

## Empathy, a Facility to Reduce Conflict Among Individuals and Societies, and the Qur'ān

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### Abstract

The aim of this study is to clarify whether the content of empathy, which is considered the process that motivates prosocial behaviour and prevents individuals and people doing harm to each other, is in harmony with the Qur'ān or not. If Muslims understand each other and non-Muslims as well, this will help in decreasing the conflicts and contribute to world peace. In this paper, to present the theoretical framework of empathy we will consider the concepts closely related to empathy such as sympathy and altruism etc. After that, we will discuss the verses that appear to be related to empathy in the Qur'ān. During that effort, a risk of exceeding our human level awaits us: To claim that we can empathize with God. Can we put ourselves in His place? I must say from the perspective of the Muslim approach "No!" Nevertheless, considering both classical and modern era Qur'anic commentaries, we can investigate God's Book sent to the prophet Muḥammad (pbuh) to understand His intention. This is quite normal unless we claim that our level of understanding is absolute. According to preliminary findings, people are encouraged by the Qur'ān to do self-criticism, to keep themselves away from transgression, and not to take revenge. We suggest that, taken together, the logic behind these recommendations is for us to develop a sense of empathy in any situation of conflict.

### Keywords

Qur'ān Exegesis, Empathy, Sympathy, Altruism, Conflict

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## Bireyler ve Toplumlar Arasındaki Çatışmaları Azaltma İmkânı Olarak Empati ve Kur’an

### Öz

Bu araştırmanın amacı, toplum yararına davranmayı teşvik eden ve bireylerin, toplumların birbirlerine zarar vermesini önleyen süreç olarak kabul edilen empatinin içeriğinin Kur’an ile uyumlu olup olmadığını netleştirmektir. Müslümanlar birbirlerini ve gayri müslimleri iyi anarlarsa bu, çatışmaları azaltmaya yardımcı olacak ve dünya barışına katkı sağlayacaktır. Bu makalede empatinin teorik çerçevesini sergilemek için empati ile yakından ilişkili sempati, diğerkâmlık vb. kavramları da ele alacağız. Ardından Kur’an’da empatiyle ilişkili görünen âyetleri değerlendireceğiz. Bu çaba sırasında bizi bir tehlike beklemektedir: Allah ile empati yapabileceğimizi ileri sürmek. Kendimizi O’nun yerine koyabilir miyiz? İslamî açıdan bu soruya, “Hayır!” yanıtını vermeliyim. Bununla birlikte klasik ve modern dönem tefsirleri dikkate alarak O’nun niyetini anlamak için Hz. Muhammed’e gönderilmiş olan İlahî Kitabı araştırabiliriz. Anlama düzeyimizi mutlaklaştırmadığımız sürece bu tür bir çaba gayet normaldir. Ön bulgulara göre insanlar; özeleştirme yapma, kendilerini haddi aşmaktan koruma ve intikam almama konusunda Kur’an tarafından teşvik edilmektedir. Bunları göz önünde bulundurduğumuzda bu tavsiyelerin arkasındaki mantığın, bizi herhangi bir çatışma konusunda empati anlayışı geliştirmeye teşvik olduğunu söyleyebiliriz.

### Anahtar Kelimeler

Tefsir, Empati, Sempati, Diğerkâmlık, Çatışma

### Introduction

Conflict is a fact of life and occurs for a variety of reasons, such as differing perspectives, priorities, or solutions to a problem. It is not imaginable to have a day without conflict. Nevertheless, it can be reducible. In this context, our hypothesis is that the Qur’an, whose purpose is the happiness of human beings both here and in the Hereafter, incorporates some advice related to empathy as a facility to reduce quarrels, debates, fights, etc.

