

UNIVERSAL ASPECTS OF ISLAMIC ETHICS AND MUSLIM EXTREMISM

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Abstract: The researchers investigate the role of Islam in promoting ethical society in globalized world against the extremists' interpretations of Islamic ethical system, using the self-developed theoretical framework based on *Amr Bi al-Maruf Wa al-Nahyi al-Munkar* – promotion of goodness and prevention of badness. The content analysis method is used in this research to collect the data from the religious scriptures and literatures. This research found Islamic religious ethics is universal and capable of guiding young generation in industrial revolution 4.0.

Keywords: *Amr Bi al-Maruf Wa al-Nahyi al-Munkar*, Erosion of Ethics, Failure of Professional Ethics, Islamic Religious Ethics, Muslim Extremism, Religious Ethics, Universal Ethics.

1. Introduction

Islamic ethical system has become confused among young Muslims due to Muslim extremists' exclusive interpretations of ethics and justification of violence against all those who do not subscribe their view including Muslims. This research highlights the differences between Universal aspect of Islamic ethics and the extremists' understanding of good and evil and their

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exclusive approach. The theoretical framework of Islamic religious ethics has been developed by the researchers based on *Amr Bi al-Maruf Wa al-Nahyi al-Munkar* – promotion of goodness and prevention of badness referring to the Islamic religious resources mainly the Quran and Hadiths.

Teaching the right and wrong is the core business of religion, which plays crucial roles in developing an ethical society by developing moral-consciousness and connecting human mind with the omnipresent power of the God (Kruger 1-2). The high level of integrity due to God-consciousness motivates individuals to make moral decisions with responsibility (Al-Attas and Naquib 10-12).

Despite the primary role of religion in creating high level of self-consciousness on moral responsibility, young people are losing their faith in religion and religious teachings and prefer seeking ethical guidance outside of religion (Verschoor). Pew Research Center survey (2017) shows that increasing number of young people are leaving the traditional religions. On reasons for leaving Islam among ex-Muslims, a quarter of them cited that they dislike organized religion (Basheer and Elizabeth, "The Share of Americans who leave Islam") while religious bigotry, oppression, and violence in the name of Islam are other reasons.

The desertions of religion among young Muslims is not just an American or Western phenomenon, rather it is the fact among Muslim youths in many Muslim countries (PEW, "Young adults around the world"), including deeply Muslim conservative countries like Pakistan, Iran, and Sudan. Suroor Hasan supports his arguments with the scale of Muslim conversion to atheism, self-identify conviction among Muslim youths and increasing number of ex-Muslims in Muslim countries. According to Gallup International poll in 2012, the 5% of Saudi citizens self-identified as "convinced atheists" and 19% of Saudis think of themselves as "not a religious person" (5,19). Gallup International poll in 2015 indicated the increment of "not a religious person" in Saudi Arabi by 1% within three years (2012-2015) although 80% of them in 2015 attributed religion as great importance for them. (Carballo and Hermelo, 127.)

Researchers identified many reasons such as cultural, emotional, and linguistic dispositions, seniority-based patriarchal rule, and authoritarian attitudes for the youth dissatisfaction of religions (Barton). Exclusive, rigid, and intransigent interpretation to religious ethics also played a crucial role in driving young people away from the religions. Abdul Rahman Ibdah has found the exclusive interpretation of religious ethics, literal reading of religious texts, efforts to understand the religious literatures without referring to mainstream scholars, reading the Islamic literature without considering the socio-political conditions of the author as reasons for the loss of faith among Muslims. The exclusive understanding of religious ethics, interpreting the religious texts related to ethics ignoring social contexts, and disregarding the opinions of the mainstream Muslim scholars led some youths towards extremism but draw others away from Islam.

The concept of sin is an important example to explain the position of the extremists on Islamic religious ethics. Anything that goes against the commands of Allah, a breach of the laws and norms laid down by religion is considered sin in Islam. It arises from a wilful misuse of God-given human freedom. It might be one of any violation or omission of a religious law or ethical norm (Esposito, "Sin"). A sinner, according to the mainstream scholars, is a Muslim although the person commits sin. The extremists, however, do not recognize a sinner a Muslim. According to them, the Muslims who commit sins effectively reject their religion, entering the ranks of apostates, and therefore deserve capital punishment (Sonn and Farrar).

