Engaging in a Secularized Public Sphere –
a Possible Qur’anic Perspective?

Sara Rahman  | ORCID: 0000-0003-0467-3432
Research Associate at the department of educational science,
University of Vienna, Vienna, Austria
sara.rahman@univie.ac.at

Received 31 January 2023 | Accepted 31 October 2023 |
Published online 17 January 2024

Abstract

For Habermas, social cohesion in liberal democratic societies is created and ensured by public discourse, which creates and regulates democratic virtues through non-hierarchical communication in which all citizens participate equally. According to the understanding of post-secularism, this public discourse must be secular. This requires religious citizens to translate religious arguments into secular ones in public discourse.

However, it remains an open question to what extent religious citizens in plural societies can or want to participate in such a communication process based on their religious self-understanding. In this article, an attempt will be made to investigate this question, at least within the Islamic faith tradition. A Qur’anic narrative will be examined for possible indications of how the Qur’an conceives communication with those of different worldviews. The analyzed narrative reveals perspectives of understanding from which remarkable contributions to social cohesion can be derived.

Keywords

Qur’anic narratives – social cohesion – Habermas – religious education
1 Introduction

If one deals with the fundamental question of the pre-political preconditions of liberal, democratic societies, one quickly ends up with the Böckenförde paradox, which has meanwhile advanced to the locus classicus. According to this paradox “the liberal, secularized state lives on the basis of assumptions that it itself cannot guarantee. That is the great gamble (Wagnis) it has made for the sake of liberty” (Böckenförde 1976). This dictum outlines the paradox of the liberal, secularized state, which on the one hand, can only exist if the freedom it grants its citizens regulates itself from within, from the moral substance of the individual and the homogeneity of society. On the other hand, it precisely cannot authoritatively order it without simultaneously giving up its claim to freedom and exercising coercion. The liberal, democratic state is therefore dependent on the consent of its citizens, respectively, on their democratic attitude, without being able to demand it or to guarantee it from its own resources. Therefore, the point of its liberality is, that it cannot command them without undermining its claim to freedom. According to Böckenförde, this significant risk that the state has taken for the sake of freedom is due to the gap in legitimacy that secularization, as the emancipation of the political order from its sacral appropriation, has opened up. This raises the question of the possibility of socio-political homogeneity under the conditions of freedom. In this context, homogeneity means a force that unites citizens beyond tangible social, ideological, or political differences and ensures the unity of the community (Ingenfeld, 2009, p. 14), thus ensuring social cohesion in a society. Böckenförde concludes that even the secularized secular state must ultimately live from those inner drives and binding forces conveyed by its citizens religious faith (Böckenförde 1976, p. 61).

Jürgen Habermas decisively rejected the Böckenförde dictum in a widely received discussion with Cardinal Josef Ratzinger: He acknowledges that a democratic system “cannot simply be imposed on its authors” (Habermas, 2008, p. 27), and therefore “the constitutional state confronts its citizens with the demanding expectations of an ethics of citizenship that reaches beyond mere obedience of law” (ibid.). So, there is in the democratic constitutional state no deficit of validity that would have to be filled with morality, for he assumes that the constitution of the liberal state can satisfy its need for legitimacy self-sufficiently, that is, from the cognitive resources of an argumentative

---

1 In original: „Der freiheitliche Staat lebt von Voraussetzungen, die er selbst nicht garantieren kann. Das ist das große Wagnis, das er um der Freiheit willen eingegangen ist“ (Böckenförde 1976, S. 63).
reservoir independent of religious and metaphysical traditions (Habermas, 2019, p. 109). For Habermas, the public discourse, as the carrier of democratic self-government (see Arendt 1981), creates and regulates by its own power values and behaviors, respectively, democratic virtues through non-hierarchical communication of its citizens, and thus provide legitimation and continuity of the liberal state (Habermas, 2004). This “principle of popular sovereignty requires that the citizens should play an active role in (...) shaping the definitions of their needs and interests which become incorporated into law” (Habermas 2005, xvi).