To discuss our subject, first of all, we will define empathy and related terms such as sympathy and altruism etc. This will make clear the conceptual framework of our study. After that, we will concentrate on Qur’anic verses related to empathy, especially on the ones specific to minimizing conflict. During this effort, we will consider classical and modern era Qur’anic commentaries. This process will be maintained with a kind of empathy with the Qur’an, i.e., the intention of Allah. It cannot be claimed that we can understand the exact intention of Allah, but we can say that His Book, the Qur’an, encouraging us to have and provide a better and a peaceful life, can be empathized with its content. Consequently, we can know what God’s intention is via His Books sent to his prophets. Also the verses having phrases like “... you may be able to understand (and learn wisdom).” (al-Zukhruf 43/3) can be considered empathy with the Qur’an. *Maqāṣid al-sharī‘a*, God’s general purpose in revealing the divine law, is a good example of such an effort as well.

The Qur’an embodies empathy with Muḥammad (pbuh). His attitude is presented in the Qur’an as a good example of empathy as he listens to people for good. Nevertheless, as al-Mawdūdī (1903-1979)

expresses, strangely enough, the hypocrites tried to give an evil interpretation to this character trait:<sup>1</sup> "Among them are men who molest the Prophet and say: 'He is (all) ear.' Say: 'He listens to what is best for you; he believes in Allah, has faith in the believers and is a mercy to those of you who believe.' but those who molest the Prophet will have a grievous penalty." (al-Tawbah 9/61). Good listeners solve individual and social problems better than others. In this context, the Prophet listens to everything but he considers important beneficial for the society because he is not the one listening to evil and sinful talk. He is a good ear. He listens to revelation and then preaches it. He behaves well towards the others when listening. He does not taunt the ones who have hypocritical attitudes. As the Qur'ān presents Muḥammad (pbuh) as a successful pattern (al- Aḥzāb 33/21), his being a good listener can be a good example for the Muslims who want to empathize with whom they truly listen to. This will lessen the conflicts among Muslims and also the conflicts between Muslims and non-Muslims. More genuine communication means less conflict.

### 1. The Conceptual Framework: Empathy and Related Words

Empathy involves understanding the emotions and/or perspectives of other people.<sup>2</sup> To understand it more clearly, we can compare it with fusion: in empathy, one speaks for the other; in fusion one speaks with the other. Fusion, which is different from empathy, means melting (i.e., disappear) in the other. In fusion,<sup>3</sup> the speaker speaks in the other whereas s/he speaks in the empathy with the name of other.

For the ones who are egocentric, empathizing with the other is impossible as that person cannot adopt the other's role and see the cases from another framework.<sup>4</sup> Like many other human characteristics, empathic skill is like a knife, i.e., which can be used for both negative and positive purposes. To have empathy with the other leads us -in general- to appreciate, accept at least weaken our negative opinions of him/her. As Stocker and Hegeman say psychoanalysts and teachers have to empathize fully and do the best in their jobs. How a person considers himself/herself is important in empathy.<sup>5</sup> For example, if a person does not like himself/herself, he/she can be strict in his social relations and fail in understanding people.

One of the benefits of empathy is that it is unnecessary to change our views and beliefs. This makes it unheeded to avoid empathy as a possible threat to our own belief system. For example, non-Muslim human rights activist Rachel Courrie (1979-2003), who was killed by an Israeli bulldozer during her pursuit of justice,

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<sup>1</sup> Abū l-A'ālā al-Mawdūdī, *Towards Understanding the Qur'an*, trans. Zafr Ishaq Ansari (The UK: The Islamic Foundation, 1408/1988), 3/225.

<sup>2</sup> Nancy Eisenberg et al., 'Empathy-Related Responding: Associations with Prosocial Behavior, Aggression, and Intergroup Relations', *Social Issues and Policy Review* 4/1 (2010), 144.

<sup>3</sup> We may think fusion together with fana (annihilation) belief in Sufi culture. It can be said that one's annihilation of himself/herself in shaikh, the prophet and finally in Allah corresponds with fusion. For the belief hulul, which is treated as tawhid taking place in this present life, the deity of God enters into the human soul in the same way that the soul at birth enters into the body. See: Süleyman Uludağ, 'Hallâc-ı Mansûr', *Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı İslam Ansiklopedisi*, 44 vol. (İstanbul: Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı, 1997).; Yusuf Şevki Yavuz, 'İslam Düşüncesinde Hulûl', *Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı İslam Ansiklopedisi* (İstanbul: Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı, 1998). Murat Kayacan, 'Hallâc-ı Mansûr ve Hulûl Felsefesi', *Haksöz* 175 (2005), 69-72.

