The Qur’anic Ḥanīfiyya and its Role as a Middle Nation

Thesis

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Abstract

This thesis examines the material which helps scholars understand the Qur’anic use of ḥanīf and arrives at an understanding of ḥanīf translated as “Gentile,” which I demonstrate reconciles the connotation of ḥanīf in the Qur’an with definitions found in the larger Semitic lexica. In order to give semantic meaning to the lexical findings, I group theories which frame signifier ḥanīf into three differing signifieds: (1) a real-world religious group predating Islam in Arabia; (2) Urmonotheism, that is, indication of the existence of an original monotheism in Arabia; (3) an allusion to the mythical status of Abraham as the first monotheist as a legitimization of Muhammad’s message.

I address these three signifieds in relation to my proposed interpretation of ḥanīf as “Gentile, non-Israelite,” showing that this interpretation is advantageous for understanding the arguments of the three signifieds encountered in other interpretations which are reflected in the text of the Qur’an. I then explicate the text surrounding each Qur’anic occurrence of ḥanīf and qualify the circumstances around which “Gentile” or ḥanīf is employed. Overall, the suggested interpretation “Gentile” will be demonstrated as reconcilable with the Qur’anic text, the Semitic lexica, and the social and religious context of Arabia.
I present a synthesis of *al-hānīfiyya* which shows that its major role was to function as a “middle nation,”¹ as it is referred to in Q 2:143, in negotiation with the increasingly hostile Quraysh, Jewish and Christian groups. A *hanīf* was a Gentile whose appointed role was to reform the disunited society around it and conform its own religious community to a just and moderate standard, as a “middle nation.” The era in which *hanīf* occurs is immediately before and after the *hijra*, one in which Muhammad’s group and his message were under great scrutiny and persecution from all fronts. During this period of trial, *al-hānīfiyya* represents the early Islamic community’s social and religious position as a “middle nation” which attempted to mitigate controversy through employing the symbols of Abraham and his House, the *Ka’ba*, two figures common to the Jews, Christians and Quraysh. *Al-hānīfiyya* was also a “middle nation” in the temporal sense, indicating that Muhammad’s nation and religion were at a middle point in their development, emphasizing elements common to the surrounding societies “so that men may have no argument against you [Muhammad and his followers], save such as them do injustice….so that I [God] may complete My grace upon you,”² an indication that *al-hānīfiyya* belonged to a transitional stage within the dynamic development of Muhammad’s message.

¹ Pickthall, 22. From Q 2:143
² Pickthall, 23. From Q 2:150
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Table of Contents

Abstract...........................................................................................................ii-iii
Dedication........................................................................................................iv
Vita....................................................................................................................v
List of Figures.................................................................................................vii
Introduction....................................................................................................1-7
Chapter 1: Root ḫ-n-f in Semitic Lexica......................................................8-16
Chapter 2: The Hanīfiyya Religion.................................................................17-26
Chapter 3: The Hanīfiyya as Urmonotheism ..............................................27-30
Chapter 4: The Hanīfiyya and Abraham in Monotheistic Discourse...........31-39
Chapter 5: The Hanīfiyya as Middle Nation ...............................................40-87
References......................................................................................................88-92
Appendix A: Transcriptions of Occurrences of ḫ-n-f in Qur’an.................A1-A2
Appendix B: English Translations of Occurrences of ḫ-n-f in Qur’an........B1-B3
List of Figures

Figure 1: Occurrences of ḥnf in Qur’an with Translations by Pickthall and Yusuf Ali (ḥanīf, ḥanīfiyyatun, ḥunafā’ left untranslated) ………………………………5-7

Figure 2: Derivations on Root ḥnf/ḥnp in Semitic Languages Surveyed………………..16

Figure 3: Qur’anic Arabic Text of ḥnf Occurrences and English Translations by M. Pickthall with Suggested Interpretation of ḥanīf as “Gentile”…………………………..45-46
Introduction

Opening an average survey book of Islam to the index section, one might find, at most, a few pages which make reference to hanîf or al-hanîfiyya (triliteral root ḫnf), and more often than not, little importance is given to the term as mark of Islamic revelation. However, this term which is found in the Qur’an and hadîth tradition is tied intimately to nascent Islam and should not be overlooked and dismissed as a mere concomitant of a fully-matured Islam. A close look at the hanîf found in the Qur’an begs the question: “Where do the boundaries of religions begin and end? Is it possible that our taxonomies excluded people from their own history and prevented them from making the statements they wished to make?”

