dominant categories are moral and anthropological rather than administrative and juridical.

The distinction is not merely linguistic. It reflects two different starting points for understanding human relationships. One begins with humanity and proceeds toward questions of belief, conduct, and responsibility. The other begins with legal status and proceeds toward questions of rights, obligations, and political belonging. Both approaches address important concerns, but they operate from different conceptual foundations.

The Qur'anic approach places humanity at the center of the discussion. Human beings appear first as creatures of God, recipients of divine guidance, bearers of dignity, and moral agents responsible for their actions. Only afterward do questions of communal identity and legal relationship emerge. This ordering is significant because it establishes a hierarchy of concepts in which shared humanity precedes legal classification [19].

The repeated use of universal categories such as mankind and the children of Adam suggests that the Qur'an's primary concern is not the construction of boundaries between human beings but the articulation of ethical responsibilities within a shared human condition. Diversity is acknowledged, disagreement is recognized, and differences of belief are treated seriously. Yet these realities exist within a broader framework that consistently affirms the common humanity of all people.

From this perspective, the human person remains visible before the category. The individual is encountered first as a member of the human family and only subsequently as a representative of a particular religious or political classification. This distinction will prove critical in understanding the contrast between the Qur'an's vision of humanity and the later development of legal classifications concerning non-Muslims.

3.3. Freedom, Accountability, and Equality Before God

The Qur'anic understanding of humanity is inseparable from the concepts of freedom, accountability, and moral responsibility. Human beings are not portrayed as passive subjects within a predetermined social order. Rather, they are presented as moral agents capable of making choices and bearing

responsibility for those choices before God.

This principle appears throughout the Qur'an. Human beings are repeatedly called to reflect, reason, consider, choose, and respond. The possibility of belief is consistently accompanied by the possibility of rejection. Moral responsibility presupposes freedom because accountability loses its meaning in the absence of genuine choice.

For this reason, the Qur'an repeatedly emphasizes the limits of human authority over the conscience of others. Addressing the Prophet Muhammad himself, the Qur'an asks:

"Will you then compel people until they become believers?" (Qur'an 10: 99)

Elsewhere it declares:

"There is no compulsion in religion." (Qur'an 2: 256)

The Prophet is further reminded:

"You are only a reminder." (Qur'an 88: 21)

And:

"You are not over them a controller." (Qur'an 88: 22)

These passages establish an important distinction between persuasion and coercion. The role of the believer is to communicate, invite, explain, and bear witness to truth as he understands it. The acceptance or rejection of that message ultimately belongs to the individual and is judged by God alone. Faith, according to the Qur'anic vision, must arise from conviction rather than compulsion [20].

The theological basis of this principle lies in the Qur'an's understanding of accountability. Every human being will ultimately stand before God to answer for his or her own actions. No individual carries the burden of another, and no human authority possesses complete knowledge of another person's conscience. Ultimate judgment belongs exclusively to God because only God possesses perfect knowledge of the human heart [18, 20].

This framework naturally leads to a profound understanding of human equality. Although human societies create distinctions based upon ethnicity, nationality, social status, political authority, and religious affiliation, the Qur'an repeatedly reminds humanity that all people share a common origin and a common accountability before their Creator.

This principle is expressed in one of the Qur'an's most significant declarations concerning human diversity and equality:

"O mankind, We created you from a male and a female and made you peoples and tribes so that you may know one another. Indeed, the most honored of you in the sight of God is the most righteous among you." (Qur'an 49: 13) [13].

The verse acknowledges diversity but refuses to transform diversity into hierarchy. Peoples and tribes are presented as means of recognition rather than instruments of superiority. Human distinction before God is not determined by race, tribe, nationality, wealth, power, or inherited identity. Rather, the criterion of honor is moral conduct known fully only to God.

The implications of this principle are far-reaching. It challenges every attempt to establish permanent hierarchies

among human beings based upon collective identity. It reminds believers that all people stand before the same Creator and are subject to the same ultimate judgment. Human beings may disagree profoundly regarding matters of belief, yet they remain equal in their status as creatures of God, bearers of dignity, and moral agents accountable before Him.

The Qur'anic vision therefore combines freedom with responsibility and equality with accountability. Human beings are free because they are responsible. They are responsible because they will be judged. They are equal because all stand before the same divine authority. This understanding forms a critical component of the Qur'an's anthropology and provides an essential foundation for relations among people who differ in belief, culture, and identity.

While the Qur'an presents humanity through the universal principles of creation, dignity, moral responsibility, and accountability before God, Muslim jurists were later required to address the practical realities of governance, political authority, territorial expansion, treaty relations, and social organization. The legal frameworks that subsequently emerged were developed within these historical circumstances and reflected the challenges of managing increasingly complex societies. Understanding this distinction between the Qur'an's foundational vision and the historical development of jurisprudence is essential for examining how later legal classifications evolved and how their influence extended beyond their original context.

4. From Revelation to Jurisprudence

4.1. The Historical Context of Juristic Development

The distinction between the Qur'an's vision of humanity and the later development of Islamic legal classifications should not be understood as a contradiction between revelation and jurisprudence. Rather, it reflects the emergence of different intellectual concerns within different historical contexts. Revelation addressed the moral, spiritual, and social foundations of human life. Jurisprudence, by contrast, developed in response to the practical challenges of governance, administration, conflict, and communal organization [10, 11].

During the lifetime of the Prophet Muhammad, the Muslim community remained relatively small and existed within a rapidly changing social and political environment. Questions concerning belief, morality, justice, social relations, and communal cohesion occupied a central place within the Qur'anic message. Although political and legal issues were certainly present, the Qur'an's dominant concern remained the moral formation of individuals and communities.

The historical circumstances confronting later Muslim jurists were substantially different. Within a relatively short period after the Prophet's death, Muslim political authority ex-

panded across vast territories encompassing diverse populations, cultures, languages, and religious traditions. Muslims found themselves governing societies that included Christians, Jews, Zoroastrians, and numerous other communities. New questions emerged that had not existed in the same form during the formative Qur'anic period [10].

Jurists were required to address practical matters concerning taxation, military obligations, commercial relations, judicial authority, treaty arrangements, diplomatic relations, public order, and the legal status of religious minorities living under Muslim rule. These questions demanded systematic legal responses. As a result, Islamic jurisprudence gradually developed increasingly sophisticated frameworks for regulating relationships between Muslim political authorities and various non-Muslim populations [11, 14].

It is important to recognize that these developments occurred within the context of pre-modern empires rather than modern nation-states. Concepts such as equal citizenship, constitutional democracy, universal human rights, and secular governance did not exist in their contemporary forms. Like their counterparts in other civilizations, Muslim jurists worked within a world structured by communal identity, political sovereignty, territorial control, and religious affiliation [11, 15].

The legal classifications that emerged during this period therefore reflected specific historical realities. They were designed to address practical questions concerning governance and social order rather than to provide a comprehensive theological anthropology. Their primary purpose was administrative and juridical. They sought to define legal relationships within the political context of medieval Muslim societies [7, 14].