<sup>4</sup> Üstün Dökmen, *İletişim Çatışmaları ve Empati*, 12th Ed. (İstanbul: Sistem, 2000), 141.

<sup>5</sup> Michael Stocker - Elizabeth Hegeman, *Valuing Emotions* (Cambridge University Press, 1996), 214, 215.

empathized with a Palestinian family and tried to save their house from bringing their house down. It should not be so hard for Muslims to empathize with her although she was not a Muslim.

There are two concepts in a broader sense, which I suggest that both can be seen related to empathy: ta'wil and hermeneutics. The Qur'anic concept ta'wil means interpreting the Qur'anic verses by asking such questions: "What does God mean? Why has He said so? If He were to speak today, what would He tell us?"<sup>6</sup>. This effort, which is substantially reader-centered and intellectual process, tries to understand the true path both in belief and practice defined in the Qur'an. When we discover somebody's situation or horizon, his/her opinions can be more comprehensible without agreeing with him/her.<sup>7</sup> There is a difference between understanding a text and a person. During our daily conversations, the listener has to understand the speaker's intention. The talker and listener are not separated because of a certain written text. Both are not far from each other physically or time-wise. The intention and mind of the author only becomes problematic related to hermeneutics when there are written statements or texts, not verbal expressions.<sup>8</sup> In this context, we can define hermeneutics as a kind of empathy with a written text.

Sympathy, which is stronger form of empathy, is to have inclination to think or feel alike. If you sympathize with somebody, you try to understand that person and are not critical of him/her but supportive. In empathy, you try to understand the other but in sympathy you justify her/him.<sup>9</sup> Muslims are expected to show sympathy whether the other is Muslim or non-Muslim if it is in the range of the Qur'anic recommendations or permitted.

If we categorize empathy, sympathy, and altruism, we can say that altruism is more powerful than the other two. This golden rule of ethics is a virtue in many cultures and religions. It encourages us to help others without expecting a reward. A helpful person, a hero fireman, or a soldier can be considered an altruist. Altruism is motivation or action considering the other and it is an approach encouraging the good and supporting the moral codes.<sup>10</sup> The verse in the Qur'an can be considered a good example of altruism: "And those who, before them, had settled in the homeland, and had accepted faith. They love those who emigrated to them, and find no hesitation in their hearts in helping them. They give them priority over themselves, even if they themselves are needy. Whoever is protected from his natural greed -it is they who are the successful." (al-Hashr 59/9).

After mentioning above the related terms for empathy, we can focus on the Qur'anic verses related to empathy. In this context there is a problem. As the Qur'an is the words of Allah, can we understand His intention? It becomes a big claim, but we can understand the intention in his verses in the Qur'an. With this perspective, we will mention Qur'anic verses related to understanding the other. Through this, we hope to contribute to reducing conflict among individuals and societies.

## 2. Examples of Empathy in the Qur'an Related to Reducing Conflict

The Qur'an gives its readers two main types of empathy, i.e., positive and negative one (Yusuf 12/30-32). So, the Qur'an does not impose a positive meaning on empathy every time. In communication, some

<sup>6</sup> Şahin Güven, *Çokanlamlılık Sorunu* (İstanbul: Düşün, 2005), 67.

<sup>7</sup> Burhanettin Tatar, *Felsefi Hermenötik ve Yazarın Niyeti* (Ankara: Vadi Yayınları, 1999), 22.

<sup>8</sup> Tatar, *Felsefi Hermenötik ve Yazarın Niyeti*, 24.

<sup>9</sup> Dökmen, *İletişim Çatışmaları ve Empati*, 139.

<sup>10</sup> Richard B. Brandt, *Facts, Values, and Morality* (USA: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 132.

empathize with the other to exploit, deceive, dominate, transgress, or slander. So, it is used to harm as well as help people. If we empathize to help people, it is a good attitude and behaviour, but if the purpose is evil, empathy can be a dangerous tool in the hands of ill-willed people.<sup>11</sup> In this study, we will focus on the positive types of empathy, especially the ones related to minimizing conflicts among individuals and societies.

