Dialogue of Civilizations as a Framework for Global Ethics: A Conceptual Analysis Between Islamic Tradition and Contemporary Humanitarian Discourse

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Abstract

The aspiration for a unified global ethic often founders on the stubborn realities of civilisational particularity. While calls for universal moral frameworks proliferate, they frequently struggle to reconcile diverse cultural and religious traditions, leading to ethical propositions that feel more imposed than collaboratively constructed. This paper scrutinises the conceptual terrain of intercivilisational dialogue as a potential global ethical framework, specifically examining the intricate relationship between Islamic tradition and contemporary humanism. It argues that a genuine ethical architecture cannot simply flatten difference, nor can it retreat into isolated moral silos. Instead, the real challenge lies in fostering a dynamic, critical engagement that respects distinct ethical genealogies while seeking shared ground for human flourishing. The existing discourse often either oversimplifies Islamic ethical contributions or dismisses contemporary humanism as inherently secular, thereby missing opportunities for profound conceptual cross-pollination. This analysis contends that only through an intentional, robust dialogue, one prepared to confront entrenched assumptions and acknowledge historical power imbalances, might a truly inclusive and resilient global ethic begin to emerge, offering a more compelling vision than the predictable alternative of fragmented moralities.

Keywords: Intercivilisational Dialogue, Global Ethics, Islamic Humanism, Ethical Pluralism, Human Dignity

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Introduction

The world lurches from one crisis to another, each revealing the profound inadequacy of existing global governance structures and, more pointedly, the often-hollow promises of universal moral consensus. We speak of shared values, of a common humanity, yet the chasm between rhetoric and reality widens daily. Persistent conflicts, humanitarian catastrophes, and escalating environmental degradation demonstrate that grand ethical declarations, however well-intentioned, frequently fail to galvanise collective action or bridge deep-seated cultural divides. Surprisingly, despite decades of scholarly attention to 'global ethics,' the fundamental mechanisms for truly integrating diverse ethical traditions into a workable framework remain underdeveloped. The discourse too often presumes a singular, pre-defined ethical destination, rather than appreciating the arduous, iterative journey of co-creation. This intellectual oversight, a reluctance to critically interrogate the very foundations upon which global ethical frameworks are built, leaves us with proposals that feel suspiciously like re-packaged Western universalisms, alienating precisely those civilisations whose genuine participation is indispensable.

The 'clash of civilisations' narrative, popularised by Huntington (1996), for all its predictive shortcomings, starkly highlighted the profound cultural fault lines that continue to shape international relations. Countering this grim prognosis, the notion of 'dialogue among civilisations' emerged, offering a more hopeful, albeit conceptually demanding, alternative (Zaqzūq, 2018; Sankalpa, 2025). Yet even this dialogical impulse often devolves into superficial exchanges, celebrating diversity without truly grappling with the difficult work of ethical integration. The specific contributions of Islamic ethical thought, with its rich intellectual history and its profound emphasis on justice, compassion, and human dignity, are frequently either overlooked or caricatured in contemporary humanitarian discourse. Simultaneously, contemporary humanism, often perceived through a narrow, secular lens, struggles to articulate a global ethic that resonates beyond its specific philosophical origins without appearing culturally imperialistic. This study argues that the failure to construct a robust, inclusive global ethical framework is not merely a diplomatic challenge, but a conceptual one, demanding a rigorous analysis of how Islamic tradition and contemporary humanism might genuinely inform, challenge, and enrich each other through a purposeful intercivilisational dialogue.

Literature Review

The contemporary discourse on global ethics often oscillates between the urgent necessity of universal moral principles and the equally insistent demand for respect for civilisational particularity. This tension is not new, yet its resolution remains elusive, particularly when considering the ethical contributions of non-Western traditions. Samuel Huntington's (1996) provocative 'clash of civilisations' thesis, despite its widespread critique, undeniably shaped much of the subsequent discussion, framing inter-civilisational engagement as inherently conflictual. He argued that post-Cold War conflicts would primarily manifest along cultural and civilisational fault lines, including those separating Western and Islamic civilisations

(Huntington, 1996). This perspective, however, provoked a strong counter-narrative advocating for 'dialogue among civilisations' as an imperative for global peace and cooperation (Zaqzūq, 2018; Sankalpa, 2025). Indeed, the United Nations itself dedicated 2001 to this very concept, signalling a global recognition that confrontation yields little lasting peace (Küng, 2001; Ikeda, 2010).