Recognizing this historical context is essential for understanding the development of Islamic legal thought. The jurists were not simply repeating the language of revelation. They were responding to new circumstances that required legal elaboration and institutional organization. Their work represented an effort to translate broad moral principles into concrete legal frameworks capable of governing complex societies [10].

The distinction between revelation and jurisprudence is therefore not a distinction between divine and human concerns, but between different levels of discourse. Revelation provides ethical principles, moral orientation, and theological foundations. Jurisprudence represents the human effort to apply those principles within particular historical conditions. While the former claims universal authority, the latter inevitably reflects the assumptions, challenges, and limitations of the societies in which it developed.

This distinction becomes particularly important when examining the legal classifications concerning non-Muslims. These classifications emerged within a specific historical environment and served identifiable legal purposes. Understanding their origins allows us to appreciate their historical significance while also raising important questions concerning their

continued relevance in contemporary societies organized according to fundamentally different political and social principles [7, 11].

Recognizing the historical context of juristic development does not diminish the intellectual achievements of the classical tradition. Rather, it allows legal classifications to be understood within the circumstances that gave rise to them. The political structures, territorial realities, and patterns of inter-communal relations that shaped early juristic reasoning were products of particular historical conditions. As those conditions evolved over time, an important question emerged: whether classifications originally developed to address specific legal and administrative concerns would continue to influence social perceptions long after the circumstances that produced them had changed.

4.2. The Construction of Legal Categories: Dhimmi, Mu'ahid, Musta'min, and Harbi

As Islamic jurisprudence matured, jurists developed increasingly sophisticated classifications to regulate relations between Muslim political authorities and non-Muslim populations. These classifications emerged as part of a broader effort to address questions of governance, security, diplomacy, taxation, military conflict, and communal coexistence within expanding Muslim societies [10, 11].

Among the most influential of these categories was the concept of the dhimmi. The term referred to non-Muslim subjects, particularly Jews and Christians, who resided under Muslim political authority and received legal protection in exchange for accepting certain civic obligations. Jurists devoted considerable attention to defining the rights, responsibilities, and legal status associated with this category. The dhimmi framework became one of the most enduring features of classical Islamic governance and remained influential across numerous Muslim polities for centuries [7, 14].

A second category was the mu'ahid, referring to individuals or communities linked to Muslim authorities through treaty agreements or formal covenants. Jurists developed extensive discussions concerning the rights and obligations arising from such agreements, reflecting the importance of diplomacy and negotiated relationships within the medieval international order [7, 12].

A third category was the musta'min, referring to non-Muslims who entered Muslim territory under a grant of security or safe conduct. This classification addressed questions concerning temporary residence, commercial activity, travel, and legal protection. It reflected the need to regulate interactions among populations moving across political boundaries [11].

The fourth category, and often the most consequential in discussions of political relations, was the harbi. In classical jurisprudence, this designation generally referred to individuals or communities associated with territories considered outside treaty relationships and outside the authority of Muslim

governance. The category emerged within a world characterized by competing empires, shifting alliances, and frequent military conflict. It reflected the geopolitical realities of the medieval period rather than the assumptions of contemporary citizenship-based societies [7, 11].

Viewed individually, each of these classifications addressed identifiable legal concerns. They provided jurists with conceptual tools for organizing legal relationships within a complex and diverse political environment. In this sense, they represented efforts at legal systematization rather than arbitrary exercises in categorization.

The significance of these classifications, however, extends beyond their immediate legal function. Together they created a framework through which non-Muslims were increasingly understood according to juridical status rather than shared humanity. The primary question gradually shifted from "Who is this person?" to "What legal category does this person occupy?" The individual became visible through the lens of legal classification [4, 6].

This transformation should not be exaggerated. Classical jurists did not deny the humanity of non-Muslims, nor did they ignore broader ethical principles found within the Qur'an. Nevertheless, the structure of legal discourse increasingly organized social relationships around categories of status, protection, treaty, security, and conflict. Over time, these classifications became central reference points within discussions concerning relations between Muslims and others.

The result was the gradual emergence of a classificatory framework that differed significantly from the Qur'an's dominant anthropological vocabulary. Whereas the Qur'an repeatedly speaks of mankind, the children of Adam, justice, mercy, and moral responsibility, juristic discourse increasingly spoke in terms of legal status and political relationship. The shift was subtle but important. Human beings remained present within the discussion, but they increasingly appeared through the mediation of legal categories [7, 11].

It is important to distinguish between legal classification and human valuation. The categories developed within classical jurisprudence were primarily intended to regulate legal relationships, political obligations, and questions of governance within specific historical contexts. While these classifications shaped legal status and institutional arrangements, they were not necessarily conceived as comprehensive judgments regarding the intrinsic dignity, moral worth, or humanity of the individuals to whom they were applied. This distinction becomes particularly significant when examining how legal categories may later acquire broader social meanings beyond their original juridical function.

This development marked a significant stage in the evolution of Islamic legal thought. What began as administrative and juridical distinctions gradually acquired broader social significance. The categories did not remain confined to legal manuals. Through education, religious instruction, scholarly commentary, and communal practice, they became part of the intellectual framework through which generations of Muslims

understood the religious other [4, 6].

5. From Legal Classification to Social Consciousness

5.1. The Institutionalization of Social Distance

Legal classifications rarely remain confined to legal texts. Once embedded within educational institutions, religious instruction, scholarly discourse, and communal memory, they often acquire a significance that extends far beyond their original juridical purpose. Over time, legal categories can shape social perceptions, influence patterns of interaction, and contribute to the formation of collective understandings regarding both self and other [4, 6].

This process may be described as the institutionalization of social distance. The concept refers to the gradual transformation of legal distinctions into enduring social perceptions transmitted through educational institutions, religious instruction, scholarly discourse, communal memory, and cultural practice. Through this process, categories originally designed to regulate legal relationships acquire broader social significance and begin to influence how communities perceive, approach, and interact with religious others [5].

For the purposes of this article, the institutionalization of social distance refers to the process through which legal distinctions become embedded within educational, religious, cultural, and social institutions and are gradually internalized as part of collective social understanding. Over time, classifications originally developed for specific juridical purposes may extend beyond their legal function and become normalized as frameworks through which communities perceive social relationships, group boundaries, and patterns of belonging. The concept does not imply deliberate hostility or conscious exclusion. Rather, it describes the gradual transformation of historically contingent legal distinctions into enduring social assumptions that continue to shape perception long after the original circumstances that produced them have changed.

The concept of the institutionalization of social distance draws upon broader sociological insights concerning the relationship between institutions, collective perception, and social boundaries. Sociologists have long observed that social distance is not merely an individual attitude but a phenomenon reproduced through cultural, educational, and institutional processes. The work of Emory Bogardus demonstrated that perceptions of social proximity and distance can shape relations between communities, while Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann highlighted the ways in which socially constructed categories become embedded within collective consciousness and subsequently appear as natural features of social reality. Similarly, Pierre Bourdieu's analysis of institutional reproduction illustrates how inherited frameworks may continue to shape perceptions long after the conditions that produced them have changed. These insights provide a useful analytical

framework for understanding how legal classifications may extend beyond their original juridical function and become enduring elements of social consciousness. [4-6].