### 2.1. Thought-centered approach more than person-centered one

In al-Ḥudaybiya negotiations, as Yusuf Ali (1872-1953) expresses, when it was not clear whether Quraysh would treat well or ill the Prophet's delegate to Mecca, there was a great wave of feeling in the Muslim camp of 1400 to 1500 men. They came with great enthusiasm and swore their loyalty to the Prophet Muḥammad by placing hand on hand according the Arab tradition.<sup>12</sup> This number of people was the half of the warriors in the Battle of Khandaq (Trench).<sup>13</sup>

The Qur'ān mentions the case above as such by considering Muslims' allegiance unto the Prophet similar to their allegiance to Allah: "Lo! those who swear allegiance unto you (Muḥammad), swear allegiance only unto Allah. The Hand of Allah is above their hands. So whosoever breaks his oath, breaks it only to his soul's hurt; while whosoever keeps his covenant with Allah, on him will He give immense reward." (al-Fath 48/10). "The Hand of Allah" in the verse is a metaphor for Allah's being a witness to their pledge.<sup>14</sup> With this Qur'anic verse, Allah gives a great prestige to the Prophet. al-Qurṭubī (d. 671) says the situation here is like the one in that verse: "He who obeys the Messenger, obeys Allah." (al-Nisā' 4/80).<sup>15</sup> That is, the hand on which the Muslims were forswearing loyalty was not the hand of the Prophet's person but of Allah's representative, and this loyalty was, indeed, being sworn to Allah through His Prophet.

When we comment on the verse above from the aspect of empathy, one should not think that we consider Allah and His Prophet Muḥammad (pbuh) the same. We would like only to draw attention to how the allegiance of Muslims is accepted by Allah. Obedience is towards God, not the Prophet, in reality. What is more important is the principles not the person(s). Swearing allegiance is towards the divine principles

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<sup>11</sup> The Qur'ān gives us the parable of Joseph who is well-known by the Jews and Christians as well. In it, the wife of the Aziz falls in love with Joseph who was taken by both as a slave boy. Her love of him is heard by leading group's wives in the kingdom: "Ladies said in the city: the wife of the (great) Aziz is seeking to seduce her slave from his (true) self: truly has he inspired her with violent love: we see she is evidently going astray. When she heard of their malicious talk, she sent for them and prepared a banquet for them: she gave each of them a knife: and she said (to Joseph), come out before them. When they saw him, they did extol him, and (in their amazement) cut their hands: they said, Allah preserve us no mortal is this is none other than a noble angle. She said: there before you is the man about whom you did blame me I did seek to seduce him from his (true) self but he did firmly save himself guiltless and now, if he doth not my bidding, he shall certainly be cast into prison, and (what is more) be of the company of the vilest!" (Yūsuf, 12/30-32). Aziz's wife gave in to Satanic temptation and try to seduce her slave boy. Additionally, she tried to legalize her immoral act by making her elitist friends empathize with her and understand the situation and she succeeded it. This ill-willed empathy was a complete victory of her over her friends gossiping.

<sup>12</sup> Yusuf Ali, *The Holy Quran* (USA: Aman Corp., 1983), 1393.

<sup>13</sup> Muhammed Hamîdullah, 'Hudeybiye Anlaşması', *Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı İslam Ansiklopedisi* (İstanbul: Türkiye Diyanet Vakfı, 1998), 18/298.

<sup>14</sup> Muhammad Asad, *The Message of the Qur'an* (İstanbul: İşaret, 2006), 786.

<sup>15</sup> Abū 'Abdallāh Muḥammad b. Aḥmad al-Qurṭubī, *al-Jami' li-ahkam al-Qur'ān*, 2nd Ed. (Cairo: Dar al-Kutub al-Misriyyah, 1960), 16/267.

available in the Qur’ān, in fact. If people consider the just principles more than the implementers, they will have fewer disagreements. Principles come before the operators and reduce conflicts. In the opposite case, there will be chaos.