The mainstream Muslim scholars distinguish between major and minor sins. According to them, there are seven major sins namely (i) *Shirk* – ascribing a partner or rival to Allah in Lordship, worship or in His names and attributes, (ii) *Qatl* - murder without legal reason, (iii) *Sihr* - black Magic, (iv) *Riba* - interest, (v) *Aklu Mal al-Yetim* - snatching the property of an orphan, (vi) *Qathf* - accusing a pious, believing, and chaste women of adultery, and (vii) *Zahaf* - fleeing from the battlefield (Esposito, "Sin"). The minor sins due to human weakness such

as not replying to those who say *Salam*, losing temper, saying bad words, and making fun of people according to these scholars, will be forgiven by good deeds while the major sins can be forgiven only by repentance (Oliver, *The Qur'an: An Encyclopaedia*). God may overlook minor sins, and the traditions state they can be forgiven by performing salat (prayers) and *wadu* (ritual washing) (al-Bukhari 10:504; al-Muslim 2:437).

The extremists such as *Kharijites* and ISIS do not divide sin into major and minor sins. For them, all sins are major sins and transgression against divine law. Although they accept the possibility of repentance and forgiveness, the person who commits sin and dies without repentance, considered pagan and to be punished in hell (Nur 81). Hence, according to the extremists, sinner will not be forgiven unless he or she repents and should be excluded from the community of believers. This is against the mainstream view of Muslims that built upon several verses and Hadiths. According to the mainstream scholars' view, the minor sins will be forgiven by good deeds such as prayer although the sinner did not repent (al-Bukhari, Hadith No: 525 and al-Muslim, Hadith No:667).

The extremists like ISIS not only reject non-Muslims but also exclude Muslims who did not subscribe to their views. They also believe that they cannot live with those who did not share their views although they are Muslims (Sonn and Farrar). ISIS, therefore, killed Muslims more than non-Muslims and there is an increase over the past several years in terrorism-related violence against Muslims in the 35-member nations of the OECD. Islamic religious values and ethics, thus, have become the source of conflict and fight between Muslims and non-Muslims and unpopular not only among non-Muslims but also among Muslims.

As the world is entering into the 4.0 industrial revolution with the expansion of communication technologies and media, people acquired access to different philosophical, cultural, and religious orientations. The introduction of foreign moral philosophies and cultural values among regions and nations not only challenge the local culture and moral philosophy but also

highlighted the need of universal value and ethical system to guide people. People in the society do not share the same understanding of right and wrong, and there are conflicts among individuals regarding ethical principles and practices (Ferrell and Fraedrich 22). The ethical system that guides people in the future, therefore, should be inclusive and accommodative of different views and cultural preferences. This system should be able to build trust and helpful relationships in the society. This universal ethical system should be able to guide the behaviour of people in a local context while preparing them to adopt global culture and values. As Donaldson noted, a universalist view of ethics demands that all human activities should be judged based on the same and unified standards, independent of the situation and culture (Donaldson, *Ethics of International Business*, 18).

The universal values and ethical system are possible from the sources that are free from human limitation and attachments. In other words, these are only possible from the religious sources. Although religions are different in the aspect of theology, almost all religions are similar in terms of ethics and morals (Oniah, "Religion and Pluralistic Co-Existence," 161). The Golden rule of religions clearly expressed this shared value system. Love of others, for example, is generally encouraged in all religions and no religion supports hate (Oniah, "Religion and Pluralistic Co-Existence," 162) although there are exceptional situations like apostates, enemies during war. Universality of religious values and principles should be elaborated while clarifying the issues of exclusive interpretation by some extremists.

2. Islamic Ethical Framework

Do good and avoid evil is the basic principle to any ethical system. In Islamic ethical system, it is known as *Amr Bi al-Maruf Wa al-Nahyi al-Munkar* - promotion of goodness and prevention of badness. The two terms are mentioned in the Quran once to denote approved speech (2:263) and more than 32 times to explain morally approved and disapproved actions. The term *ma'ruf*, which is the passive participle of the verb to know, may best be translated as 'approved', whereas its antithesis *munkar*

may be translated as 'disapproved' or 'reprehensible' (Fakhry 12). Muslim scholars like al-Hasan al-Basari (d. 728), al-Mawardi (d. 1058), al-Raghib al-Ishfahani (d. 1108), and Al-Ghazali (d. 1111) taught ethical systems blending Philosophy, Theology, and Sufism. Fakhr al-Din al-Razi (d. 1209), whose thought is thoroughly impregnated with Avicennian and al-Ghazalian elements, may be regarded as an important representative in the late classical period of ethical and philosophico-theological writing. This concept was one of the five principles of theological discussions later between Mutazilites, the rationalist ethical philosophers, and others in Islamic history (Fakhry 31).