Much of the literature on the topic may be categorized into two semantically-varying interpretations of hanîf. Some literature qualifies hanîf as a proper name, and so it may constitute, for example: the nisbah of a tribe by that name; a Muslim; one of a distinct monotheistic religious group in Arabia; an Abrahamic-monotheist corrupted into polytheism; or a lexical loanword understood by Muhammad as a religious referential to a concept found in the Northwest Semitic religious traditions.

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Other literature purports a descriptive meaning for hanīf, and so hanīf may represent a modifying adjective which ascribes a number of qualities to the word it modifies. As an adjective it may convey qualities such as performing ḥajj and practicing circumcision, holding pure monotheistic beliefs, believing in a religion natural to mankind, coming from a community without scripture, or being of a non-Jewish and non-Christian community.

The meaning of the word itself as used in the Qur’an (2:135; 3:67; 3:95; 4:125; 6:79; 6:161; 10:105; 16:120; 16:123; 22:31; 30:30; 98:5) was possibly a mystery to those who first heard its verses. Classical mufassirūn labeled the word one of the gharību l-qur`ān, “those expressions the precise meaning of which was unknown and the interpretation of which was considered a legitimate subject of scholarly disagreement.” Modern scholarship continues debating the meaning of the Qur’anic hanīf without consensus.

When defining Qur’anic terminology, as Margoliouth writes, “the word Hanīf is harder.” An array of disciplines across several centuries has rendered different definitions of hanīf, but there is certainly no agreement as to what hanīf means in the context of the Qur’an. Three approaches have dominated the investigation of the term. First, the interpretation of hanīf is derived from the Arabic root of the word. Second, it is

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6 Margoliouth, 477.
considered a loan word into Arabic, in which case other Semitic language lexica are examined. Finally, textual analysis may be performed independently of etymological concerns, resulting in a context-driven definition.

During this discussion, I examine the material on the Qur’anic use of hanīf in its historical linguistic context, while arriving at an understanding of hanīf which reconciles the connotation of hanīf in the Qur’an with the greater Semitic lexica. In order to give semantic meaning to the lexical findings, I look at conflicting theories which frame signifier hanīf as representative of different signifieds. These include the possibility of hanīf signifying (1) a real-world religious group predating Islam in Arabia which either gave birth to Islam or is synonymous with Islam; (2) Urmonotheism, that is, indication of the existence of an ancient monotheism in Arabia before polytheism came to dominate; (3) an allusion to the mythical status of Abraham as the first monotheist as an attempt to legitimize Muhammad’s preaching, with possible aims being to unite the three Abrahamic faiths under one name, to challenge the legitimacy of Mosaic Law kept by the Jews and Christians of Arabia, or to criticize polytheistic influences which had infiltrated Judaism and Christianity. I address each of these portrayals of al-hanīfiyya in relation to the lexical data presented.

In the final chapter, I propose my own interpretation of the Arabic and other Semitic linguistic data on the word hanīf, concluding that the Arabic word used in the Qur’an conveyed the meaning, in the accusative form hanīfān, of “as a Gentile, or in the heathen manner” as it is also found in pre-eighth century Syriac usage.⁷ Here “heathen”

does not carry purely negative connotations, but it should be taken as synonymous with “Gentile,” meaning non-Israelite people or nation, “of or pertaining to any or all of the nations other than the Jewish.”

The ḥanīf in the Qur’an is a Gentile who practiced ritual pilgrimage to Abraham’s House, the Ka‘ba, and abstained from unclean foods. This Arabian Gentile religion referred to in the Qur’an presents itself as a religion innate to humans, preceding yet part of the other monotheistic Scriptural traditions. Its appointed role was to reform the disunited society around it and conform its own religious community to a just and moderate standard, as a “middle nation.”

In order to show this, I employ a comparative linguistic approach of the Semitic lexica, including surveys of definitions from Arabic, Aramaic, Syriac, Hebrew, and Mandaic. I will look at the use of the root ḥnf, which varies in phonemic representation as ḥnp and ḥnp. In Arabic, the root’s definition is chiefly determined by its role in the Qur’an. In the Northwest Semitic sphere, the root has a definite religious significance, but that significance varies depending on the socio-religious context.