This article attempts to question how far religious citizens are willed to engage in such a communication process, in which rationally motivated understanding [Verständigung] is reached among equal participants by reaching an agreement [Einigung] based on common convictions (Habermas 2004, Vol. 1, 286–287). To what extent are religious citizens encouraged or discouraged by their religious self-understanding to participate in public processes of “democratic opinion- and will-formation” (Habermas, 2005, p. 128) in liberal democratic societies? In the following, an attempt will be made to pursue this question, which arises in increasingly plural societies, at least within the Islamic faith tradition, and to examine, by way of example, how disputes between people of different worldviews are imagined and negotiated in the Qur’an. After briefly introducing Habermas’s concept of communicative rationality, his claimed Cooperative Learning Model between Secular and Religious Citizens would be discussed. Following this, a Qur’anic narrative is examined concerning a possible contribution to such a Cooperative Learning Model.

2 Habermas’s Concept of Communicative Rationality

Habermas’s theory of communicative action is fundamentally based and oriented to achieving understanding (Verständigung) between persons participating in a speech act by the medium of language (Habermas, 2004). In any speech act, specific validity claims (Geltungsansprüche) are unavoidably raised by participants and can be accepted or contested based on intersubjective understanding arrived at “rationally motivated assent [Zustimmung] (...) Agreement rests on common convictions” (ibid. 287). Habermas focuses on three validity claims, which are only met when an understanding or agreement is achieved between actors:2

2 The consequences of the presumptions implicit in Habermas’s concept have been critically reflected widely. An overview provides, e.g., Li, Victor (2006). The Neo-Primitivist Turn.
It belongs to the communicative intent of the speaker (a) that he perform a speech act that is right in respect to the given normative context so that between him and the hearer an intersubjective relation will come about which is recognized as legitimate; (b) that he makes a true statement (or correct existential presuppositions) so that the hearer will accept and share the knowledge of the speaker; and (c) that he express truthfully his beliefs, intentions, feelings, desires, and the like so that the hearer will give credence to what is said (ibid. 307).

Therefore, Habermas assumes a sort of universal basis for understanding or agreement on general normative principles, which he expects to be shared even among citizens of pluralistic societies who may differ on fundamental questions of value and the good life (Habermas 2005, x). In this respect, the question arises how a “shared understanding of the situation” (ibid.) on a rational – that means, in Habermas’s sense, secular –basis can be achieved between citizens of different worldviews (ibid. 39). This might prove to be a challenge especially when Habermas demands that religious citizens should actively participate in democratic processes of public opinion and will formation, in which “just those norms are valid to which all possibly affected persons could agree as participants in rational discourses” (Habermas, 1999, p. 940).

Aware that such an effort may fail (Habermas, 2005, p. 39), he suggests a cooperative learning model between secular and religious citizens.

3 Habermas’ Understanding of a Cooperative Learning Model between Secular and Religious Citizens

It might be helpful to briefly outline Habermas’s analysis of religion’s role in modern democratic and liberal societies. He describes these societies as “post-secular” (Habermas, 2008, p. 27) in a sense “that religious communities owe their persisting influence to an obstinate survival of pre-Modern modes of thought” (ibid.) and therefore have “to adjust itself to the continued existence of religious communities in an increasingly secularized environment” (ibid. 19). The latter signifies that “religion must be tolerated, but it cannot lay claim to providing a cultural resource for the self-understanding of any truly modern...
mind” (ibid. 26). Therefore, Habermas insists that political discourses must be secular because the liberal premises of the constitutional state assume of public or "natural" reason. This public reason must be based on rational arguments that are equally accessible to all persons because only based on reason can discursively controlled processes of understanding bring about a consensus between citizens of different worldviews. However, religious contributions can and should occupy a legitimate space within the secular public sphere.\(^3\) Because the democratic constitutional state draws its legitimating power, among other things, from “the equal political participation of citizens, which ensures that the addressees of the laws can at the same time see themselves as their authors.”\(^4\) (Habermas 2019, 126).