The significance of this concept lies in its ability to bridge legal history and social experience. Rather than viewing legal classifications as confined to courts and legal manuals, the concept highlights their capacity to shape collective perceptions across generations. It therefore provides a framework for examining not only what legal categories prescribed but also how they contributed to the formation of social boundaries and patterns of human interaction [16, 22].

The classical Islamic classifications of *dhimmi*, *mu'ahid*, *musta'min*, and *harbi* emerged within specific historical circumstances and addressed identifiable legal concerns. Yet their influence was not limited to courts, legal manuals, or administrative institutions. Through centuries of transmission, these classifications became incorporated into religious education, scholarly commentary, sermons, public discourse, and popular understanding. As a result, legal categories increasingly contributed to the formation of social attitudes toward non-Muslims [7, 14].

This development did not necessarily require explicit hostility. Social distance often emerges without animosity. It may arise through inherited assumptions concerning belonging, difference, familiarity, and trust. When individuals are consistently encountered through pre-existing categories, the category itself begins to shape perception. The religious other is no longer approached primarily as a fellow human being but as a representative of a legal or communal classification [5, 21].

The process should not be exaggerated. Classical jurists did not deny the humanity of non-Muslims, nor did they ignore broader ethical principles found within the Qur'an. Nevertheless, the structure of legal discourse increasingly organized social relationships around categories of status, protection, treaty, security, and conflict. Over time, these classifications became central reference points within discussions concerning relations between Muslims and others.

The result was the gradual emergence of a classificatory framework that differed significantly from the Qur'an's dominant anthropological vocabulary. Whereas the Qur'an repeatedly speaks of mankind, the children of Adam, justice, mercy, and moral responsibility, juristic discourse increasingly spoke in terms of legal status and political relationship. The shift was subtle but important. Human beings remained present within the discussion, but they increasingly appeared through the mediation of legal categories [4].

This development marked a significant stage in the evolution of Islamic legal thought. What began as administrative and juridical distinctions gradually acquired broader social significance. The categories did not remain confined to legal manuals. Through education, religious instruction, scholarly commentary, and communal practice, they became part of the intellectual framework through which generations of Muslims understood the religious other [4, 6].

5.2. The Construction of the Religious Other

One of the most significant consequences of institutionalized classification is the gradual construction of the religious other. While legal categories may initially serve administrative and juridical functions, their continued transmission often influences the way communities perceive those who exist beyond their own religious boundaries. Over time, classification can become perception, and perception can become social reality [4, 21].

The construction of the religious other is not unique to Islamic societies. Sociologists have long observed that communities often develop symbolic boundaries through which distinctions between "us" and "them" are maintained and reproduced. Such boundaries are rarely sustained through legal structures alone. Rather, they are reinforced through education, collective memory, religious discourse, cultural narratives, and everyday social practice. Over time, these processes shape collective perceptions regarding belonging, difference, trust, and identity. The religious other thus emerges not simply as a theological category but as a social construction embedded within communal consciousness [21].

The transition from legal classification to the construction of the religious other represents a critical stage in the formation of social boundaries. Once classifications become embedded within collective consciousness, they begin to function not merely as legal distinctions but as interpretive frameworks through which communities understand themselves and others. The category increasingly becomes a lens through which human beings are perceived. Over time, distinctions originally intended to regulate legal relationships may contribute to broader perceptions of belonging, difference, familiarity, and exclusion. In this way, the religious other emerges not simply as a theological reality but also as a social construct shaped by inherited patterns of classification and collective memory [4, 6].

The concept of the "religious other" does not arise merely from theological disagreement. Religious communities have differed in belief throughout human history without necessarily producing enduring patterns of social distance. The construction of the religious other occurs when difference becomes organized through inherited frameworks that systematically distinguish between those who belong and those who do not. In such contexts, individuals are increasingly understood not as unique persons but as representatives of broader categories [21].

The formation of social and religious boundaries is not unique to Islamic societies. Throughout human history, communities have frequently developed distinctions between those perceived as belonging to the group and those viewed as existing beyond its boundaries. Sociological scholarship has demonstrated that such processes often emerge through collective identities, inherited narratives, and institutional structures that shape perceptions of self and other. The significance of the present discussion therefore lies not in the existence of

boundaries themselves, but in examining how particular legal classifications may become embedded within social consciousness and contribute to enduring patterns of perception [5, 21].

The classical classifications developed within Islamic jurisprudence contributed to this process by providing an established vocabulary through which non-Muslims could be understood and situated within the social order. The categories of dhimmi, mu'ahid, musta'min, and harbi addressed legal relationships, yet their repeated use across generations also influenced social imagination. The non-Muslim increasingly appeared not simply as a neighbor, colleague, fellow citizen, or fellow human being, but as a member of a predefined juridical classification [7, 14].

This development illustrates the broader sociological phenomenon through which categories shape perception. Human beings rarely encounter one another in a conceptual vacuum. They approach others through assumptions, narratives, and inherited frameworks acquired from families, educational institutions, religious communities, and cultural traditions. When legal classifications become deeply embedded within collective consciousness, they can function as interpretive lenses through which social relationships are understood [4].

The consequence is often a subtle shift in human encounter. The primary question is no longer, "Who is this person?" but rather, "To which category does this person belong?" Identity precedes encounter. Classification precedes relationship. The individual becomes secondary to the collective label through which he or she is viewed.

Such processes need not produce overt hostility. Social distance frequently manifests through caution, unfamiliarity, suspicion, or limited interaction rather than explicit animosity. Communities may coexist peacefully while nevertheless remaining separated by conceptual boundaries inherited from earlier periods. The result is a diminished capacity for genuine human encounter, mutual understanding, and shared civic belonging [5].

This dynamic becomes particularly significant in contemporary pluralistic societies. Modern social life increasingly requires interaction among individuals of different religious, cultural, and ideological backgrounds. Citizenship, professional cooperation, education, commerce, and public participation all depend upon forms of engagement that transcend inherited communal boundaries. Frameworks that prioritize classification over encounter may therefore create tensions within environments that require cooperation and mutual recognition [16, 22].

The Qur'anic vision of humanity offers an important point of contrast. As demonstrated in the preceding sections, the Qur'an consistently addresses human beings through universal categories such as mankind, the children of Adam, moral responsibility, and human dignity. Difference is acknowledged, but it does not erase shared humanity. The human person remains visible before the category.

This distinction carries significant implications. A framework centered primarily upon legal classification tends to approach the individual through collective identity. A framework centered upon shared humanity approaches the individual first as a person and only subsequently as a member of a particular community. The difference between these approaches is not merely theoretical. It shapes how societies understand diversity, how communities relate to one another, and how individuals experience those who are different from themselves.

The construction of the religious other therefore represents more than a historical development within legal thought. It reflects a broader transformation in social perception. Understanding this transformation is essential for any effort to reexamine Muslim-non-Muslim relations in the contemporary world. If social distance has been institutionalized through inherited classifications, meaningful renewal requires a framework capable of restoring the visibility of the human person beyond the category [4, 6].