### 2.2. Preferring indirect criticism towards opponents

The Qur’ān invites idolaters, Muslims’ opponents, to empathize with their idols in order to guide them to the true path. Considering human nature, it exemplifies by concretizing the falsity of idolatry: “Allah sets forth the parable (of two men: one) a slave under the dominion of another; he has no power of any sort; and (the other) a man on whom we have bestowed goodly favours from ourselves, and he spends thereof (freely), privately and publicly: are the two equal? (by no means;) praise be to Allah. But most of them understand not. Allah sets forth (another) parable of two men: one of them dumb, with no power of any sort; a wearisome burden is he to his master; whichever way he directs him, he brings no good: is such a man equal with one who commands justice, and is on a straight way?” (al-Naḥl 16/75-76). In other words, is it possible to equalize the ones who are not free and belonging to someone else with people who are free and granted generously and spend it for the sake of Allah? Truly they cannot be equal. So, the ones worshipping idols but not Allah and accepting the ones as the authority other than Him are like the slaves without freedom. How can a person consider an idol or a stone equal with Allah, who knows everything, and free to do all, order the good, and guide to the true path? By setting forth a parable of two men, we can say that the Qur’ān intends to reduce the conflict between Muslims and non-Muslims. Instead of addressing directly to the nonbelievers, it uses indirect criticism of their false beliefs. People feel less defensive if their false attitude and behaviours are not corrected directly.

If the people had not denied the verses and proofs sent by Allah and believed and obeyed the monotheistic Islam religion, they would not have been punished. But they mocked their Prophet Hud and the punishment, which they demanded, surrounded them: “And We had firmly established them in a (prosperity and) power which We have not given to you (you Quraish!) and We had endowed them with (faculties of) hearing, seeing, heart and intellect: but of no profit to them were their (faculties of) hearing, sight, and heart and intellect, when they went on rejecting the signs of Allah and they were (completely) encircled by that which they used to mock at!” (al- Aḥqāf 46/26). The Mecca people did not have wealth, power, authority and other things as much as some of those implied past societies. On the contrary, their sphere of authority was restricted to the bounds of the city of Mecca, but those societies had dominated a large part of the earth. This is a general lesson which can be taken from `Ad nation and other people forming the milieu of Mecca. This mentioning of past societies having the same negative attitude and behaviour with the Mecca people is an indirect criticism of the Prophets’ anti-divine inspiration fellow citizens and this style of speech can be more considerable than open criticism of them. As Muḥammad Asad (1900-1992) expresses, this verse relates in the first instance to the pagan contemporaries of the Prophet, but applies to later generations as well.<sup>16</sup>

### 2.3. Empathy with idolaters

The Qur’ān wants Muḥammad (pbuh) to replace himself into idolaters. Thanks to that, paradox in polytheism can be conceived easily: “Say: If (Allah) Most Gracious had a son, I would be the first to worship.” (al-Zukhruf 43/81). In other words, he would like to say that his refusal of the claim “God has a son” is not a

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<sup>16</sup> Asad, *The Message of the Qur’an*, 774.



result of obstinacy but his love of truth. If Allah had a son, the Prophet Muḥammad would be the first worshipper of him because he is a loyal slave of God and Allah is free from having a son. The tolerance shown in the style of speaking suggested by the Qur'an indicates that empathy is a good way of lessening conflicts. Such a wording in the verse helps the other to accept the truth easily, leave obstinacy, and put out the prejudice (‘aşabiyya) fire.<sup>17</sup>