Based on these assumptions, he concludes reciprocal expectations of religious and secular democratic citizens: They must “mutually recognize one another in civil society as members of one and the same political community” (Habermas, 2008, pp. 22–23) and therefore in civil society and the political public sphere meet each other as equals and finally “live together in a self-reflective manner” (ibid. 29). Habermas defines the role of citizenship out of such a jointly exercised cohesive practice of self-reflection and self-determination:

Citizens, despite their continuing dissent on matters of worldview and religious conviction, should respect each other as equal members of their political community; and on this basis of civic solidarity, they should seek rationally motivated understanding in matters of dispute – they owe each other sound reasons.\(^5\) (Habermas 2019, 126).

---

\(^3\) However, Habermas grants this exception only to the political public sphere, which he carefully separates from the political institutions such as parliamentary, court, governmental, and administrative levels, in which actual decision-making processes occur. In this respect, he calls for a filter between an informal level of political communication and opinion formation and an institutional level, “through which only ‘translated,’ i.e., secular, contributions may pass from the confused din of voices in the public sphere into the formal agendas of state institutions” (Habermas, 2008, p. 28).

\(^4\) Author’s translation. In original: „der gleichmäßigen politischen Beteiligung der Bürger, die gewährleistet, dass sich die Adressaten der Gesetze zugleich als deren Autoren verstehen können“.

\(^5\) Author’s translation. In original: „Die Bürger sollen sich, trotz ihres fortdauernden Dissenses in Fragen der Weltanschauung und der religiösen Überzeugung, als gleichberechtigte Mitglieder ihres politischen Gemeinwesens gegenseitig respektieren; und auf dieser Basis staatsbürgerlicher Solidarität sollen sie in Streitfragen eine rational motivierte Verständigung suchen- sie schulden einander gute Gründe“.
For Habermas, this presupposes, on the one hand, a translation of religious arguments into secular ones by religious citizens in public discourse. At the same time, however, the state should also permit non-translated religious statements in the political public sphere since the liberal state is interested in enabling religious voices in the political public sphere and in the political participation of religious organizations. This exception occurs necessary for a normative reason, as persons who are not able and/or willing “to divide their moral convictions and their vocabulary into profane and religious strands” (Habermas, 2009, p. 28) must be allowed to use religious language, and a functional reason, as the democratic state, must not cut society off from scarce resources for the generation of meanings and the shaping of identities (ibid.).

On the other hand, secular citizens should “open themselves to a possible truth content of religious contributions and engage in dialogues from which the religious reasons possibly emerge in the transformed form of generally accessible arguments. Citizens of a democratic polity owe each other reasons for their political statements” (Habermas 2019, 138). They are, therefore, “expected not to exclude a fortiori that they may discover, even in religious utterances, semantic contents and covert personal intuitions that can be translated and introduced into a secular discourse” (Habermas, 2008, p. 29). Under this premise, citizens of the state understand themselves as equal participants in the common practice of opinion and decision formation, through which unifying solidarity succeeds.

Habermas' premises underlying his concept are quite debatable. For example, Taylor outlines the not comprehensible presupposition of an epistemological inequality between the rational and the religious argument in favor of the rational argument (Taylor, 2010). For Taylor, secularism in Western societies has to be understood as a historical “condition of having overcome the irrationality of belief” (2007, 269) and, therefore, as a process of maturation and progressive emancipation. Casanova (2009) points out that secularism has “the function of confirming the superiority of our present modern secular outlook over the supposedly earlier and therefore more primitive religious forms of understanding” (1054). From such a deceptive viewpoint, the perception arises...
that being secular “is not experienced as an existential choice modern individuals or modern societies make, but rather as a natural outcome of becoming modern” (ibid. 1055). Still his demand for a reason-guided discourse in the public sphere, in which all participating discourse partners owe each other “good reasons”, seems to be quite advantageous for religious citizens if they want their concerns to be considered in the agendas and negotiations of state institutions, or to count in the further political process (Habermas, 2019, p. 138).