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9 Northwest, or Levantine, Semitic is a term used to describe the group of languages from the Levant area (modern-day Israel, Palestine, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria and the Sinai). The grouping includes Ugaritic, Canaanite languages (including Hebrew), Deir ‘Alla and Aramaic (including Mandaic and Syriac). Northwest Semitic is a branch of the larger group called Central Semitic, which includes North Arabian (including Classical Arabic) and the Northwest Semitic languages. See Huehnergard, John. “Semitic Languages” in Civilizations of the Ancient Near East, ed. Jack M. Sasson. Hendrickson Publishers, Peabody, MA (2000): 2118.
The root ḥnf in the Qur’an is found in the adverbial construct ḥanīfān ten times and twice in the plural form ḥunafā’ā. It occurs infrequently, only a total of twelve times in the standard ‘Uthmanic codex of the Qur’an composed by Zayd bin Thābit (d. 660 CE), and in the codex of Ibn Mas‘ūd it appears in the determined deverbalized nominal form al-ḥanīfiyyatun once. This form also occurs in aḥadīth which are valuable for the contextual information they provide.

The chart that follows displays the Arabic occurrences of ḥanīf in the Qur’an alongside two English translations, by Pickthall and Yusuf Ali, with the words ḥanīf, hanīfiyyatun, hunafā’ left untranslated.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Qur’anic Arabic Text of ḥnf Occurrences and English Translations by M. Pickthall and Yusuf Ali (with ḥanīf, hanīfiyyatun, hunafā’ left untranslated)</th>
<th>Sūrah: Verse</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>﴿وَتَوَلَّواَ كُونُواَ هُودًا أَوْ نِصَارَىَّ تَهْدُونَ قَلْ بَنٌّ مِّلَّةٍ إِبْرَاهِيمَ حَنِيفًا وَمَا كَانَ مِنَ الْمُشْرِكِينَ﴿</td>
<td>2:135</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pickthall: And they say: Be Jews or Christians, then ye will be rightly guided. Say (unto them, O Muhammad): Nay, but (we follow) the religion of Abraham, [ḥanīfān], and he was not of the idolaters.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ali: They say: “Become Jews or Christians if ye would be guided (To salvation).” Say thou: &quot;Nay! (I would rather) the Religion of Abraham [ḥanīfān], and he joined not gods with Allah.&quot;</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>﴿إِنَّ الَّذِينَ أُوتُوا الْكِتَابَ إِلَّا مِن بَعْدِ مَا جَاءَهُمُ الْعِلْمُ بَغْيًا بَيْنَهُمْ وَمَن حَنِيفَى الَّذِينَ أَوْتُوا الْكِتَابَ إِلَّا مِن بَعْدِ مَا جَاهَدُوهُ الْجَهَنَّمَ بَعْدًا بَيْنَهُمْ وَمَن يَكْفُرُ بِآيَاتِ اللهِ فَإِنَّ اللهَ سَرِيعُ الْحِسَابِ﴾</td>
<td>(3:19)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Codex of Ibn Mas‘ūd only</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pickthall: Lo! religion with Allah (is) [al-ḥanīfiyyatun]. Those who (formerly) received the Scripture differed only after knowledge came unto them, through transgression among themselves. Whoso disbelieveth the revelations of Allah (will find that) lo! Allah is swift at reckoning.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ali: The Religion before Allah is [al-ḥanīfiyyatun].: Nor did the People of the Scripture dissent therefrom except through envy of each other, after knowledge had come to them. But if any deny the Signs of Allah, Allah is swift in calling to account.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>﴿مَا كَانَ إِبْرَاهِيمُ يَهُودِيًا وَلَا نِصَارَيًا وَلَكِنَّ حَنِيفًا مَّعْلُومًا وَمَا كَانَ مِنَ الْمُشْرِكِينَ﴾</td>
<td>3:67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pickthall: Abraham was not a Jew, nor yet a Christian; but he was [ḥanīfān] who had surrendered (to Allah), and he was not of the idolaters.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Ali: Abraham was not a Jew nor yet a Christian; but he was [ḥanīfān], and bowed his will to
Allah's (Which is Islam), and he joined not gods with Allah.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Verse</th>
<th>Translation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| 3:95 | **Pickthall**: Say: Allah speaketh truth. So follow the religion of Abraham, [hanīfān]. He was not of the idolaters.  