A significant proponent of a unified global ethic has been Hans Küng, whose 'Declaration Towards a Global Ethic' (1993) sought to identify fundamental, cross-cultural moral imperatives shared by diverse religious traditions (Küng, 2002). This declaration, stemming from the Parliament of the World's Religions, posited four foundational ethical boundaries: 'Do not kill,' 'Do not steal,' 'Do not lie,' and 'Do not commit sexual immorality,' aiming for a universal moral contract (Küng, 2002; Parliament of the World's Religions, 1993). While Küng's initiative garnered considerable attention, it also faced critical scrutiny, particularly from Islamic perspectives. Mohd Khairul Naim Che Nordin (2015, 2022) offered a detailed review and critique of Küng's global ethic from an Islamic standpoint, questioning its assumptions and its capacity to fully integrate the distinct nuances of Islamic ethical thought without some degree of conceptual compromise (Mohd Khairul Naim Che Nordin, 2015; 2022). This suggests that merely identifying common ground might not be sufficient; the underlying philosophical frameworks that give meaning to these commonalities also require careful negotiation.

The concept of humanism itself presents a complex intellectual landscape. Contemporary humanism, often rooted in Enlightenment ideals and secular thought, champions human reason, autonomy, and dignity as primary ethical anchors (Shook, 2015). Shook (2015) argues for humanism's capacity to offer a 'limited and revisable moral universalism' capable of addressing challenges from divine morality and moral relativism. However, this Western-centric view of humanism is not without its critics. Edward Said, for instance, advocated for a 'self-critical humanism,' one that acknowledges its own historical and cultural situatedness and challenges essentialised categories that underpin notions like the 'clash of civilizations' (Said, cited in 'Introduction: Edward Said and After: Toward a New Humanism', 2025). This self-reflexive approach is vital for any global ethical project, preventing the unwitting imposition of one cultural paradigm over others (Sankalpa, 2025; Wang, 2023).

Within the Islamic tradition, a distinct yet dialogically open concept of 'Islamic humanism' has been articulated. Muhammad Arkoun, for example, argued for an 'innovative intellectual education' leading to a humanistic consciousness within both Islamic and non-Islamic realms, advocating for openness towards diverse sources of knowledge and a critical evaluation of Islamic mental heritage (Arkoun, 1994, cited in Günther, 2004). Ebrahim Moosa (2011, 2018) extensively explores the 'spirit of Islamic humanism,' linking it to reconciliation and ethical practice in a globalised world (Moosa, 2011; 2018). Kai Kresse (2009) also discusses an 'implicit Islamic humanism' informing 'Swahili humanism,' connecting knowledge to moral obligation (Kresse, 2009). These interpretations of Islamic humanism often emphasise human dignity (*karamah insaniyyah*), social justice, and the pursuit of knowledge as integral to faith, distinguishing it from purely secular humanisms, yet also demonstrating points of potential convergence. The Global Islamic Universities Consortium (GIUC), for instance, proposes an internationalisation of Islamic higher education based on values like *rahmatan lil 'alamin* (blessings for the universe) and maqasid sharia (purposes of Islamic law),

aiming to foster intercivilisational dialogue and project a positive image of Islam internationally (GIUC, 2025). This initiative implicitly frames Islamic education as a contributor to global ethical discourse rather than an insular pursuit (GIUC, 2025).

The notion of 'pluriversality' emerges as a compelling response to the limitations of universalist ethical frameworks. Sankalpa (2025) argues that 'decolonising global ethics requires embracing pluriversality, which challenges the idea of global ethics as merely the application of moral expertise. Instead, it advocates for cultivating a practical ethic of coexistence in an 'ontologically plural and radically hierarchical world' (Sankalpa, 2025). This perspective resonates with criticisms of Western universalism, which often carries implicit moral dominance (Wang, 2023). Wang (2023) highlights how Western countries have historically promoted a 'clash of civilisations theory' and imposed their narrow views, advocating instead for mutual respect, equality, and tolerance among civilisations as a new paradigm for harmonious coexistence, founded on shared human values (Wang, 2023).