The Qur'an tells us that Abraham criticizes idolatry by empathizing with idolaters: "So also did We show Abraham the power and the laws of the heavens and the earth, that he might (with understanding) have certitude. When the night covered him over, He saw a star. He said: 'This is my Lord.' But when it set, He said: 'I love not those that set.' When he saw the moon rising in splendour, he said: 'This is my Lord.' But when the moon set, He said: 'Unless my Lord guides me, I shall surely be among those who go astray.' When he saw the sun rising in splendour, he said: 'This is my Lord; this is the greatest (of all).' But when the sun set, he said: 'O my people! I am indeed free from your (guilt) of giving partners to Allah. 'For me, I have set my face, firmly and truly, towards Him Who created the heavens and the earth, and never shall I give partners to Allah.' His people disputed with him. He said: '(Come) you to dispute with me, about Allah, when He (Himself) has guided me? I fear not (the beings) you associate with Allah. Unless my Lord will, (nothing can happen). My Lord comprehends in His knowledge all things. Will you not (yourselves) be admonished? "How should I fear (the beings) you associate with Allah, when you fear not to give partners to Allah without any warrant having been given to you? Which of (us) two parties has more right to security? (tell me) if you know." (al-An'am 6/75-81). Abraham's wording style during his criticism of idolatry, is the style of a person who is not a fanatic against his opponent who is in reality a deceitful person. Such a style of wording is best when inviting people to the truth and keeping trouble far away.<sup>18</sup> One of the reasons of conflicts is fanaticism. With Abraham's style of addressing, we see that encouraging empathy is a good way to minimize the conflict among people when they disagree in their thoughts. Abraham puts himself in the idolaters' shoes, and talks to them as if he is one of them in belief. In reality, he was a monotheist and was drawing their attention to their false beliefs.

#### 2.4. Empathy to understand one's role through history

The Qur'an considers what happens in the history of mankind as it repeats itself very often. So, for Muḥammad (pbuh), who is not a bringer of new-fangled doctrine but the last ring of the chain of the prophets, previous prophets' struggle and hardship they met are very important for him: "We did indeed send, before you, messengers to their (respective) peoples, and they came to them with clear signs: then, to those who transgressed, We meted out retribution: and it was due from Us to aid those who believed." (al-Rūm 30/47). The function of the previous prophets was the same as Muḥammad's (pbuh), and this is one of the proofs of his prophethood.<sup>19</sup> The people who mocked, denied, and struggled against the prophets were punished. In contrast, the believers had God's help. By empathizing with the previous prophets, Muḥammad (pbuh) can understand his role, the necessity of patience, and stumbling blocks before free preaching. Also,

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<sup>17</sup> Abū Ishāq al-Shāṭibī, *Al-Muwāfaqāt fi-uṣūl al-sharī'ah* (Saudi Arabia: Dar Ibn Affan, 1417/1997), 2/167.

<sup>18</sup> Abū-l Qāsim Mahmūd ibn 'Umar al-Zamakhsharī, *al-Kashshāf'an ḥaqā'iq gavamid at-tanzīl wa uyun al-aqawil fi vucūhi't-ta'wil*, 3rd Ed. (Beirut: Dar al-Kitab al-Arabi, 1407), 2/40.

<sup>19</sup> Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, *Mafatih al-ghayb*, 3rd Ed. (Beirut: Daru Ihyai al-Turas al-Arabi, 1420), 25/108.

for a good communication process common aspects have a great importance. To internalize other prophets forms a common ground to increase consensus.

Allah wants His Prophet to mention the parable of Noah to his people. Because they can take a lesson from it (yet those non-Muslims’ knowledge of it includes fabricated elements) and see the nonbelievers’ aftermath: “They rejected him, but we delivered him, and those with him, in the Ark and we made them inherit (the earth), while we overwhelmed in the flood those who rejected our signs. Then see what was the end of those who were warned (but heeded not).” (Yūnus 10/73). Whoever wants can learn a lesson from the aftermath of nonbelievers and whoever wants can have a lesson<sup>20</sup> from the believers’ survival. If Muḥammad (pbuh) had not addressed his society without considering their possible reactions and not given his message via Noah’s parable indirectly, they would have been less likely to listen to him. Parables are a good vehicle to express empathy to get them to reconsider the attitudes and behaviours.