As has been pointed out, Habermas’ conception of citizenship assumes reciprocal civic expectations of its citizens, which can be redeemed in a democratic community through a cooperative learning model. However, the concrete form of this learning model is not discussed in detail. Against the background of his theory of knowledge, however, it seems promising that actors engage in discourse as “self-reflecting knower” (Lovat, 2013, p. 107) because it is “through this way of knowing, the knower develops communicative capacity and ultimately communicative action” (ibid.). Following Hegel, it entails “self-knowledge” (Habermas, 1972, p. 9) as a result of emancipation from “much of the past and to embrace new futures” (Lovat, 2013, p. 110), which allows the agent to consequently change belief and behavior and therefore demands deliberate practical action (ibid. 110–111).

The Qur’anic passage, which will now be examined regarding a possible contribution to such a Cooperative Learning Model, narrates the communicative confrontation of ʾIbrahīm (Abraham), who is presented as a God-fearing prophet, with his fellow human beings of other beliefs on questions of faith.

4 A Qur’anic Narrative as a Discourse of Alterity – ʾIbrahīm and His People

4.1 ʾIbrahīm’s Search for God and the Development of His Creed

Within Muslim scholarship, ʾIbrahīm is described as the son of a respected idoler who earns his money from sculptures and images carved out of stone that
people worship (see Al- Chūri & Schaḥada 1877, 14). According to the Qur’anic narrative, ʿIbrahim grows up in a society in which polytheism is widespread. As a young person, ʿIbrahim dislikes the beliefs of his peers, which is why he refuses to help his father with his business activities. He considers it contrary to reason to build sculptures himself and then to submit to them of his own free will, or rather to place himself in dependence on them and to attribute to their power over life and death, health and illness, poverty and wealth, or blessing and disaster (see Ibn Kaṭīr 1988, 155 ff.; Riḍā 1990, 7:461–462). Starting from the rejection of the faith tradition of his time, ʿIbrahim now sets out in search of the God who is true to him. God blesses ʿIbrahim’s critical questioning of ritualized actions and traditional norms, which initiates a process of emancipation from them (see Ar- Rāẓī 1999, 13:36–37). God now, in response to ʿIbrahim’s efforts to find the truth, guides him through a multi-stage process of cognition (Abū Al-Saʿūd 2004, 3:151–152, Riḍā 1990, 7:463): he reflects on the star, the moon, and the sun as supposed deities and ultimately concludes that visually perceptible presence is not a condition for God’s existence. His process of cognition begins with the rejection of those idolatrous images that are immediately accessible to man, but they are powerless. He then continues rejecting celestial bodies that are temporarily visible and have limited effective power but are hardly accessible. He ends up with the recognition of God as the One who is inaccessible through the human sense organs but who is the creator of everything accessible to man (see Ar- Rāẓī 1999, 13: 30–31; Al- Qurṭubī 1964, 7:26–27).

Thus, through the contemplation of diverse phenomena in nature, a process of understanding is initiated that ultimately culminates in recognition of a God as creator and sustainer of heaven and earth, as well as in the distancing from all the hypostasized deities of his time (Qur’an 6:74–79). It appears evident that ʿIbrahim imposes two necessary conditions for the legitimacy of a deity worthy of worship: First, as creator, it must have power over creation, and second, it must be permanently close to human beings, although this permanent proximity does not presuppose visual perception (see Ibn Kaṭīr 1999, 3:291).