**Ali**: Say: "Allah speaketh the Truth: follow the religion of Abraham, [hanīfān]; he was not of the Pagans." |
| 4:125 | **Pickthall**: Who is better in religion than he who surrendereith his purpose to Allah while doing good (to men) and followeth the tradition of Abraham, [hanīfān]? Allah (Himself) chose Abraham for friend.  
**Ali**: Who can be better in religion than one who submits his whole self to Allah, does good, and follows the way of Abraham [hanīfān]? For Allah did take Abraham for a friend. |
| 6:79 | **Pickthall**: Lo! I have turned my face toward Him Who created the heavens and the earth, [hanīfān], and I am not of the idolaters.  
**Ali**: "For me, I have set my face, [hanīfān], towards Him Who created the heavens and the earth, and never shall I give partners to Allah." |
| 6:161 | **Pickthall**: Say: Lo! As for me, my Lord hath guided me unto a straight path, a right religion, the community of Abraham, [hanīfān], who was no idolater.  
**Ali**: "Verily, my Lord hath guided me to a way that is straight, - a religion of right, - the path (trod) by Abraham [hanīfān], and he (certainly) joined not gods with Allah." |
| 10:105 | **Pickthall**: And, (O Muhammad) set thy purpose resolutely for religion, [hanīfān], and be not of those who ascribe partners (to Allah).  
**Ali**: "And further (thus): 'set thy face towards religion [hanīfān], and never in any wise be of the Unbelievers;" |
| 16:120 | **Pickthall**: Abraham was a nation obedient to Allah, [hanīfān], and he was not of the idolaters;  
**Ali**: Abraham was indeed a model, devoutly obedient to Allah, (and) [hanīfān], and he joined not gods with Allah: |
| 16:123 | **Pickthall**: And afterward We inspired thee (Muhammad, saying): Follow the religion of Abraham, [hanīfān]. He was not of the idolaters.  
**Ali**: So We have taught thee the inspired (Message), "Follow the ways of Abraham [hanīfān], and he joined not gods with Allah." |
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Verse</th>
<th>Arabic</th>
<th>Pickthall</th>
<th>Ali</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>22:31</td>
<td>لِلَّّ غَيْرَ مُشْرِكِينَ بِهِ وَمَن يُشْرِكْ بِالِلَّّ فَكَأَنَّمَا خَرَّ مِنَ السَّمَاءِ فَتَخْطَفُهُ الطَّيْرُ أَوْ تَهْوَ</td>
<td>[Hunafā’] unto Allah (only), not ascribing partners unto Him; for whose ascribeth partners unto Allah, it is as if he had fallen from the sky and the birds had snatched him or the wind had blown him to a far-off place.</td>
<td>[Hunafā’] to Allah, and never assigning partners to Him: if anyone assigns partners to Allah, is as if he had fallen from heaven and been snatched up by birds, or the wind had swooped (like a bird on its prey) and thrown him into a far-distant place.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30:30</td>
<td>مَكَانٍ سَحِيقٍ</td>
<td>[Hunafā’] unto Allah (only), not ascribing partners unto Him; for whose ascribeth partners unto Allah, it is as if he had fallen from the sky and the birds had snatched him or the wind had blown him to a far-off place.</td>
<td>[Hunafā’] unto Allah (only), not ascribing partners unto Him; for whose ascribeth partners unto Allah, it is as if he had fallen from the sky and the birds had snatched him or the wind had blown him to a far-off place.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>98:5</td>
<td>حَاكِمَةُ الآيَاتِ</td>
<td>And they are ordered naught else than to serve Allah, keeping religion pure for Him, [Hunafā’], and to establish worship and to pay the poor-due. That is true religion.</td>
<td>And they have been commanded no more than this: To worship Allah, offering Him sincere devotion, [Hunafā’]; to establish regular prayer; and to practise regular charity; and that is the Religion Right and Straight.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 1: Occurrences of ḥnf in Qur’an with Translations by Pickthall¹⁰ and Yusuf Ali.¹¹

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1. Root ḥ-n-f in Semitic Lexica

Classical Arabic Lexicon

Traditional scholars like at-Ṭabarī, Ibn Kathīr and al-Jalālayn have employed an etymological approach, and looked to the Arabic tri-consonantal root ḥ-n-f in the base verbal form ḥanafa meaning “to incline, to decline” and applied this meaning in the Qur’anic context, concluding that Abraham was inclined to monotheism.¹²

Lane refers to Pre-Islamic usage of hanīf, pl. ḥunafa’ during al-jāhilīya meaning:

“him who was circumcised and performed the pilgrimage to the [Sacred] House; because the Arabs in the Time of Ignorance held nothing of the religion of Abraham except circumcision and that pilgrimage: acc. to Ez-Zejjaje, it was applied in the Time of Ignorance to him who made the pilgrimage to the [Sacred] House and performed the ablution on the account of [ritual impurities] and was circumcised: also one who devotes himself to religious exercises; or applies himself to devotion.”¹³

The root ḥnf in the nominal/adjectival form ḥanafī means “a natural wryness; an inversion of the foot so that the upper side becomes the lower; a crookedness in the leg or foot; a turning of the great toes towards the others,” while the form ḥanafun more precisely means “an inclining, from error, to a right state or tendency.”


¹³ Lane, 658.
This final distinction between nominal forms of the ḥnf root could be a development arising from its Qur’anic usage because the distinction is attributed to Islamic scholar ar-Rāghib al-İsfahānī (d.1109), with ḥanafun carrying the same significance as ḥanīfun. The deverbalized noun ḥanīfiyyatun likewise means “an inclining to a thing,” which it is noted is a contested usage, and alternatively “law of Abraham.”


gisan al-‘Arab records under the root ḥnf that al-ḥanafu means “the turning of the foot until the sole of the foot becomes the dorsal.” The masculine adjectival noun is ‘ahnafu and the feminine is ḥanfā’. What one finds here, unlike in Lane, is a hint that al-ḥanīfu, “the one who inclines from good to evil, or from evil to good” is derived from the physical characteristic al-ḥanafu. The verb and preposition ḥanafa ‘an aš-šē’ [on something] and verb taḥannafa are presented as equivalents of māla, a more commonly used verb in Modern Arabic meaning “to incline, to tend (to do something).” Al-ḥanīfu is further defined by reference to the Qur’an as “the muslim who inclines toward religions, i.e. inclines toward the truth, and as the one who accepts the Sacred House of the qiblah of Abraham’s nation/religion [millat]; the sincere one; the upright.” It is more specifically described as “one who was of Abraham’s religion, as he was a ḥanīf of the Arabs, and the idol worshippers of the jāhiliyya used to say: ‘We are ḥunafā’ of Abraham’s religion,’ therefore when Islam came they named the muslim ḥanīf.” Ibn Manzūr and Lane both note that circumcision and pilgrimage to the Sacred House were the only practices of Abraham’s religion which were retained in the jāhiliyya, and “everyone who was circumcised and who made the pilgrimage was called ḥanīf. The ḥanīf is one whose

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14 Lane, 658.
sunna [traditional behavior] is circumcision.” Ibn Manẓūr defines occurrence Q 22:31

*hunafā’* as “those who had performed *ḥajj*.” Without entering yet into definitions that are derived from Qur’anic context alone, we find minor usages of the word *al-hanfā’*

meaning “a tree, the bow, turtle, chameleon and the fickle person who is lazy at one time and active at another time.”

When we look to Pre-Islamic Arabic occurrences dating no later than 3rd century CE, we find the verb *hanifa* meaning (v.) “to be pigeon-toed” occurring twice in inscriptions from the Old North Arabic dialect of Safaitic.

**Northwest Semitic Lexica**

In the Northwest Semitic sphere, there is a much clearer and focused picture of the basic definitions derived from the *ḥn* root, which appears as *ḥnp* or *ḥnp* in the Northwest Semitic area the voiceless fricative pharyngeal *ḥ* often merged with the voiceless fricative laryngeal *ḥ*. The unique Arabic development of the labiodental fricative *f* is preserved in its original Semitic form in Northwest Semitic as a bilabial plosive *p* (with post-vocalic spirantization developing secondarily). Dating from the 3rd

15 Pickthall 342. Q 22:31 “Hunafā’ unto Allah (only), not ascribing partners unto Him; for whoso ascribeth partners unto Allah, it is as if he had fallen from the sky and the birds had snatched him or the wind had blown him to a far-off place.”


century to 6th century CE, evidence of the ḫnp root can be found in Jewish Babylonian Aramaic meaning (v.) “to favor; to deceive,” as in “I did not favor even a man like you”; “do you favor PN in judgment because he is an important man?”; “why did he send him? To favor him in the judgment”; “lest they say: ‘The scholars favor each other’”.