The Qur’ān tells its readers about the people who had trouble because of their ill-deeds: “On no soul does Allah place a burden greater than it can bear. It gets every good that it earns, and it suffers every ill that it earns. (pray:) our Lord! Condemn us not if we forget or fall into error; our Lord! Lay not on us a burden like that which you did lay on those before us; our Lord! Lay not on us a burden greater than we have strength to bear. Blot out our sins, and grant us forgiveness. Have mercy on us. You are our protector; help us against those who stand against faith.” (al-Baqara 2/286). This prayer is offered by the believers having the knowledge of the ones who had to bear such heavy obligations because of their ill-deeds. For example, Allah sent down His blessings to the Jews. Instead of thanking God, they acted ungratefully. As a punishment, He wanted them to kill themselves (al-Baqara 2/54). So Muslims should try to keep themselves far from sin. If they take into account the situation of sinful Jews and reconsider themselves, they can succeed in the divine trial. The more people keep themselves far from the attitudes and behaviours of sinful societies by empathizing with them the more they will leave aggression and be in the service of peace.

### **2.5. Empathy to purify people from the sin and to teach etiquette**

Before Prophet Muḥammad’s (pbuh) coming, the Mecca people were idolaters. He came and preached the oneness of the Creator and invited them to commit good deeds: “It is He who has sent among the unlettered a messenger from among themselves, to rehearse to them His signs, to sanctify them, and to instruct them in scripture and wisdom although they had been, before in manifest error.” (al- Jumu‘a 62/2). Muḥammad’s (pbuh) altruistic attitude is a good example of empathy. During his social reform process, he considered his interlocutors’ position and problem. His traditions which begin “The best of you...,” and that continue with “...are who teach and learn the Qur’ān/behaving well to the women/morally the best of you,” are indicators of his care of the people’s needs as well. Also, after the conquest of Mecca, he did not retaliate against the oppressor Meccans. Instead, as a good empath, he showed his mercy towards sinful idolaters and forgave them. This brought easy acceptance of tawheed (oneness of God).

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<sup>20</sup> The Mecca people, who were preached by the Prophet Muḥammad (pbuh), knew from the common narrations that mention what happened to Noah people; therefore, this example of the challenge should have to influence the Mecca people. H. Karaman et al., *Kur’an Yolu Türkçe ve Meal Tefsir*, 5th Ed. (Ankara: Diyanet İşleri Başkanlığı, 2014), 3: 123-124.



The children in your house incorporating your own ones<sup>21</sup> should consider your privacy. The Qur'ān teaches etiquette by making the young empathize with adults: "But when the children among you come of age, let them (also) ask for permission, as do those senior to them (in age): thus does Allah make clear His signs to you: for Allah is full of knowledge and wisdom." (al-Nūr 24/59). The adults want permission when they enter into another adult's privy room by greeting or making him/her aware of his/her coming.<sup>22</sup> Those newly adults should take their attitude as a good example. And they should want permission every time before entering her/his parents' room. After coming of age, the children begin to value their own privacy. If it is important for them, it is more important for their parents as well. Paying attention to privacy will minimize communication conflicts, especially among family members.

### 2.6. Abraham's empathy with the non-Muslim ruler and idolaters

The Qur'ān says that the ruler during the time of the Prophet Abraham put himself in God's place and tried to put it as a proof to deny Allah. Nevertheless, as Yusuf Ali expresses, the Qur'ān does not give this person's name. In fact, it is useless to try to learn who he is. The meaning of the Qur'ān is so wide and universal that the readers are in danger of missing the real and eternal meaning if they continue to dispute about secondary points:<sup>23</sup> "Have you not turned your vision to one who disputed with Abraham about his Lord, because Allah had granted him power? Abraham said: my Lord is He who gives life and death. He said: I give life and death. Said Abraham: but it is Allah that causes the sun to rise from the east: do you then cause it to rise from the west? Thus was he confounded who (in arrogance) rejected Faith. Nor does Allah give guidance to a people unjust." (al-Baqara 2/258).

The ruler mentioned above, tries to challenge God by saying "I give life and death too." That kind of empathy, which comes from overconfidence and can be called as "negative empathy", aims at insulting God, His Prophet and it is far from understanding His message. Abraham sees the ruler's ill-willed empathy as a facility to persuade him peacefully to accept the truth of the oneness of God and encourages him to maintain empathy in a beneficial way. As a result of this, the ruler of Abraham's time, could not pursue his dexterity and say: "I cause the sun to rise from the west." Abraham, who used empathy to reduce tension, showed the ruler that he is incapable of competing with God.