4.2 ʿIbrahim’s Discursive Confrontation with His Fellow Human Beings – a Pedagogical Approach

The knowledge of God entails immediate consequences for ʿIbrahim; he recognizes God as the only Creator and Lord worthy of worship, which leads him to express his newly acquired faith and to proclaim his belief to his people. This proclamation, however, is not reproduced in a monological way, but rather the dialogue between ʿIbrahim and his fellow human beings is described:
51. And indeed, We had granted Abraham sound judgment [rušd] early on, for We knew him well 'to be worthy of it.9 (Qur’an 21:51)

ʾIbrahīm is described at the beginning of this verse with the Arabic attribute rušd, which can be translated as intellectual maturity, or reasonableness.10 The fact that the Qur’an attests to his maturity can be read as the result of the cognitive process described above, which was characterized by reflective thinking (see Al- Qurṭubī 1964, 11:296) and critical questioning, as appears in the following verse:

52. Remember when he questioned his father and his people, ‘What are these statues to which you are so devoted?’ 53. They replied, ‘We found our forefathers worshipping them.’11 (Qur’an 21:52–53).

The dialogue is then introduced with a question from ʾIbrahīm, in which he engages his fellows in a conversation about their faith traditions. He does not ask his question about the sculptures and images they worship out of ignorance or even curiosity. Instead, he confronts his interlocutors, including his father, with a question whose answer he is well aware of since he grew up amid that polytheistic society and is well familiar with their beliefs and the motives of their actions. Although ʾIbrahīm is convinced of the rejection of idolatry, he does not express this here yet (see Al- Ālūsī 1994, 9:56; Ar-Rāżī 1999, 22:152). Rather, the question seems to have a pedagogical function: It is meant to make its addressees reconsider, make them reflect on their own actions, and become aware of their own point of view.

In response, ʾIbrahīm’s people justify their idolatry by saying that their forefathers also worshiped sculptures and figures. Their argument, then, is that idolatry is a tradition and that it should continue to be handed down. Their answer to his question reveals, from a Qur’anic perspective, the illusory knowledge on which they are based, for they are unable to present a plausible, soundly comprehensible reason for their actions. Instead, the reason for their actions is the unreflective imitation of already familiar practices of faith (see Al- Ālūsī 1994, 9:57; Ar-Rāżī 1999, 22:152).

9 Translated by Khattab 2016, 361.
11 Translated by Khattab 2016, 361.
54. He responded, 'Indeed, you and your forefathers have been clearly astray.' 55. They asked, 'Have you come to us with the truth, or is this a joke?’ 56. He replied, ‘In fact, your Lord is the Lord of the heavens and the earth, Who created them both. And to that I bear witness.’ 57. Then he said to himself, ‘By God! I will surely plot against your idols after you have turned your backs and gone away.’12 (Qur’an 21:54–57).

ʾIbrahīm now enlightens his audience that their forefathers committed an error in the worship of idols and that they will perpetuate this error if they continue this practice, creating a state of confusion for the first time. They ask him uncertainly whether he is really telling the truth or whether he is joking with them. Then ʾIbrahīm formulates his own belief: The only God worthy of worship is the one who created heaven and earth and has power over creation. In this way, he expresses his refusal to declare structures built by man himself as deities. ʾIbrahīm, however, does not merely leave it at this clarification, but rather he also takes a stand himself and manifestly stands up for his own convictions (see Az- Zamaḫšarī 1986, 3:122).