Islamic ethics can be elaborated from the perspectives of *Rab al-Alamin*, *Hudan Li Al-Nas* and *Rahmatlil Alamin*. The Quran describes God as *Rab al-Alamin* - the God of the Universe. According to this perspective, Allah is the creator of all beings and the God of everyone and everything. The Quran did not describe Allah as the God of Muslims and or a group of Muslims in anywhere, instead, it always designates Allah as the God of everyone including Muslims, non-Muslims, animals, plants, and everything. In referring to humanity, the Quran describes Allah as the God of humanity (114:1-3). Calderini has discussed this aspect in detail referring to number of Muslim exegetes. According to him, *Rab al-Alamin* not only includes the humanity but also all other creations. Since the term *Rab* - means the God, he studied the term *al-Alamin* - the worlds in many Tafsir – exegesis and concluded that the term has been understood by majority exegetes as 'comprehensive of all creations' not only human beings while minority of them explained this term as limited to humanity. He supported his argument with the conversation between Pharaoh and Moses in the Quran. To Pharaoh's question, "What is rabb *al-Alamin*?" Moses replied that He is the sustainer of the heaven and earth and all that is between them (26:23-24). Further, the grammatical formation of the term *al-Alamin* is also another evidence of him. Calderini indicated that *al-Alamin* is the plural of a noun which is already plural in meaning, that includes all possible species of creation and each one of them can be included. *Rab al-Alamin* denotes that

Allah is the God of the Universe, not limited to the God of Muslims and or a group of Muslims.

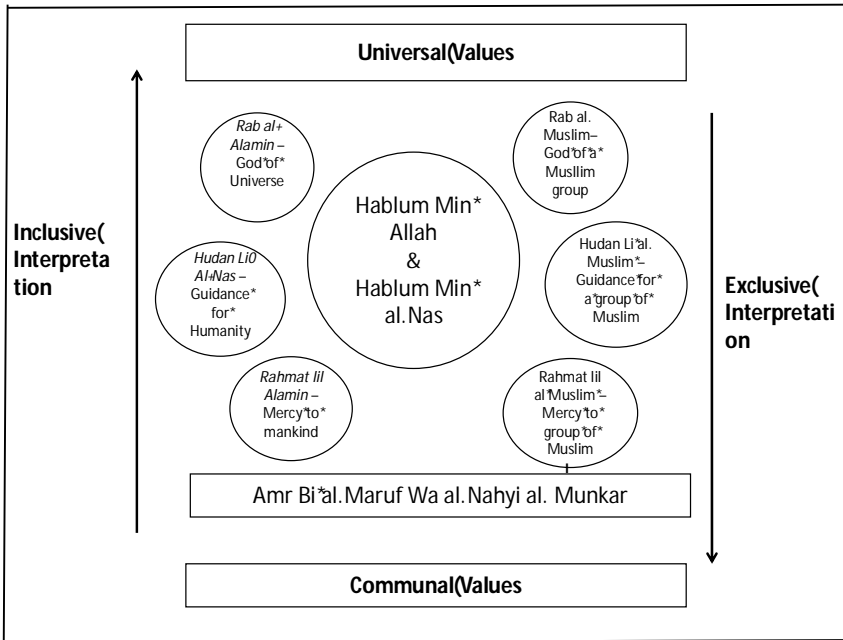
Hudan Li Al-Nas – the guidance of the humanity, is another aspect of universality of ethics in Islam. The Quran said, "it is the guidance to humanity and clear proofs of the guidance and the distinction" (2:185). According to this perspective, the Quran is the compilation of moral philosophy and ethical guidance to all, Muslims and non-Muslims (Ghouse). *Rahmat Lil Alamin* - Mercy of the Universe, is another important perspective of universality of ethics in Islam. The prophet Mohammad (pbuh) has been described in the Quran as 'mercy to the universe', "We have not sent you except as a mercy to the universe" (18:107). It means, the prophet (pbuh) and his way of life reflects mercy to all human beings, Muslims and non-Muslims, nature, and environment (Apriani, Fathurrochman, and Harmi, 194-196). From these three perspectives, it is argued that Islam are universal, and the interpretation should be inclusive and broad. *Al-Maruf* and *al-Munkar*, therefore, should be understood from this universal perspective.