6. The Contemporary Crisis

6.1. Medieval Categories in a Modern World

The historical classifications developed within classical Islamic jurisprudence emerged in societies organized according to assumptions very different from those that govern contemporary political life. Medieval legal frameworks operated within empires characterized by communal identity, religious affiliation, territorial sovereignty, and differentiated legal status. Modern societies, by contrast, are increasingly organized around concepts such as citizenship, constitutional equality, individual rights, religious freedom, and shared civic participation [7, 11].

This transformation raises an important question: What becomes of historical legal classifications when the social and political conditions that produced them no longer exist?

The central question is therefore not whether classical jurists were correct in addressing the realities of their own historical context. Every legal tradition develops mechanisms designed to respond to the circumstances of its time. The more significant question concerns the continued influence of those classifications after the social and political conditions that produced them have fundamentally changed. When categories developed for medieval imperial societies continue to shape perceptions within contemporary constitutional states, tensions inevitably emerge between inherited frameworks and present realities. It is this transition from historical context to contemporary consciousness that lies at the heart of the present discussion [10, 11].

The contemporary significance of this discussion lies not primarily in the continued existence of historical legal classifications, but in the enduring social assumptions that may survive long after their original legal context has disappeared. As

explored in the preceding sections, legal categories can become embedded within collective memory, educational traditions, religious discourse, and social consciousness. When this occurs, inherited frameworks may continue to shape perceptions of belonging, difference, and social relationships even within contemporary societies governed by principles of equal citizenship and constitutional equality. It is this tension between historical inheritance and contemporary realities that forms the central challenge examined in this article [4, 6].

For many contemporary Muslims, the classical categories of *dhimmi*, *mu'ahid*, *musta'min*, and *harbi* possess little direct legal relevance. Modern states generally define individuals according to citizenship rather than religious status. Constitutional systems typically grant legal equality to citizens regardless of religious affiliation. International law regulates relations among states, while domestic legal systems govern the rights and responsibilities of individuals within society [2, 13].

Yet the disappearance of formal legal structures does not necessarily eliminate the conceptual frameworks associated with them. Categories may survive long after the institutions that produced them have disappeared. Ideas transmitted through religious education, scholarly literature, communal memory, and popular discourse often continue to influence social perception even when their original legal context no longer exists [4].

This tension is particularly visible in societies experiencing increasing religious and cultural diversity. Muslims living as minorities in non-Muslim-majority societies frequently participate in political systems built upon principles of equal citizenship, constitutional protection, and civic belonging. At the same time, inherited frameworks developed under very different historical circumstances may continue to shape understandings of identity, loyalty, social boundaries, and relations with non-Muslims [2, 20]. Recent scholarship on intra-Salafi debates concerning naturalization likewise demonstrates that inherited territorial and theological classifications continue to influence contemporary discussions of Muslim citizenship, loyalty, and political belonging in non-Muslim-majority states [3].

The result is a complex intellectual and social challenge. Modern realities require forms of cooperation, participation, and coexistence that transcend historical categories. Educational institutions, workplaces, civic organizations, professional associations, and democratic political systems depend upon sustained interaction among people of different beliefs and backgrounds. Yet inherited assumptions may continue to encourage forms of social distance that limit such interaction. [16, 22].

The challenge is not confined to Muslim minorities. Similar tensions can be observed within Muslim-majority societies where questions concerning citizenship, religious freedom, minority rights, and national identity continue to generate public debate. As contemporary states increasingly adopt constitutional frameworks grounded in equal citizenship, older classificatory models often coexist uneasily with newer political realities [13].

This coexistence produces a form of conceptual dissonance. Individuals may participate fully in modern civic life while simultaneously inheriting conceptual frameworks rooted in pre-modern assumptions about religious differences. The resulting tension affects not only legal and political discourse but also everyday social relationships, public trust, and perceptions of belonging.

The contemporary relevance of these issues extends beyond Muslim-non-Muslim relations alone. At stake is the broader question of how religious traditions engage changing social realities while remaining faithful to their foundational principles. The challenge is not whether historical legal thought should be respected, but how historically conditioned frameworks should be understood within contexts fundamentally different from those in which they originally developed.

From this perspective, the central issue is not the preservation or rejection of classical classifications as such. Rather, it is the need to distinguish between enduring moral principles and historically contingent legal constructions. Such a distinction opens the possibility of engaging contemporary realities without abandoning the ethical and spiritual foundations of the Islamic tradition [2, 11].

6.2. Social Distance and Contemporary Challenges

The institutionalization of social distance carries implications that extend far beyond questions of legal theory. Once embedded within collective consciousness, inherited perceptions of religious difference can influence patterns of interaction, trust, cooperation, and civic participation. The effects are often subtle, yet their cumulative impact may significantly shape relations among communities [4, 5].

One of the most important consequences of social distance is the reduction of meaningful human encounters. Individuals who primarily understand others through inherited categories are less likely to engage them as unique persons. The category becomes the dominant lens through which the individual is perceived. As a result, opportunities for mutual understanding may be limited before genuine interaction even begins [21].

This dynamic can create obstacles to social integration in increasingly diverse societies. Integration does not require the abandonment of religious conviction, cultural identity, or communal belonging. Rather, it depends upon the ability of individuals and communities to participate within shared social and civic spaces while maintaining their distinct identities. Such participation requires trust, cooperation, and recognition of common interests that transcend religious differences [16].

When social distance becomes normalized, however, the development of such relationships may be hindered. Communities may coexist geographically while remaining socially separated. Individuals may work together, study together, and inhabit the same political environment while continuing to perceive one another through inherited conceptual boundaries.

The result is often a form of parallel existence rather than genuine social cohesion [5].

The implications are particularly significant in democratic societies organized around principles of equal citizenship. Modern civic life depends upon the assumption that individuals from different religious, cultural, and ideological backgrounds can cooperate in pursuit of shared goals. Educational institutions, professional organizations, public services, and political systems all rely upon forms of interaction that transcend communal divisions. Frameworks that emphasize separation over encounter may therefore generate tensions within societies built upon civic inclusion [22].

Social distance may also affect perceptions of religious freedom. If the religious other is viewed primarily through inherited categories of difference, theological disagreement can become intertwined with social suspicion. The freedom of others to believe, change belief, or reject belief may be regarded less as an expression of human conscience and more as a challenge to communal identity. Such perceptions complicate efforts to cultivate cultures of mutual respect within religiously diverse environments [2, 20].

At a broader level, the persistence of social distance influences the formation of civic belonging. Shared citizenship requires more than legal recognition. It also depends upon the willingness of individuals to view one another as legitimate participants within a common social and political community. Where inherited frameworks continue to define relationships primarily through religious boundaries, the development of shared civic identity may be constrained [16].

These challenges are not unique to Muslim societies or Muslim communities. Similar dynamics can be observed whenever social groups construct enduring conceptual boundaries between themselves and others. The phenomenon therefore reflects a broader sociological reality rather than an exclusively Islamic one. Nevertheless, the specific historical classifications developed within Islamic jurisprudence provide an important case study through which to examine the long-term relationship between legal categories, social perception, and communal interaction.