If one wants to read the verses quoted so far in pedagogical terms, it is noticeable that ʾIbrahīm's argumentative approach reminds of the Socratic method – maieutics, i.e., “midwifery” – which is intended to initiate a learning process in the addressee. It aims at enabling the learner, through appropriate questions, to become self-reflexively aware of his/her errors and thus to reach a higher insight; the learner should thus “give birth” to his/her own insight. This becomes possible when the learner questions his/her previous notions, ideas, and concepts and becomes aware that they do not (cannot) correspond to the truth but only represent illusory knowledge. For this, the refutation of insufficiently thought-out assertions by the discussion leader is necessary. Therefore, a state of aporia, i.e., perplexity, is evoked for the first time. In the state of aporia, Socrates sharpens the learner's powers of observation, for example, through hypothetical examples or illustrations. The process of cognition is initiated when independent thinking is stimulated; therefore, cognition has to originate in the learning subject itself and cannot be brought into the interlocutor from the outside. This should be made possible by checking the coherence of an overall concept represented by a dialogue participant (see Wahler 2012; Birnbacher/ Krohn 2002). It becomes evident that the Socratic method aims at bringing about a self-reflexive knower in the Habermas’ sense, who is able to engage in a communicative process with dissenters.

12 Ibíd.
ʾIbrahīm’s opening question does not lead to the desired result because his people are unwilling to subject their previous faith traditions to a critical examination to achieve higher knowledge in a self-reflective manner. However, the dialogue seems to come to a standstill at this point, and his audience does not seem to pay any further attention to him. But just because the process of knowing is supposed to begin in the dialogical discussion, it is now driven anew by ʾIbrahīm’s ruse: His audience is now to be stimulated once again to question their convictions. In the further course of the narrative, ʾIbrahīm’s attempt to evoke this state of aporia in his audience through illustration should become evident:

58. So he smashed them into pieces, except the biggest of them, so they might turn to it for answers. 59. They protested, ‘Who dared do this to our gods? It must be an evildoer!’ 60. Some said, ‘We heard a young man, called Abraham, speaking ill of them.’ 61. They demanded, ‘Bring him before the eyes of the people so that they may witness his trial.’ 62. They asked, ‘Was it you who did this to our gods, O Abraham? ’ 63. He said, Rather, this is done by this chief of theirs. So, ask them if they can speak.’ 64. So they came back to their senses, saying to one another, ‘You yourselves are truly the wrongdoers!’ 65. Then they quickly regressed to their original mindset, arguing, ‘You already know that those idols cannot talk.’ 66. He rebuked them, ‘Do you then worship – instead of God – what can neither benefit nor harm you in any way? 67. Shame on you and whatever you worship instead of God! Do you not have any sense?’ (Qur’ān 21:58–67).

ʾIbrahīm uses a vivid example that comes from the direct experience of his people: The same sculptures made by human beings are destroyed by a human being. In this respect, man here has the power over these supposed deities, for he creates them by building them, and he destroys them by dismantling them. Therefore these cannot be deities, for – as both interlocutors agree – a deity is characterized by power over creation (see Ar- Rāżī 1999, 22:155–157). ʾIbrahīm now leads into the desired aporia through a practical example that should directly concern them. The desired result occurs at first, for they turn within themselves and admit they have been on the wrong path. They, therefore, recognize their previous knowledge as illusory (see Al- Ālūsī 1994, 9:65). However,

---

13 Ibid. 361–362.
14 Translated by Usmani 2010, 603.
15 Translated by Khattab 2016, 362.
recognizing the previous illusory knowledge as such is insufficient to initiate an ongoing learning process. Instead, there must be an inner willingness to acknowledge the deconstructed non-knowledge as such and, subsequently, to engage with the arguments presented by the discussion leader with an open attitude. Especially the latter is not what his audience is willing to do because they were too much connected to their sculptures on an emotional level.

In verse 65, ʿIbrahīm now concludes by using the rhetorical question as a persuasive stylistic tool and asks whether they really want to worship and adore something that neither benefits humans nor can harm them. On the fact that they now return to their old superstitions despite the recognized truth, ʿIbrahīm reacts with resentment (see Al- Qurṭubī 1964, 11302). The expressionuff, translated as ‘īfe’ in verse 66, is to be interpreted as a sign of displeasure and discontent (Az- Zamaḥšārī 1986, 3125). He then poses a final rhetorical question, asking whether they might not exercise their reason, for their beliefs and actions run counter to any rational consideration. ʿIbrahīm fails, and the narrative ends in an attempt to kill ʿIbrahīm.