Interreligious and intercivilisational dialogue is increasingly seen not just as a diplomatic tool but as an ethical imperative. Khadijah Mohd Khambali @ Hambali (n.d.) extensively addresses Islam and civilisational dialogue, highlighting its potential for fostering mutual understanding (Khadijah Mohd Khambali @ Hambali, n.d.). Azizan Baharuddin (2016) further illustrates this by examining the 'enculturing of bioethics through interreligious and science dialogue' within a Malaysian context, demonstrating practical applications of dialogue in addressing complex ethical issues (Azizan Baharuddin, 2016). The very act of dialogue, when approached with genuine openness and a willingness to learn, can lead to 'mutual transformation,' enriching participants' own religious practices (Ikeda, 2010; Ikeda & Tu Weiming, 2010).

However, the path to a truly inclusive global ethic remains fraught with challenges. Amarasingam (2010) explores the relationship between religion and contemporary humanism, suggesting that while contemporary humanism's central ethic champions rational engagement, it often contrasts with religious perspectives, even those within Islam such as Sufism, which explore polysemous possibilities of the Qur'an (Amarasingam, 2010). The task, therefore, is not to erase these differences but to understand them as resources for a richer, more robust ethical conversation. The literature suggests that a meaningful global ethical framework must move beyond superficial commonalities, engage deeply with distinct civilisational ethical traditions, and critically reflect on the power dynamics inherent in any discussion of universal values. It is a call for a dialogue that is not merely polite conversation but a rigorous, intellectually honest, and ethically driven encounter.

Methodology

This conceptual analysis embarked upon a deliberate, critical interrogation of existing academic discourse concerning intercivilisational dialogue, global ethics, Islamic tradition, and contemporary humanism. The methodology was not merely descriptive; it constituted an intellectual defence of a qualitative approach, acknowledging the inherent complexity and subjectivity of ethical frameworks. We deliberately prioritised a deep dive into textual sources rather than empirical data collection, understanding that the problem at hand—the conceptual

chasm between aspirational global ethics and fragmented civilisational realities—demands a rigorous engagement with ideas, arguments, and philosophical underpinnings.

To avoid the bias of relying on a narrow disciplinary lens, we focused on a diverse array of academic outputs: peer-reviewed journal articles, doctoral and master's theses, and chapters from scholarly books published by reputable academic presses. The initial search strategy employed a broad spectrum of keywords derived from the study title, such as 'Dialog Peradaban,' 'Global Ethics,' 'Islamic Tradition,' 'Contemporary Humanism,' 'Intercivilizational Dialogue,' 'Islamic Ethics,' and 'Humanitarian Discourse.' This iterative search process, conducted through academic databases and Google Scholar, was not a simple keyword match; it involved a careful sifting through abstracts and introductions to ascertain genuine conceptual relevance and academic rigor. We consciously excluded popular articles, opinion pieces, and unverified online content, ensuring that every source contributed to a robust academic foundation.

The selection of specific texts involved a manual, thoughtful process of evaluating their argumentative weight and their capacity to illuminate the core tensions of the research question. For instance, works by Huntington (1996) were included not for endorsement, but for their foundational role in shaping the 'clash' narrative that subsequently spurred the 'dialogue' countermovement (Zaqzūq, 2018; Sankalpa, 2025). Similarly, Hans Küng's propositions for a global ethic (Küng, 2002) were deemed essential not as definitive solutions, but as significant attempts that invited critical Islamic responses (Mohd Khairul Naim Che Nordin, 2015, 2022). This approach allowed us to map the intellectual terrain, identifying both points of convergence and persistent divergence.

Once a corpus of relevant texts was assembled, the analysis proceeded through several stages. First, each selected text was read thoroughly to grasp its primary argument, its theoretical framework, and its methodological approach. Second, we identified key concepts and recurring themes within the texts, such as 'human dignity,' 'universalism,' 'pluralism,' 'dialogue,' and 'secularism.' Third, a critical comparative analysis was undertaken, juxtaposing authors' perspectives on these themes. This involved asking: Where do authors agree? Where do they disagree? What are the underlying assumptions driving their arguments? What are the strengths and weaknesses of their positions when viewed against the broader intellectual landscape? This was not about summarising individual papers but synthesising their contributions into a coherent, argumentative narrative.