Universal aspects of Islamic ethics based on *Amr Bi al-Maruf Wa al-Nahyi al-Munkar* can be discussed in relation to God as well as relation to fellow beings. *Amr Bi al-Maruf* is an act or expression that promotes and strengthens the relationship of human being with God and *Nahyi al-Munkar* is an act of expression that prevent badness and discourages relationship with the God. An act or expression that promotes and strengthens the relationship of human being with fellow human beings and an act or expression that prevents badness in relationship with the fellow human beings is known as *Hablum Min Al Nas* (Oniah, *Understanding Islam*, 97).

3. Application of Islamic Ethical Framework

The following diagram presents *Amr Bi al-Maruf Wa al-Nahyi al-Munkar* in relations to *Hablum Min Allah* -relationship with the God and *Hablum Min al-Nas* – relationship with the human beings. The universal aspect of Islamic ethic will be elaborated

when *Hablum Min Allah* and *Hablum Min al-Nas* are interpreted from inclusive approach.



Inclusive approach to religious ethic in this diagram has developed based on the universal aspect of *Rab al-Alamin* and His communication to human being through prophet Mohammad (pbuh) in the form of universal guidance – *Hudan Li Al-Nas* and universal model of *Rahmatlil Alamin*. On the other hand, Islamic religious ethics is distorted in the absence of recognizing these universal aspects in interpreting the ethics.

Theft, for instance, is a major sin in Islam and it is punishable crime. Understanding theft ignoring the aspect of *Rab al-Alamin* leads the Islamic ethics distorted. Since *Rab al-Alamin* - God of the universe demands equal treatment in the application of ethics regardless of people’s social background, the prophet Mohammad (pbuh) rejected attempting to implement the punishment for theft in a narrow sense as a way of protecting the respect of a clan. It is reported by Aisha (RA), wife of the prophet Mohammad (pbuh) that a woman from Makhzum clan - one of the most influential tribes in the Pre-Islamic Arab world - committed a theft and she was proven guilty of the offence and

the verdict was to cut off her hand. Some of the members of that clan deliberated that based on the pre-Islamic practices, this punishment should not be applied to the members of the Makhzum clan. However, they could not find the courage to make this suggestion to the prophet (pbuh) since it will result in favouritism. Usama bin Zaid spoke to him. The Messenger of Allah was very furious when he heard this suggestion. The colour of his face changed, and said: Do you intercede in one of the prescribed punishments of Allah? He (Usama) said: 'Messenger of Allah, seek forgiveness for me. When it was dusk. Allah's Messenger (pbuh) stood up and gave an address. He (first) glorified Allah as He deserves, and then said; this (injustice) destroyed those before you that when any one of (high) rank committed theft among them, they spared him, and when any weak one among them committed theft, they inflicted the prescribed punishment upon him. By Him in Whose Hand is my life, even if Fatima daughter of Muhammad were to commit theft, I would have cut off her hand. (Al-Muslim, Hadith No: 4189 and al-Bukhari, Hadith No:3733). According to this Hadith, Islamic ethical system operates among people equally and no preferences is strictly allowed. As far as Allah is the God of everyone, people are equal in the application of ethics. Further, understanding ethics and its application in a narrow sense was an important reason for the destruction of people before Islam. Hence, understanding and the application of theft unequally is distortion of Islamic ethics.

Feeding the hungry is an important aspect of Islamic ethics. From the perspective of *Rahmatlil Alamin* – mercy to the universe, the needy includes all human beings, animals as well as other creatures. "Prophet Mohammad (pbuh) said, a prostitute saw a dog turning around a well on a hot day; it was panting due to thirst. She took off her shoe, filled it with water and gave the water to the dog. The woman was forgiven due to this deed." (Al-Muslim, Hadith No: 2245). Although the prostitution is one of the major sins in Islamic ethical system, providing food for the hungry and saving a life is considered greater and the sin is forgiven. It shows the important aspect of

Rahmatlil Alamin in understanding Islamic ethics. This aspect is further elaborated in another Hadith, "A woman went to Hell due to imprisoning a cat in the house. She did not give it any food and did not let it go out and eat the insects on earth" (Al-Bukhari, Hadith No: 2242). The Hadith ignoring the aspect of *Rahmatlil Alamin* is wrong and it is distortion of Islamic ethics.