However, the structure of the narration also reveals a further development of the Socratic method. At crucial points, the narration does not represent a monologue interrupted by closed questions, as in Plato’s dialogues. Rather, in the Qur’anic narrative, there is a discussion of ideas comprehensible to the reader. Whereas in Socrates’ dialogues, wrong paths and mental dead ends are avoided by verbally anticipating them, in the Qur’anic narration, they represent the core element of the intellectual path. In this respect, confidence is placed in the dialogue partner’s ability to reason and make decisions about right and wrong, true and untrue. However, the willingness to gain self-reflexive knowledge is a prerequisite for this. And apparently, from the narrative perspective, the conversation fails because of the unwillingness of his people to deal with ʿIbrahīm’s objections and to subject their faith traditions to critical examination in Habermas’s sense (see Lovat 2013, 110). ʿIbrahīm himself does not succeed in arguing his own faith convictions in a rationally comprehensible way, but this does not seem to be his primary concern. Rather, he is mainly concerned with getting them to engage in critical self-reflection because it is only based on self-reflexive convictions that they can exchange their different conceptions of God. His contributions can be understood as an attempt to convey to his discourse partners, along commonly shared notions of norms, first verbally and then through practical illustration, that their beliefs and actions contradict their own criteria of a deity. From a Qur’anic perspective, ʿIbrahīm seems to present his objections in a consistently reasonable manner, for he basically demands that his audience critically examine traditional actions and rites for their compatibility with their own conceptions of norms. In doing so,
he challenges them to articulate their motives for belief in a reflective and reasoned manner. ‘Ibrahim explicitly appeals against a blind adoption of customs and traditions and calls on his fellows to take the sometimes quite strenuous path of fundamentally questioning ways of thinking and behaving that are assumed to be true and right. For – and this also becomes clear from the narrative – only a self-reflective faith sharpens one’s own power of articulation and enables an understanding beyond one’s own horizon of faith.

4.3 Four Constructive Contributions to a Cooperative Learning Model According to Habermas

From what has been said so far, at least four constructive contributions to the cooperative learning model proposed by Habermas can be derived:

1) ‘Ibrahim’s critical examination of the faith tradition of his people enables him to arrive at new, reflected beliefs that he can communicate and explain comprehensibly. He breaks with the blind imitation of supposedly self-evident facts and questions basic religious assumptions in his society for their reasonable plausibility. His newly gained knowledge in faith enables him to stand up for his convictions and express them confidently in thinking and action. In addition – and this seems to be of particular importance for creating and maintaining social cohesion in society – his conscious faith enables him to enter into a communicative process with his fellows of other faiths. Although this does not mean that the communicative process will lead to a consensus, the competence of religious citizens to express their own religious convictions in a way that is comprehensible to people of other faiths or non-beliefs is, according to Habermas – as stated – a precondition for processes of communicative negotiations in plural democratic societies.

2) The entire Qur’anic argumentation structure is based on the assumption of a consensual idea of what a deity should be like and what attributes are attributed to God. Although ‘Ibrahim tries to convey his ideas about God to his fellow human beings, he does not do so in any way detached from the social norms of his time. As became apparent in the course of the discussion, the two parties to the conversation do not seem to disagree at all about the fact that there is a deity and that a deity has to fulfill certain criteria. Thus, it qualifies by power over life and death and by the power to benefit or harm man, and a deity has to be more powerful and greater than anything created by it. Rather, these norms form the basis for discursively negotiating ascriptions of God in the first place. ‘Ibrahim himself seems to argue along these commonly shared norms, and his entire argumentation strategy is aimed ostensibly at convincing his fellows that in
their beliefs, they unreflectively counteract these norms, which are recognized as valid in their society. At the same time, 'Ibrahim is well aware of the dissent that cannot be negotiated away: He has become convinced of the One transcendent God because he has overcome the criterion of God's visual perceptibility. Interestingly, however, this criterion is not even addressed since the discourse already fails when he tries to get them to reflect critically on their beliefs.