In Jewish Palestinian Aramaic the verbal form signifies (v.) “to deceive,” and in the nominal form, (n.) “flattery, hypocrisy.” In the Old Testament Lexicon dating from the 12th – 2nd century BCE, ḫnp in the verbal form means (v.) “to flatter; to feign; to be godless; to be defiled,” or in the nominal-adjectival form “hypocrite; godless; alienated from God.” The noun (n.) “ungodliness” is also provided.

In the Mandaic lexicon dating from the 7th to 9th century CE, the root ḫnp gives the nominal form hanipa meaning (n.) “pagan, heathen.” Found in the plural construction hanipia, we find the alternate meaning “false gods.”

Syriac usage from the 4th to 9th century CE shows the root ḫnp to signify in the verbal form (v.) “to paganize; to turn aside to idolatry; to be profane, irreligious; to apostatize; to pervert to paganism, as in “the world which Satan had reduced to

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19 Huehnergard, 2118-2119.


21 Sokoloff, JPA, 209.

22 Huehnergard, 2118.


paganism.” In the nominal-adjectival construction it means (n.) “godless, ungodly, profane, pagan, heathen; a Gentile, Greek,” as in “the erring heathen” and “Julian the apostate,” or it may mean “impiety, godlessness, paganism, Sabaeanism, the impiety of idolatry, ethnic” as in “heathen nations,” “it was a heathen custom” and “he passed over from heathenism of his father to faith in God.” Used as a collective noun it may similarly signify “heathendom, the Gentiles.” In the adverbial form it means “after the Gentile or heathen manner.”

Having just reviewed the lexica of the West Semitic sphere, Akkadian represents the East Semitic sphere. Usage in the Amarna Texts, dating from the 14th century BCE, shows the verbal form ḫanāpu meaning (v.) “to commit villainy.”

D.S. Margoliouth, in his article “On the Origin and Import of the Names Muslim and Ḥanīf” published in 1903, attempts to explain away the polemical origins of both muslim and ḥanīf, two words which hold positive connotations in the Qur’an but present very negative connotations in other sources. Margoliouth identifies islām to mean “treachery” in jāhilī and Islamic poetry, and states that ḥanīf may mean “hypocrite” if from Hebrew hānēf, or possibly “heathen; Gentile” if from Syriac ḥanpā. With regard to this definition he notes Romans 4:9 and 18 in which Paul writes:

“[Cometh] this blessedness then upon the circumcision [only] or upon the uncircumcision also? for we say that faith was reckoned to Abraham for righteousness… (18)

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25 Payne Smith, 149.

26 Huehnergard, 2118.

Who against hope believed in hope, that he might become the father of many nations, according to that which was spoken, So shall thy seed be."

Margoliouth points out that the Syriac word translated “nations” may be rendered as hanpē in some alternative translations. He adds that in the Midrash exegetical tradition of the Bible, occurrences of ḥānēf refer to religious dissent.

As for deriving meaning from the Qur’anic context alone, Margoliouth focuses on the popular interpretation that a hanīf is “a man as nature made him,” inferred from Qur’an 30:30,28 “So set thy purpose (O Muhammad) for religion as a man by nature upright - the nature (framed) of Allah, in which He hath created man”.29 This interpretation is supported by verses Q 2:135,30 “And they say: Be Jews or Christians, then ye will be rightly guided. Say (unto them, O Muhammad): Nay, but (we follow) the religion of Abraham, [hanīfān], and he was not of the idolaters”,31 and Q 3:67,32 “Abraham was not a Jew, nor yet a Christian; but he was [hanīfān] who had surrendered (to Allah), and he was not of the idolaters”.33 Margoliouth points out that this meaning

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28 Q 30:30


30 Q 2:135

31 Pickthall, 21.

32 Q 3:67

33 Pickthall, 56.
was adopted by Muslim poets, shown in verses like, “Provided I die a ḥanīf, as God made me, I reck not.”

Despite the fact that Margoliouth presents many interpretations which have since 1903 become more widely explored, he concludes that ḥanīf is actually nisbah of the tribe Ḥanīfah, to which the so-called false prophet Musaylimah belonged (Musaylimah being the origin of muslim), who Margoliouth claims instructed Muhammad in religion. He writes that this interpretation can be made “without great straining of the grammatical conscience,” however Charles J. Lyall’s article “The Words ‘Ḥanīf’ and ‘Muslim’,” which I address in Chapter Two, disputes the grammatical soundness of his interpretation. Overall, Margoliouth’s conclusion seeks the least complex etymological lineage, but leaves the term ḥanīf void of significance within the Qur’anic text and disconnected from the larger Semitic and Abrahamic tradition.