We deliberately sought out texts that offered explicit critiques or alternative perspectives, such as Edward Said's call for a 'self-critical humanism' (Said, cited in 'Introduction: Edward Said and After: Toward a New Humanism', 2025) or the argument for 'pluriversality' in global ethics (Sankalpa, 2025; Wang, 2023). This reflective engagement allowed us to move beyond a simplistic acceptance of existing frameworks and to explore the conceptual nuances required for a truly inclusive global ethic. The goal was to uncover how Islamic ethical traditions, particularly through the lens of 'Islamic humanism' (Moosa, 2011, 2018; Arkoun, 1994, cited in Günther, 2004), could offer distinctive, enriching contributions to contemporary humanitarian discourse, rather than being merely accommodated within pre-existing, often Western-derived, ethical models. This methodological stance, rooted in careful textual interpretation and critical intellectual engagement, aimed to provide a robust conceptual

foundation for understanding the potential of intercivilisational dialogue as a viable ethical framework.

Results

The conceptual analysis revealed several interconnected themes, each illuminating the intricate dynamics of constructing a global ethical framework through intercivilisational dialogue. The first, and perhaps most insistent, finding was the profound and persistent tension between the aspiration for ethical universalism and the undeniable reality of civilisational particularism. While many scholars, following Küng (2002), advocate for universally applicable moral norms, the practical implementation often encounters resistance rooted in distinct cultural and religious epistemologies. This is not merely a matter of differing customs; it concerns fundamental disagreements about the source, scope, and ultimate purpose of ethics itself. For instance, the very notion of 'human dignity,' ostensibly a universal concept, takes on specific theological and philosophical colourations within Islamic tradition that may not perfectly align with its secular humanist counterparts (Moosa, 2011, 2018). The ease with which 'universal' values can become thinly veiled projections of a dominant culture's morality remains a significant intellectual hurdle, as Wang (2023) and Sankalpa (2025) forcefully argue.

Secondly, the concept of 'Islamic humanism' emerged as a vital, yet often misunderstood, ethical resource. This is not a mere mimicry of Western humanism, nor is it an anachronistic attempt to project modern ideals onto historical Islamic thought. Instead, as articulated by Arkoun (1994, cited in Günther, 2004) and Moosa (2011, 2018), Islamic humanism represents an indigenous ethical tradition that prioritises human flourishing, intellectual inquiry, and social justice within a theocentric framework. It demands an openness to diverse knowledge sources, even non-Islamic ones, and a critical engagement with one's own heritage, pushing beyond rigid orthodoxies. This tradition, with its emphasis on karamah insaniyyah (human dignity) and maqasid sharia (higher objectives of Islamic law), offers a robust ethical vocabulary that can contribute meaningfully to global discussions, moving beyond the often-reductive portrayals of Islam in contemporary humanitarian discourse (GIUC, 2025). Its focus on moral obligation stemming from knowledge, as Kresse (2009) observes, provides a unique angle on ethical responsibility.

A third significant finding was the compelling critique of hegemonic ethical frameworks and the necessity of embracing 'pluriversality.' The 'clash of civilisations' thesis (Huntington, 1996) inadvertently underscored the dangers of singular, totalising narratives. Scholars like Sankalpa (2025) and Wang (2023) directly challenge the notion of a 'universal civilisation' as a Western imposition, advocating for a pluriversal ethics that cultivates coexistence in a world of multiple, equally valid ways of being. This perspective insists that true global ethics cannot be about finding one master key to unlock all moral dilemmas, but rather about building bridges between distinct, thriving ethical houses. The failure to appreciate this ontological pluralism perpetuates a subtle form of cultural imperialism, hindering genuine dialogue.

Fourthly, dialogue itself was not merely identified as a communication strategy but as an ethical imperative. The literature consistently demonstrated that meaningful intercivilisational engagement moves beyond polite exchange to a transformative encounter.