3) In this story, 'Ibrahim does not seem to be concerned with his faith's proclamation but rather with his people's faith tradition. In this argument, he is actually concerned with wanting to bring about a process of reflection among his fellow men. 'Ibrahim implicitly asks them to abandon the perhaps more pleasant path of blind imitation in favor of a more unpleasant self-reflexive effort that is supposed to critically examine the tradition concerning its truth content and thus its legitimacy. And because, according to the Qur'an, they do not want to engage in this, the process of understanding does not come about in the first place. For self-reflective faith is a prerequisite for entering into a process of understanding with people of other faiths or non-believers. It sharpens one's own ability to articulate and makes it possible to understand beyond one's own faith horizon.

4) However, the narrative is ultimately a story of failure. 'Ibrahim encourages his fellow human beings in the sense of Habermas to a reason-guided understanding by challenging them to subject their faith traditions to a critical examination along commonly shared premises. However – and here the reasonable discourse fails – his people are unwilling to comply with this request, although they do not deny the validity of 'Ibrahim's critical objections. Instead, they leave the rationally founded ground of discourse when they decide in favor of the imitative tradition. In this respect, the Qur'an confirms here the real-life experience that understanding processes can certainly fail, but this does not make them any less important and necessary. The many other prophet stories in the Qur'an bear witness to this.

5 Conclusion

It should have become clear that the discursive debate about ascriptions of God between 'Ibrahim and his fellow people is based on common premises regarding ideas about God, which make the discourse possible in the first place. Today – in societies guided by secular principles – such shared premises can no longer be assumed when Muslim believers enter a public discourse
with their fellows of other faiths or non-believers that affects their religious convictions and sensibilities. However, the fact that ʾIbrahīm argues in a way that is accessible to the reason of his discourse partners seems to be a helpful finding concerning the cooperative learning model by Habermas. ʾIbrahīm and his people thus share the same premises, enabling the dialogue partners to subject their assumptions concerning God to critical scrutiny. These premises are – and must be – accessible to the reason of both parties to the discourse, for there is no other common basis of understanding between them. For neither can they argue based on culture, tradition, customs, and traditions because it is precisely these that ʾIbrahīm categorically rejects as the basis of faith—nor can ʾIbrahīm meet them on a spiritual level, for he is attached to the one-god faith. In contrast, his audience is emotionally attached to sculptures and pictorial works. In this respect, reason-guided discourse forms the sole structural basis, recognized by both discourse partners, on which processes of understanding and comprehension become possible.

ʾIbrahīm is, therefore, able to put forward “good reasons,” which Habermas identifies as “rationally motivated understanding,” however – and here the rational discourse then fails – his people are not willing to acknowledge them, even though they do not dispute the validity of these reasons at all. Rather, they leave the rationally based ground of discourse when they decide in favor of imitative tradition. However, ʾIbrahīm holds on to them until the end, when he concludes by asking whether they do not want to use their minds. Admittedly, it cannot be concluded from the analysis of this Qur’anic narrative that the Qur’an assumes the primacy of rational argument over religious argument. However, the fact that ʾIbrahīm uses a reason-guided mode of argumentation in the discursive debate now shows that the attempt to reach a rational understanding based on shared premises assumes a decisive key function in his discursive debate with his people of other faiths since this establishes the common ground of understanding through which cooperative learning can succeed. It is exciting to investigate to what extent other Qur’anic narratives can support this finding.

References

Al- ʿAẓīrī, Šaḥāda; Salīm Mkhīl (1877). Kitāb Aṯār Al- Adhār, Beirut: Al-Qism at-Tārīḫī.


Habermas, Jürgen (1972). Knowledge and Human Interests, Boston: Bacon Press.