Understanding these contemporary challenges does not require the rejection of religious identity or theological conviction. Rather, it requires a critical examination of the conceptual frameworks through which human difference is understood. The question facing contemporary societies is not whether religious communities should maintain their beliefs, but whether inherited categories should continue to define the terms upon which human beings encounter one another.

It is precisely at this point that the Qur'anic vision of humanity regains its contemporary significance. By emphasizing shared human dignity, moral responsibility, justice, mercy, and mutual recognition, the Qur'an offers a framework capable of engaging diversity without denying difference. Such a framework provides an alternative foundation for coexistence, one rooted not in social distance but in the recognition of a common humanity [13, 18].

7. Toward a Qur'anic Framework for Human Coexistence

The preceding sections have argued that classical Islamic classifications concerning non-Muslims emerged within specific historical circumstances and gradually contributed to the institutionalization of social distance. While these classifications served important juridical functions in their original context, their continued influence raises significant challenges within contemporary societies characterized by religious diversity, constitutional citizenship, and shared civic participation.

The question therefore becomes whether the Islamic tradition contains resources capable of supporting a different framework for human relations. This article argues that such a framework can be found within the Qur'an's own vision of humanity. The Qur'an consistently approaches human beings through categories of creation, dignity, moral responsibility, justice, mercy, and mutual recognition. These principles provide the foundation for a constructive model of coexistence capable of engaging contemporary realities while remaining firmly rooted within the Islamic tradition.

If the institutionalization of social distance describes the gradual normalization of inherited distinctions within collective social consciousness, the Qur'anic framework outlined in this article offers a different point of departure. By grounding human relationships in creation, dignity, justice, freedom, diversity, mercy, and mutual recognition, the Qur'an provides a framework through which social boundaries may be reconsidered without denying religious difference. The significance of this approach lies not in eliminating diversity, but in ensuring that diversity is approached through principles that preserve the visibility and dignity of the human person before all secondary classifications.

Rather than beginning with legal classification, a Qur'anic framework begins with the human person. Rather than defining relationships primarily through inherited categories of difference, it emphasizes the shared dignity of all members of the human family. In doing so, it offers a basis for overcoming social distance without requiring the abandonment of religious conviction or theological commitment.

7.1. Human Dignity as the Foundation of Human Coexistence

Any sustainable framework for human coexistence must begin with a clear understanding of human worth. The Qur'an establishes this foundation through its affirmation of the inherent dignity of the human person. Rather than deriving value from religious affiliation, political status, ethnicity, nationality, or social position, the Qur'an grounds human dignity in the act of divine creation itself.

This principle finds its clearest expression in the declaration: "Indeed, We have honored the children of Adam." (Qur'an 17: 70)

The significance of this verse lies in its universality. The object of divine honor is not limited to a particular religious community but encompasses humanity as a whole. Every human being shares in the dignity that accompanies creation. Human worth therefore precedes legal classification, communal identity, and social status [18, 19].

This understanding carries profound implications for human relationships. If all people are recipients of divine honor, then every social, legal, and political framework must respect a dignity that exists prior to human judgment. Differences of belief remain real and significant, yet they do not erase the fundamental worth that the Qur'an attributes to every member of the human family [13].

The recognition of human dignity also provides an important corrective to forms of social perception shaped primarily by inherited classifications. When human beings are approached first through categories, their individuality and humanity may become obscured. A dignity-centered framework reverses this process. The individual appears first as a human being honored by God and only subsequently as a member of a particular community, tradition, or social group.

In this sense, human dignity functions as a unifying principle within the Qur'anic vision of humanity. It creates a moral foundation upon which relations among people of different beliefs and backgrounds can be constructed. It does not require agreement in matters of theology, nor does it eliminate genuine differences of conviction. Rather, it establishes a shared moral starting point from which disagreement can be managed without denying the humanity of those who differ [19].

A Qur'anic framework for coexistence must therefore begin where the Qur'an itself begins: with the dignity of the human person. Before legal status, before communal affiliation, before religious classification stands the human being, honored by God and entrusted with moral responsibility. It is this recognition that makes meaningful coexistence possible.

7.2. Justice as a Universal Obligation

If human dignity establishes the worth of the human person, justice establishes the moral framework through which human beings are required to relate to one another. Throughout the Qur'an, justice is not presented as a privilege reserved for members of a particular community. Rather, it appears as a universal moral obligation that governs all human relationships.

The Qur'an declares:

"Indeed, God commands justice, excellence, and generosity toward relatives, and He forbids immorality, wrongdoing, and oppression." (Qur'an 16: 90) [13].

This verse occupies a central place within the Qur'anic ethical vision. Significantly, the command is not restricted to relations among Muslims alone. Justice is presented as a general principle rooted in the character and will of God. It functions as a universal standard by which human conduct is measured.

The Qur'an further instructs believers:

"O you who believe, stand firmly for God as witnesses in justice." (Qur'an 4: 135) [13].

Justice in this context is not merely a legal procedure but a moral commitment. It requires individuals to uphold fairness even when doing so challenges personal interests, communal loyalties, or inherited prejudices. The obligation to act justly is grounded not in group identity but in accountability before God [19].

Equally important is the Qur'anic insistence that justice must not be compromised by disagreement or hostility. The text warns believers against allowing conflict or negative feelings toward others to become a justification for injustice. Moral integrity requires that justice remain constant regardless of the identity of those involved.

This principle carries profound implications for relations among people of different beliefs and backgrounds. If justice is a divine command rather than a communal preference, then it cannot be limited by religious classification. The obligation to act justly extends to all human beings because all human beings stand within the scope of God's moral concern.

Within the context of contemporary pluralistic societies, this understanding provides an important foundation for coexistence. Shared civic life depends upon the assurance that individuals will be treated fairly regardless of their religious affiliation, ethnicity, or social identity. The Qur'anic commitment to justice supports precisely such an ethic. It calls believers to engage others according to principles of fairness and integrity rather than inherited assumptions of difference [2].

Justice therefore functions as a bridge between human dignity and social coexistence. Human dignity affirms the worth of every person; justice provides the practical means through which that dignity is respected in everyday life. Together they establish a moral framework capable of sustaining relationships across lines of religious and cultural diversity [13, 18].

In this sense, justice is not merely one virtue among many. It is the social expression of the Qur'an's vision of humanity. A community that recognizes human dignity but fails to practice justice undermines its own moral foundations. Conversely, a commitment to justice affirms the shared humanity that the Qur'an places at the center of human existence.

7.3. Mercy as the Governing Principle of Human Relations

Among the most profound themes in the Qur'an is the principle of mercy. Mercy is not presented merely as a personal virtue or occasional act of kindness. Rather, it occupies a central place within the Qur'anic understanding of God, revelation, and human relationships. It functions as a governing principle through which believers are called to engage both God and one another.

This principle finds its clearest expression in the Qur'anic description of the Prophet Muhammad:

"We have not sent you except as a mercy to the world." (Qur'an 21: 107)

The significance of this verse lies in the breadth of its language. The Qur'an does not describe the Prophet as a mercy to Muslims alone, nor to believers alone, nor to a particular nation or community. Rather, he is presented as a mercy to the world. The scope of mercy extends beyond communal boundaries and embraces humanity in its diversity [18].