The racism is a major destructive principle of the society. This is the perception of one group of people is designated as the 'out group' or all but one group of people are designated as the 'in group'. This creates a massive imbalance in all levels of society. In the view of *Hudan Li Al-Nas* - the guidance of humankind, Islam rejects racism and considered major ethical challenge for the progress of any society (49:11). Hence, the prophet Mohammad (pbuh) took serious action against his companions those who tried to understand the human dignity based on racism ignoring the aspect of *Hudan Li Al-Nas*. It is reported that, Once, the Prophet's companions - Khalid B. Al-Walid, Abdurrahmann B. Auf, Bilal B. Abi Rabah, and Abu Dharr - got together in a gathering. Abu Dharr began speaking, and Bilal corrected him. Abu Dharr exclaimed out of anger, "Even you, O son of a black woman, try to correct me?" Bilal got up, visibly upset at what was said, and said: "By Allah, I will report you to the Prophet." He went to him and informed him of what was said and the Prophet became very angry. Abu Dharr rushed to meet the Prophet and said "Peace be upon you, O Prophet of Allah." He continued, "I am not sure if he responded to my greeting due to his extreme anger." Then he said: "O Abu Dharr! Have you ridiculed him on account of his mother? Indeed you are a man in whom there remain traits of the pre-Islamic era!" Abu Dharr wept and said: "O Messenger of Allah, ask Allah to forgive me." He left the Masjid weeping and when he saw Bilal, he put his head on the ground and said to Bilal, "O Bilal, I will not move from my position till you put your foot on my head. You are the honourable and I am the disgraced." Bilal wept, and kissed the cheek of Abu Dharr and said: "A face that has prostrated to Allah is not to be stepped on—rather, it is to be kissed" (Al-Bukhari, Hadith No: 6050, Al-Muslim, Hadith No:

1661, and Abu Dawood, Hadith No: 5157). Since the aspect of *Hudan Li Al-Nas* demands a change of worldview, particularly perceiving dignity and rights of people, the Prophet indicated remnant traits of the pre-Islamic worldview in Abu Dharr. It shows understanding Islamic ethics in reference to particular race, religion, language and other traits is wrong.

Hence, exclusive approach to *Amr Bi al-Maruf Wa al-Nahyi al-Munkar* creates group values that rejects religious freedom and multiple choice of practice considering the multi-religious and multi-cultural context. This inflexible form of moral claim justifies violence against those who do not subscribe to the view of extremists and way of practices regardless of their faith Muslims or denominations. The extremists understand Allah as the God of certain group of Muslims (*Rab Li al-Muslim*) instead of the God of the Universe (*Rab li al-Aalmin*), the Quran as the guidance only for them not for others and the prophet Mohammad (pbuh) as the Prophet of them not of the rest. As a result, their interpretations to Islamic religious ethics, have become exclusive and sectarian. This aspect is discussed under following three themes.

3.1. *Rab li al-Aalmin*

To extremists, Allah is their God, and He loves only them but not others. It is because, they believe that they only understand the teachings of the Quran and Islamic ethical system correctly and practice it in their day to day life. (Ali). This perception led them to consider that Allah will not love others. They also believe that the mistakes in practicing religious ethics or ignoring them necessarily reflects deviation from the belief in Allah that eventually leads to apostacy. The exclusive perception of Allah led them to consider that the Muslims who commit sins effectively reject the faith in religion and does not deserve the love of Allah (Sonn and Farrar). The misunderstanding of Allah, His mercy, and forgiveness, led the extremists to consider sinners not as members of the community of believers.

The Quran criticizes the exclusive understanding of Allah and restricts interpretation of ethics with the example of the

Jews. Although the Quran highlights privilege place for Jews (2:47), it criticizes them for their ethical misbehaviours and corruptions such as killing their prophets (5:70), worshipping other gods (9:30–31), breaking their covenant (2:83), being ungrateful to God (45:16–17), slandering God (4:50, 5:64), and scorning Islam and Muslims (5:57). The Jews are criticized by their own scriptures for similar reasons. In Jeremiah, for instance, Jews are criticized for breaking their covenant with God, being ungrateful to God, worshipping other gods, and killing their sons (Jeremiah, 2: 26-28). Particularly, God punished Israel for sectarian understanding of ethics and interpreting the right and wrong from exclusivist views (Quran 17:4-7). Although, the Quran considered Israelites who lived before the arrival of the Christianity as believers (3:67), Allah punished them when they were ethically corrupt (17:7). Allah's support to the people is based on their behaviour rather than on their faith alone. If believers do good God makes them stronger and He punishes them when they misbehave and involve in corruptions.