Zaqzūq (2018) and Khadijah Mohd Khambali @ Hambali (n.d.) highlight how dialogue, when approached with humility and a willingness to learn, can dismantle prejudices and foster a deeper appreciation for shared human brotherhood. It is through this sustained, often uncomfortable, process of mutual questioning and listening that distinct ethical traditions can begin to recognise common ground, not as an abstract universal, but as a shared commitment to addressing collective human problems. The very act of engaging in dialogue becomes an ethical practice, challenging insularity and fostering solidarity (Azizan Baharuddin, 2016).

Finally, the concept of 'human dignity' emerged as a potent, though conceptually contested, bridge concept. Across both Islamic and humanist traditions, the inherent worth and respect due to every individual form a foundational ethical principle. While the sources of this dignity may differ—divine creation in Islam versus inherent human autonomy in secular humanism—the practical implications often converge. This convergence offers a crucial starting point for ethical collaboration, allowing diverse traditions to advocate for shared humanitarian goals without necessarily homogenising their underlying worldviews. The challenge lies in ensuring that this shared commitment to human dignity is translated into concrete action, resisting its reduction to a mere rhetorical flourish in the face of real-world injustices (Dierksmeier, n.d.).

Discussion

The persistent global challenges facing humanity, from climate change to widespread conflict, undeniably demand a robust ethical framework, yet the prevailing approaches often fall short. What becomes clear from this analysis is that a simplistic imposition of 'universal' values, often rooted in specific Western Enlightenment traditions, is not only ineffective but also intellectually and culturally problematic. It is entirely possible that this very approach, rather than fostering unity, inadvertently exacerbates civilisational friction by failing to genuinely acknowledge and integrate diverse ethical genealogies (Wang, 2023; Sankalpa, 2025). The 'clash of civilisations' narrative, while ostensibly descriptive, risks becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy if dialogue remains superficial, as Huntington (1996) himself, perhaps ironically, demonstrated.

The argument for intercivilisational dialogue, therefore, is not merely a plea for civility; it is an ethical imperative that recognises the inherent value of pluralism. When Zaqzūq (2018) speaks of fostering an inclusive ethical framework rooted in human brotherhood, he implies a process of mutual learning, not just tolerance. This hints at a deeper issue: the quality of dialogue matters immensely. Superficial exchanges, often driven by political expediency, will never yield the profound transformations necessary for a truly global ethic. Khadijah Mohd Khambali @ Hambali's work on Islam and civilisational dialogue underscores this by demonstrating the potential for genuine understanding when traditions engage constructively (Khadijah Mohd Khambali @ Hambali, n.d.).

Moreover, the exploration of 'Islamic humanism' provides a powerful counter-narrative to the often-reductive portrayal of Islamic ethics. Moosa (2011, 2018) and Arkoun (1994, cited in Günther, 2004) illustrate that Islamic tradition contains rich conceptual resources for human flourishing, intellectual critique, and social justice. This is not an attempt to force-fit Islamic

thought into a Western mould; rather, it identifies an indigenous ethical lineage that champions human dignity (karamah insaniyyah) and rational inquiry. Neglecting such traditions impoverishes the global ethical conversation, reducing it to a monologue rather than a symphony of voices. The GIUC's vision of promoting rahmatan lil 'alamin through education (GIUC, 2025) is a concrete example of how Islamic ethical principles can be translated into contributions to a broader humanitarian discourse.

The persistent critique of 'universal ethics' by scholars like Mohd Khairul Naim Che Nordin (2015, 2022) regarding Küng's framework (Küng, 2002) is not a rejection of shared values per se, but a necessary challenge to their uncritical adoption. It suggests that a global ethic, if it is to be truly global, cannot be merely a lowest common denominator or a pre-packaged set of rules. Instead, it must emerge from a painstaking, iterative process of conceptual negotiation, where each tradition brings its full ethical weight to bear. This process requires a 'self-critical humanism,' as implied by Said (cited in 'Introduction: Edward Said and After: Toward a New Humanism', 2025), one that is aware of its own historical baggage and open to being reshaped by engagement with others.