This understanding carries important implications for human coexistence. If the mission of the Prophet is characterized by mercy, then relations among human beings cannot be governed exclusively by categories of separation, suspicion, or exclusion. Mercy requires recognition of the humanity of others even in the presence of disagreement. It calls individuals to approach differences with wisdom, patience, and compassion rather than hostility and fear [19].

The Qur'an repeatedly associates divine guidance with mercy. Revelation is not presented as an instrument for domination but as a means of moral and spiritual benefit. Likewise, the believer's relationship with others should reflect the ethical character that the Qur'an seeks to cultivate. Mercy becomes a practical expression of the recognition that all human beings share a common origin, a common dignity, and a common accountability before God [18].

Importantly, mercy does not require the abandonment of conviction. The Qur'an never suggests that genuine differences of belief should be ignored or denied. Theological disagreement remains a reality of human existence. Yet the presence of disagreement does not eliminate the obligation to treat others with compassion, fairness, and respect. Mercy governs the manner in which differences are encountered.

This principle stands in significant contrast to frameworks that primarily emphasize boundaries and classifications. While legal distinctions may address specific administrative or political concerns, mercy directs attention back to the human person. It encourages believers to see beyond inherited categories and to recognize the shared humanity of those with whom they disagree.

The contemporary relevance of this principle is considerable. In increasingly diverse societies, coexistence depends not only upon legal equality and institutional fairness but also upon the cultivation of social virtues that sustain human relationships. Mercy provides one such virtue. It creates space for dialogue, cooperation, reconciliation, and mutual understanding without requiring uniformity of belief or identity [19].

Within a Qur'anic framework of human coexistence, mercy therefore functions as more than an ethical recommendation. It serves as a guiding principle that shapes the believer's encounter with the broader human family. By emphasizing mercy as a defining characteristic of prophetic mission, the Qur'an offers a vision of human relations grounded not in fear of difference but in concern for human flourishing [18].

7.4. Freedom of Conscience and the Limits of Human Authority

The Qur'anic vision of humanity rests upon the assumption

that human beings are moral agents capable of making meaningful choices. Creation, dignity, responsibility, and accountability all presuppose a degree of freedom through which individuals respond to divine guidance. Without freedom, moral responsibility loses much of its significance, for accountability assumes the possibility of choice.

This principle appears repeatedly throughout the Qur'an. Human beings are invited to believe, reflect, reason, and respond. Yet the acceptance of faith is consistently presented as an act of conviction rather than compulsion. The Qur'an declares:

"There is no compulsion in religion." (Qur'an 2: 256)

This statement is among the clearest expressions of freedom of conscience within the Qur'anic text. Faith cannot be reduced to external conformity, nor can genuine belief be produced through coercion. Religious commitment possesses moral value precisely because it arises from voluntary conviction [20].

The same principle is reflected in the Qur'an's address to the Prophet Muhammad:

"Will you then compel people until they become believers?" (Qur'an 10: 99)

And elsewhere:

"You are only a reminder." (Qur'an 88: 21)

"You are not over them a controller." (Qur'an 88: 22)

These passages establish important limits upon human authority. The role of the Prophet is to communicate, explain, and invite. The response belongs to the individual, while ultimate judgment belongs to God. Even prophetic authority does not extend to controlling the conscience of another person [2, 20].

This distinction carries profound implications. If the Prophet himself is reminded of the limits of his authority over human belief, then all subsequent religious, political, and social authorities must recognize similar limits. Human beings may teach, persuade, advise, and advocate. They may defend their convictions and invite others to share them. What they cannot legitimately do is assume ownership of another person's conscience [2].

The theological foundation of this principle lies in the Qur'an's understanding of accountability. Every individual stands directly before God and bears responsibility for his or her own beliefs and actions. No person can believe on behalf of another, and no human authority can ultimately answer before God in another person's place. The relationship between the individual conscience and divine judgment remains fundamentally personal [18].

Within the context of human coexistence, this principle provides a powerful safeguard against domination and coercion. It affirms the dignity of the individual while recognizing the limits of human authority. Religious communities remain free to maintain their convictions and communicate their beliefs, yet they are reminded that the final judgment of conscience belongs to God alone [2].

The contemporary significance of this principle is considerable. Modern societies are increasingly characterized by religious diversity, mobility, and freedom of belief. Questions concerning conversion, religious identity, and individual conscience continue to generate debate across many parts of the world. The Qur'anic emphasis upon freedom of conscience offers an important framework through which such questions may be approached [2, 20].

By linking freedom to responsibility and responsibility to accountability before God, the Qur'an presents a vision in which human dignity and moral agency are preserved. Freedom of conscience is not a rejection of faith. Rather, it is a recognition that faith possesses meaning only when embraced freely. In this sense, respect for conscience becomes an essential component of a Qur'anic framework for human coexistence.

7.5. Mutual Recognition and Human Diversity

One of the most profound contributions of the Qur'an to human coexistence is its understanding of diversity. Rather than treating human difference as a problem to be eliminated or a threat to be feared, the Qur'an presents diversity as an intentional feature of creation itself. Human plurality is not portrayed as a deviation from divine purpose but as one of its expressions.

This principle finds its clearest articulation in the Qur'anic declaration:

"O mankind, We created you from a male and a female and made you peoples and tribes so that you may know one another. Indeed, the most honored of you in the sight of God is the most righteous among you." (Qur'an 49: 13)

The verse begins with a universal address to humanity. Significantly, it does not speak exclusively to believers, Muslims, or members of a particular community. Instead, it addresses mankind as a whole and reminds all people of their shared origin. Human diversity emerges from a common humanity rather than from separate creations or unequal beginnings [18].

The Qur'an then acknowledges the reality of human plurality. Peoples, tribes, cultures, languages, and communities are presented as part of the human condition. Diversity is neither denied nor condemned. On the contrary, it is recognized as a reality willed by God [19].

Most significant, however, is the purpose assigned to this diversity. The Qur'an does not say that peoples and tribes were created so that they might dominate one another, isolate themselves from one another, or remain permanently separated from one another. Rather, they were created "so that you may know one another" (li-ta'arafu).

The concept of ta'aruf extends beyond simple acquaintance. It implies recognition, understanding, encounter, and the development of meaningful human relationships. Diversity becomes an invitation to engagement rather than withdrawal. Human difference is transformed from a source of division into an opportunity for learning and mutual enrichment [18,

19].

This principle carries profound implications for contemporary discussions concerning social distance. If diversity exists for the purpose of mutual recognition, then frameworks that encourage persistent separation stand in tension with the Qur'an's stated objective. The goal of human interaction is not the elimination of difference but the cultivation of understanding across difference. [13].

The verse further reinforces this principle by rejecting common forms of human hierarchy. The measure of honor before God is neither ethnicity, nationality, tribe, nor communal affiliation. The criterion is righteousness, a quality known fully only to God. This shift redirects attention away from inherited identity and toward moral character [18].