Indeed, the extremists reject the attribute of 'the Rahman' - mercy for the humankind including non-Muslims and accept 'the Raheem' - mercy for Muslims (Kamali). Hence, exclusive understanding of God leads the extremists to interpret Islamic religious ethics in communal view and to consider all others including Muslims who do mistakes in practicing religious ethics as non-Muslims. This exclusive view is rejected by the Quran as well as Hadiths. The mainstream Muslim scholars and religious leaders already have declared this view as deviant and have highlighted contradiction of this view to the view of the Quran and Hadiths (Daftary 63-65).

3.2. *Hudan Li Al-Nas*

The exclusive understanding of the Quran is another reason that led the extremists to interpret Islamic ethics in narrow perspective. They see all good deeds mentioned in the Quran as faith, and leaving one of these good deeds is immoral and erase all deeds that one has earned throughout the life (Sule, Shettima, and Alkali). According to this perspective, nothing in the Quran

is relevant to those who have no faith in Islam and the Quran will not guide any non-Muslims.

Islamic ethics, however, is universal, and the Quran discusses ethics in broader perspective. The honesty (*Sidq*), for instance, is an ethical principle of Islamic ethical system. Islam encourages practicing honesty in all affairs of human life including individual and societal affairs (2:177). Muslims or non-Muslims who follows this teaching and organize their personal and societal relationship based on honesty, will find its impact in their lives regardless of their faith. Similarly, sexual misbehaviour is a moral problem in the Quran (17:32) and Muslims or non-Muslims will find its consequence if they follow the Quranic guidance of sexual behaviour. The people who follow Islamic ethical system in social life will find its impact regardless of their faiths. Hence, faith in Islam is not necessary to get the benefit from the guidance of the Quran in social affairs.

3.3 Rahmat Lil Alamin

Exclusive understanding of the Prophet Mohammad (pbuh) is another motivation of the extremists to interpret Islamic religious ethics in a narrow perspective. The extremists misunderstood prophet Mohammad (pbuh) as their Prophet instead of *Rahmat Lil Aalamin* - mercy to the universe (Sule, Shettima, and Alkali 171-173). This exclusive perspective led the extremists to misunderstand the characteristics of the prophet (pbuh) and his mercy towards others, and to misinterpret certain verses of the Quran including 48:29 which says, "Muhammad is the Messenger of Allah; and those with him are forceful against the disbelievers, merciful among themselves." Although this verse describes the attitude of Prophet Mohammad (pbuh) to non-Muslims in certain condition and context such as war, these extremists generalized this condition and interpret Islamic religious ethics with non-Muslims in narrow sense. They practice justice, love, compassion, helping the needy, and all other human values exclusively within their circle while adopting rigour with others (Daftary 163-164). Based on this concept, Muslim extremists not only reject non-Muslims but also

exclude Muslims who did not subscribe to their view. ISIS, for example, killed Muslims more than non-Muslims as they believed that they cannot live with those who did not share their views although they are Muslims.

The mercy of the prophet Mohammad (pbuh) to the universe and his cordial relationship with non-Muslims throughout his life has been elaborated and discussed by many Muslim and non-Muslim scholars (Levy-Rubin). The friendliness and cordial relationship with non-Muslims not only is an option but also is compulsory, according to the Quran (60:8, 5:42). It is further reiterated by many hadiths such as "Whoever killed a person having a treaty with the Muslims, shall not smell the smell of Paradise though its smell is perceived from a distance of forty years" (Al-Bukhari, Hadith No. 6914); "If anyone kills a man whom he grants protection prematurely, Allah will forbid him to enter Paradise (Ahmad, Hadith no. 19864 and Abu Dawud, Hadith no. 2760). The universal aspects of Islamic religious ethics need to be highlighted based on the universal aspects of God, the Quran, and the Prophet since these universal aspects accommodate cultural variations and adopt different contexts in interpreting the religious ethics (Kamaruddin, Abdullah, and Ramzy, 192). Islamic religious ethics is suitable to guide young people in moral decision making.

4. Conclusion

As far as the God describes human being as the best creature and as universal citizenship, His commands are universal and transform the human being from racial, language, colour and all other limitation to a universal culture and religion. Therefore, Islamic values and ethical system are not only universal but also comprehensive. This research reaffirms that Islamic religious ethics inclusive, universal and accept people with different cultures and religions. Young Muslims, therefore, can feel blessed by being Muslims and religious while maintaining their friendship and acquaintance with others. They also can reject the extremists' approach to ethics and convince their view of ethics is clear deviation.

There is need for further research on the application of the universal aspect of Islamic religious ethics in different cultural contexts and universal ethical systems in other faiths that could guide young people in globalized world.

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