Abraham lived in a society which worshipped idols, and his father was not an exception. Abraham wanted to put them off their stride by asking, "What are these images, to which you are devoted?" (al-Anbiyā' 21/52). They said that they were maintaining their ancestors' rituals (al-Anbiyā' 21/53). Abraham told them that they were in clear error like their ancestors (al-Anbiyā' 21/54). They did not take him seriously (al-Anbiyā' 21/55). He made them remember that Allah is his and their Lord who created them (al-Anbiyā' 21/56). After seeing that they ignored the truth, Abraham told them openly that he had a plan for their idols after they went away (al-Anbiya 21/57) and he broke them to pieces except the biggest one (al-Anbiyā' 21/58). When they saw what happened to their gods, they could not believe their eyes and considered the offender some man of impiety (al-Anbiyā' 21/59), and they remembered the rumours about Abraham who talked of them (al-Anbiyā' 21/60). They brought Abraham before the eyes of the people (al-

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<sup>21</sup> Ali, *The Holy Quran*, 916.

<sup>22</sup> "O you who believe! enter not houses other than your own, until you have asked permission and saluted those in them: that is best for you, in order that you may heed (what is seemly)." (al-Nūr 24/27).

<sup>23</sup> Ali, *The Holy Qur'an*, 104.

Anbiyā' 21/61) and started to interrogate him (al-Anbiyā' 21/62): "He said: 'But this, their chief had done it. So question them, if they can speak.' So they turned to themselves and said: 'Surely you are the ones in the wrong!' Then were they confounded with shame: (they said) 'You know full well that these (idols) do not speak!' (Abraham) said: 'Do you then worship, besides Allah, things that can neither be of any good to you nor do you harm? Fie upon you and upon the things that you worship besides Allah! Have you no sense?' They said: Burn him and protect your gods if you do (anything at all)!" (al-Anbiyā' 21/63-68). The expression in the passage, "So question them, if they can speak." shows us that Abraham did not tell a lie when saying, "But this, their chief had done it." By saying that, Abraham wanted them to be aware of the fact that and also accept that the idols could do nothing to keep themselves from Abraham's attack and even they were helpless and without power so they could not talk. Abraham encouraged the idolaters to empathize with broken idols and understand that they are not precious nor to be glorified. God is one and only He deserves to be worshipped.

### Conclusion

As you can see in this study, empathy, which is a phenomenon having connection with inborn ability to understand the other and available nearly in every culture on different levels, and the Qur'an are not so far from each other as the latter promotes helping attitude and behaviour. Although we know that it is impossible to discover exactly the inner state of a person, as far as we see, the empathic approach is clear in the Qur'an. Believers should try to understand each other, God's intention through the Qur'an, and the other as well. The more we know about the other, the easier it is to put oneself in their shoes.<sup>24</sup> Although it is known that empathy is not conceptualized in Muslim culture, we can easily say that people are encouraged by the Qur'an to do self-criticism, and to keep themselves away from transgression. We suggest that, taken together, the logic behind these recommendations is for us to develop a sense of empathy in any situation of conflict. If we consider that empathy works to some extent, the claim of understanding the other can be on a reasonable level from the aspect of safety and soundness.

To encourage empathy enriching one's understanding, the Qur'an suggests a thought-centered approach in human relations more than a person-centered one. Also it gives good examples of indirect criticism helping in reducing the conflicts. To think on the historical events is another facility to empathize people in the Qur'an. From this aspect, the parables of the Qur'an are functional, especially the Abraham parable related the ruler and people of his time being the epitome for the deliberators who seek the truth.

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<sup>24</sup> Frédérique de Vignemont, 'When do we Empathize?', in *Novartis Foundation Symposia*, ed. Greg Bock - Jamie Goode (Chichester, UK: John Wiley & Sons, Ltd, 2008), 188, <http://doi.wiley.com/10.1002/9780470030585.ch13>.

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