Within a Qur'anic framework for human coexistence, diversity therefore becomes a moral opportunity. It challenges individuals and communities to move beyond inherited assumptions and to encounter one another as fellow human beings sharing a common origin and a common destiny before God. The purpose of diversity is not social distance but human encounter.

This vision offers a powerful alternative to frameworks that define relationships primarily through boundaries of exclusion. While differences of belief remain real and significant, they do not negate the possibility of mutual recognition. The Qur'an acknowledges diversity while simultaneously providing an ethical foundation for living with that diversity in a manner consistent with human dignity, justice, mercy, and freedom.

In this sense, mutual recognition represents more than a social virtue. It is a theological principle rooted in the Qur'an's understanding of creation itself. God created human diversity, and He assigned to that diversity a purpose. That purpose is not estrangement but encounter; not hostility but recognition; not social distance but human relationship [18, 19].

7.6. Benevolence and Excellence (Ihsan)

While justice establishes the minimum standard required for human relations, the Qur'an consistently calls believers to a higher moral ideal: ihsan. Often translated as excellence, benevolence, or moral beauty, ihsan represents the aspiration to treat others not merely according to what justice requires, but according to what reflects the highest ethical character.

This principle appears prominently in the Qur'anic declaration:

"Indeed, God commands justice and excellence (ihsan)." (Qur'an 16: 90)

The significance of this verse lies in its progression. Justice is not abandoned or diminished. Rather, it is complemented by a higher ethical standard. Human beings are called not only to avoid wrongdoing but also to cultivate generosity, compassion, patience, and kindness in their interactions with others [13].

The Qur'an repeatedly applies this principle to communication and human encounter. It instructs believers:

"Speak to people kindly." (Qur'an 2: 83)

Significantly, the command is directed toward "people" (al-nas) rather than a particular religious community. The ethical obligation extends beyond communal boundaries and reflects a broader concern for the quality of human relationships [18].

Similarly, the Qur'an addresses situations of disagreement and theological debate:

"Invite to the way of your Lord with wisdom and good instruction, and argue with them in the best manner." (Qur'an 16: 125)

And:

"Do not argue with the People of the Book except in the best manner." (Qur'an 29: 46)

These passages acknowledge the reality of difference and disagreement. Yet they simultaneously regulate the manner in which such disagreements should be conducted. The objective is not humiliation, hostility, or domination. The Qur'an repeatedly directs believers toward wisdom, respectful dialogue, and the pursuit of understanding [13].

The same principle is reflected in the Qur'an's description of the Prophet Muhammad:

"Had you been harsh and hard-hearted, they would have dispersed from around you." (Qur'an 3: 159)

The verse identifies gentleness as a source of social cohesion and human connection. Harshness creates distance; kindness draws people together. The ability to engage others with patience, dignity, and respect becomes an essential component of successful human relations [18].

Within a framework of human coexistence, *ihsan* performs a vital function. Justice may prevent oppression, but *ihsan* fosters genuine relationship. Justice establishes fairness, while *ihsan* encourages empathy. Justice protects rights, while *ihsan* cultivates trust. Together they create the conditions necessary for communities to live together despite differences of belief, culture, and identity [13].

The contemporary significance of this principle is considerable. Increasingly diverse societies require more than legal arrangements and institutional protections. They require social virtues capable of sustaining everyday interaction among people who differ from one another. The Qur'anic ethic of *ihsan* offers precisely such a virtue. It encourages individuals to approach others not with suspicion or hostility, but with a commitment to moral excellence in word and deed.

In this sense, *ihsan* represents the ethical expression of mutual recognition. If diversity exists so that human beings may know one another, then the manner of that encounter must be governed by wisdom, kindness, and respect. The Qur'an therefore moves beyond coexistence understood merely as tolerance and calls believers toward a higher standard of moral engagement rooted in excellence of character.

7.7. Cooperation in Goodness and Shared Human Responsibility

The Qur'anic framework for human coexistence culminates

not merely in mutual recognition but in the possibility of shared moral action. Human beings are not called simply to tolerate one another's existence or to coexist within parallel social worlds. Rather, they are encouraged to cooperate in the pursuit of what is good, just, and beneficial for human flourishing.

This principle finds clear expression in the Qur'anic command:

"Cooperate in righteousness and piety, and do not cooperate in sin and aggression." (Qur'an 5: 2)

The significance of this verse lies in its moral orientation. The basis of cooperation is neither tribal affiliation, ethnic identity, nor communal membership. Rather, cooperation is organized around shared commitment to what promotes justice, goodness, and human well-being. The criterion is ethical rather than sectarian [13].

Such a vision reflects the broader Qur'anic understanding of humanity. If all human beings share a common origin, possess inherent dignity, and stand equally accountable before God, then they also share responsibility for the moral condition of the world they inhabit. The pursuit of justice, the relief of suffering, the protection of human dignity, and the promotion of peace are not exclusively communal concerns. They are human concerns [18, 19].

The Qur'an's emphasis upon cooperation therefore provides an important corrective to frameworks that define relationships primarily through boundaries of difference. Diversity remains a reality, and disagreement remains inevitable. Yet these realities do not eliminate the possibility of working together in pursuit of common goods. The existence of theological differences does not prevent collaboration in areas where moral objectives are shared [13].

This principle possesses particular relevance in contemporary societies characterized by religious, cultural, and ideological diversity. Many of the challenges facing humanity transcend communal boundaries. Poverty, violence, corruption, environmental degradation, injustice, and social fragmentation affect people regardless of their religious identity. Addressing such challenges requires cooperation among individuals and communities who may differ profoundly in belief yet remain united in their concern for human welfare [2].

The Qur'anic call to cooperate in goodness therefore transforms diversity from a source of division into an opportunity for collective responsibility. Human difference is not erased, but it is placed within a broader framework of shared moral purpose. The focus shifts from protecting boundaries to serving the common good [18, 19].

Viewed in this light, cooperation becomes the practical expression of the principles developed throughout this article. Human dignity affirms the worth of every person. Justice regulates human relationships. Mercy shapes the spirit of engagement. Freedom of conscience protects moral agency. Mutual recognition encourages understanding across difference. *Ihsan* elevates human interaction through excellence of character.

ter. Cooperation in goodness brings these principles into collective action.

The result is a vision of human coexistence rooted not in separation but in shared responsibility. The Qur'an's ultimate concern is not the construction of distance between human beings but the cultivation of a moral community in which diversity, dignity, justice, and cooperation contribute to the flourishing of humanity as a whole.

8. Conclusion

This article has examined the historical development of classical Islamic classifications concerning non-Muslims and their broader implications for Muslim-non-Muslim relations in the contemporary world. It has argued that while categories such as *dhimmi*, *mu'ahid*, *musta'min*, and *harbi* emerged within specific historical circumstances and served important juridical functions, their long-term influence extended beyond the realm of law. Through processes of transmission, education, religious instruction, and collective memory, these classifications contributed to what this study has described as the institutionalization of social distance.

The central argument of the article has been that legal categories do not remain confined to legal texts. Over time, they may shape social perception, influence patterns of interaction, and contribute to the construction of the religious other. What began as administrative distinctions within medieval societies gradually acquired broader social significance, affecting the way communities understood difference, belonging, and human relationship [4, 6].