The call for 'pluriversality' (Sankalpa, 2025) might initially sound like an abandonment of universal aspirations, but it is, in fact, a more pragmatic and ethically sound pathway to them. It acknowledges that human experience and moral reasoning are deeply embedded in specific cultural contexts. A global ethic, therefore, ought not to seek a singular, homogenous moral code, but rather a framework for navigating and respecting multiple, legitimate ethical systems while identifying areas for collective action. The Humanistic Management Network, discussed by Dierksmeier (n.d.), which defends human dignity in the face of vulnerability, exemplifies how shared values can drive practical initiatives even when their philosophical underpinnings vary.

Ultimately, the discussion implies that the current global ethical landscape is fragmented because the tools of its construction have been inadequate. We have too often prioritised abstract principles over the messy, difficult work of intercivilisational engagement. The insights from Islamic tradition, particularly its humanistic elements, offer a potent corrective, providing both a rich ethical vocabulary and a demonstrated capacity for intellectual openness (Amarasingam, 2010; Kresse, 2009). The challenge now is to move beyond mere recognition of difference to a proactive, transformative dialogue that allows diverse traditions to co-create a genuinely shared ethical future, one that is robust enough to withstand the shocks of a turbulent world. This will require not just intellectual curiosity, but a profound ethical commitment to mutual respect and genuine understanding.

Conclusion

The pursuit of a global ethical framework, one capable of navigating the complex moral currents of our interconnected world, remains an urgent, yet profoundly elusive, endeavour. This analysis has argued that the conventional approaches, often leaning towards a singular, universalist imposition, are conceptually flawed and practically inadequate. Such methods frequently fail to respect the inherent diversity of civilisational ethical traditions, inadvertently perpetuating a subtle form of cultural hegemony that undermines the very solidarity they seek to build. The true path to a resilient global ethic lies not in the erasure of difference, but in a

robust, critical, and transformative intercivilisational dialogue. We have seen that the 'clash of civilisations' narrative, while influential, presents a false dichotomy, overshadowing the rich potential for ethical convergence and mutual enrichment. Instead, the literature consistently points towards dialogue as an ethical imperative, a process that moves beyond superficial exchange to a deeper, more challenging engagement with differing worldviews. Crucially, Islamic tradition, far from being an insular ethical system, offers a vibrant 'Islamic humanism' that champions human dignity, intellectual inquiry, and social justice. This indigenous humanistic current, as articulated by scholars such as Arkoun and Moosa, provides a powerful and often overlooked resource for contemporary humanitarian discourse, capable of challenging and enriching secular humanist perspectives.

Furthermore, the critique of hegemonic universalism and the embrace of 'pluriversality' emerge as indispensable conceptual tools. A global ethic that genuinely serves all humanity cannot be dictated by one civilisation; it must be co-created through a process that acknowledges and respects multiple ontological and ethical realities. This means moving beyond merely tolerating difference to actively valuing it as a source of ethical strength and innovation. The efforts of Küng, while commendable in their aspiration for common ground, highlight the critical need for deeper engagement with specific traditions, as demonstrated by the Islamic responses to his framework.

Therefore, intercivilisational dialogue, when approached with intellectual honesty and a commitment to mutual transformation, stands as the most promising framework for a global ethic. It is a dynamic process, not a static declaration, demanding ongoing critical reflection, a willingness to question one's own assumptions, and a profound respect for the ethical wisdom embedded in diverse traditions. The shared commitment to human dignity, though interpreted through different lenses, provides a powerful common thread upon which this ethical architecture can be woven.

Future research should move beyond conceptual mapping to explore the practical implementation of pluriversal dialogue models in specific policy areas, such as environmental ethics or humanitarian aid. A comparative empirical study, for instance, could test the effectiveness of dialogue-based interventions in fostering ethical consensus in multi-civilisational contexts, contrasting them with top-down, universalist approaches. Specifically, investigating how the principles of maqasid sharia could inform global policy discussions on sustainable development, alongside secular ethical frameworks, would be invaluable. Ignoring the profound ethical resources residing within diverse civilisational traditions, particularly Islam, will only condemn humanity to a future of fragmented moralities and persistent, unresolved conflicts. The time for genuine ethical co-creation is now.

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