At the same time, the article has argued that the Qur'an approaches humanity through a significantly different framework. The Qur'an consistently begins not with legal classification but with creation, dignity, moral responsibility, and accountability before God. Its dominant vocabulary is that of mankind, the children of Adam, justice, mercy, freedom of conscience, and mutual recognition. Human beings appear first as creatures of God and only secondarily as members of particular communities and social groups [18, 19].

This distinction is of more than historical interest. It carries profound implications for contemporary societies characterized by religious diversity, constitutional citizenship, and increasing global interdependence. The persistence of inherited frameworks developed for medieval conditions raises important questions concerning their continuing relevance within social and political contexts fundamentally different from those in which they originally emerged.

In response to these challenges, the article has proposed a Qur'anic framework for human coexistence grounded in seven interrelated principles: human dignity, justice, mercy, freedom of conscience, mutual recognition, benevolence, and cooperation in goodness. Together, these principles provide an alternative foundation for understanding relations among human beings while remaining firmly rooted within the Islamic tradition itself [2, 13, 18-20].

The purpose of this framework is not to erase difference, deny theological conviction, or eliminate religious identity. The Qur'an acknowledges diversity as a reality of human existence and recognizes the persistence of disagreement among people. Its contribution lies elsewhere. It offers a vision in which difference need not result in estrangement, and in which diversity becomes an opportunity for encounter rather than separation.

The significance of this vision extends beyond Muslim-non-Muslim relations alone. It speaks to broader questions concerning citizenship, pluralism, social cohesion, religious freedom, and the ethical foundations of human coexistence in the modern world. By recovering the Qur'an's anthropology of the human person, contemporary Islamic thought may discover resources capable of addressing challenges that neither medieval legal categories nor modern political theories can fully resolve on their own.

Ultimately, the question explored throughout this article is not simply how Islamic jurisprudence classified non-Muslims. The deeper question concerns how human beings choose to see one another. The institutionalization of social distance begins when categories become more visible than persons. A Qur'anic framework for coexistence seeks to reverse that process by restoring the human being to the center of the discussion.

Before the category stands the person.

Before the classification stands the child of Adam.

Before difference stands a shared humanity.

This article has argued that the long-term significance of classical Islamic classifications concerning non-Muslims cannot be understood solely through legal analysis. Their enduring influence lies in the ways they became embedded within educational, religious, and social institutions and were gradually transmitted across generations as part of collective social consciousness. The concept of the institutionalization of social distance provides a framework for understanding how classifications originally developed within specific historical circumstances may continue to shape perceptions of religious difference long after the conditions that produced them have changed. By distinguishing between revelation and jurisprudence, and by returning to the Qur'an's broader vision of human dignity, justice, freedom, diversity, mercy, and mutual recognition, the article proposes a framework through which contemporary societies may engage religious difference without reproducing inherited patterns of social separation.

It is here, perhaps, that the Qur'an offers one of its most enduring contributions to the contemporary world: a vision in which human dignity precedes division, justice tempers power, mercy overcomes hostility, and mutual recognition transforms diversity into an opportunity for peaceful coexistence and shared human flourishing.

Acknowledgments

The author gratefully acknowledges the support and encouragement of his wife, Unja Schmidt Gabriel, throughout

the preparation of this article.

Author Contributions

Mark A Gabriel: Conceptualization, Formal Analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Resources, Writing – Original Draft, Writing – Review and Editing

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

References

- [1] Abou El Fadl, Khaled. *The Great Theft: Wrestling Islam from the Extremists*. New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 2005.
- [2] An-Na'im, Abdullahi Ahmed. *Islam and the Secular State: Negotiating the Future of Shari'a*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008.
- [3] Alshech, Eli. "When Legal Conservatism Renders Salafi-Jihadis Lenient: The Intra-Salafi Debate about Being a Naturalized Citizen of an Infidel Country." *The Journal of the Middle East and Africa* 14, no. 4 (2023): 393-413. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21520844.2023.2270882>
- [4] Berger, Peter L., and Thomas Luckmann. *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*. New York: Anchor Books, 1966.
- [5] Bogardus, Emory S. "A Social Distance Scale." *Sociology and Social Research* 17 (1933): 265-271.
- [6] Bourdieu, Pierre. *Outline of a Theory of Practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977.
- [7] Friedmann, Yohanan. *Tolerance and Coercion in Islam: Interfaith Relations in the Muslim Tradition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003.
- [8] Griffiths, John. "What Is Legal Pluralism?" *The Journal of Legal Pluralism and Unofficial Law* 18, no. 24 (1986): 1-55. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07329113.1986.10756387>
- [9] Essabane, Kamel, Carl Sterkens, and Paul Vermeer. "The Relationship between Islamic Religious Education and Citizenship Education in Liberal Democracies." *Religious Education* 118, no. 4 (2023): 297-311. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00344087.2023.2262888>
- [10] Hallaq, Wael B. *The Origins and Evolution of Islamic Law*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005.
- [11] Hallaq, Wael B. *Shari'a: Theory, Practice, Transformations*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009.
- [12] Jackson, Sherman A. *Islamic Law and the State: The Constitutional Jurisprudence of Shihab al-Din al-Qarafi*. Leiden: Brill, 1996.
- [13] Kamali, Mohammad Hashim. *Freedom, Equality and Justice in Islam*. Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 2002.
- [14] Levy-Rubin, Milka. *Non-Muslims in the Early Islamic Empire: From Surrender to Coexistence*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011.
- [15] Lewis, Bernard. *The Jews of Islam*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984.
- [16] Merry, Sally Engle. *Human Rights and Gender Violence: Translating International Law into Local Justice*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006.
- [17] Rahman, Fazlur. *Islam and Modernity: Transformation of an Intellectual Tradition*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982.
- [18] Rahman, Fazlur. *Major Themes of the Qur'an*. 2nd ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009.
- [19] Sachedina, Abdulaziz. *Islam and the Challenge of Human Rights*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009.
- [20] Saeed, Abdullah. *Freedom of Religion, Apostasy and Islam*. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004.
- [21] Simmel, Georg. "The Stranger." In *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*, translated and edited by Kurt H. Wolff, 402-408. New York: Free Press, 1950.
- [22] Tamanaha, Brian Z. *A General Jurisprudence of Law and Society*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001.

Biography



Mark A Gabriel holds a PhD in International Law of Human Rights and Islamic Criminal Law from the University of Cape Town, South Africa. His research focuses on Islamic law, human rights, religious freedom, legal reform, interfaith relations, and Muslim-non-Muslim relations in contemporary societies. He is the author of several books and scholarly publications on Islam, law, extremism, and human coexistence, and has lectured internationally on issues relating to Islamic thought, counterterrorism, human rights, and religious pluralism. His current research explores the relationship between classical Islamic jurisprudence, social distance, and Qur'anic approaches to human dignity and coexistence.

Research Field

Mark A Gabriel: Islamic Law, Human Rights, Religious Freedom, Law and Society, Legal Pluralism, Islamic Studies, Comparative Religion, Counterterrorism Studies, Social Integration, Interfaith Relations