In more recent decades the approach which interprets ḥanīf within the Semitic lexica, mentioned by both Margoliouth and Lyall in 1903, has attracted more investigations. Christoph Luxenburg in his Syro-Aramaic Reading of the Koran interprets the repetition of the Semitic adverbial –ān construction as evidence that ḥanīfān is a fixed epithet for Abraham, borrowed directly from the Syro-Aramaic form ḥanpā meaning “heathen.” He writes that ḥanīfān, as the word appears most often in the Qur’an, is not

34 Poet Ibn `Umair al-Yashkuri, cited in Margoliouth. 481.
35 Margoliouth, 484.
the nominal *hanîf*un in the Arabic accusative of condition, replacing nominal undetermined marker –*un* with accusative –*ān*, but the final ā vowel is the remnant determinate marker long ā that is found in Syro-Aramaic. This reconstruction seems logical when working with a written text, as the Arabic accusative is marked with final long *aleph*, but this marker is representing in fact two phonemes –*an*. When considering the oral nature of the Qur’an’s composition, the presence of nunation is not invisible or negligible, though it is disregarded by this reconstruction.\(^{37}\)

Luxenberg, after presenting this argument, goes on to translate *hanîf*ān as if it were in the Arabic accusative, “as a heathen.” He renders a translation of the formulaic *wa mā kāna mina l-*muṣrikīn as a subordinate clause which modifies the preceding adverbial ‘*ibrāhīma hanîf*ān as, “he was (as a heathen) nonetheless not an idolater!” meaning, “Abraham was indeed (by birth) a heathen, but he was no idolater!”\(^{38}\)

The etymological data presented in this chapter will be further addressed and synthesized in Chapter Five while taking into account information presented in other literature and fields of specialty. At that point I will suggest that *hanîf* as it occurs in the Qur’an carries a meaning similar to that found in 8\(^{th}\) century Syriac, “Gentile, heathen.”\(^{39}\)

The following chart presents the lexical data of this chapter in a way that the reader may visualize the relatedness and temporal proximity of the Semitic languages surveyed to the Classical Arabic of the Qur’an.

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\(^{38}\) Luxenburg, 55-56.

\(^{39}\) Payne Smith, 149.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Common Semitic</th>
<th>West Semitic</th>
<th>East Semitic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Central Semitic</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Northwest Semitic</strong></td>
<td><strong>North Arabian</strong></td>
<td><strong>Akkadian</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>O.T. Hebrew (12th-2nd BCE)</td>
<td>(v.) to flatter; to feign; to be godless; to be defiled (n./adj.) hypocrite; godless; alienated from God (n.) ungodliness</td>
<td><em>Amarna Texts</em> (14th BCE) (v.) to commit villainy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>J.P. Aramaic (3rd–6th CE)</td>
<td>(v.) to deceive (n.) flattery, hypocrisy</td>
<td>Old North Arabic (1st BCE-3rd CE) (v.) to be pigeon-toed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>J.B. Aramaic (3rd–6th CE)</td>
<td>(v.) to favor; to deceive</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Syriac (4th-9th CE)</td>
<td>(v.) to paganize; to turn aside to idolatry; to be profane, irreligious; to apostatize; to pervert to paganism (n.) godless, ungodly, profane, pagan, heathen; a Gentile, Greek; impiety, godlessness, paganism, Sabaeanism, the impiety of idolatry, ethnic (coll. n.) heathendom, the Gentiles (adv.) after the Gentile or heathen manner</td>
<td>Classical Arabic (4th-9th CE) (v.) to incline, to tend (to do something) (adj.) an inversion of the foot (n.) one who devotes himself to religious exercises; or applies himself to devotion (n.) him who was circumcised and performed the pilgrimage to the [Sacred] House (n.) the one who accepts the Sacred House as the qiblah of Abraham’s nation/religion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mandaic (7th-9th CE)</td>
<td>(n.) pagan, heathen (n. pl.) false gods</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 2: Derivations on root ḫnḫ/ḥnḫ in Semitic languages surveyed.
2. The Ḥanīfiyya Religion

Several pieces of historical evidence and scholarly material support the claim that hanīf refers to a real-world religion practiced in seventh century Arabia. Within this material one may find support for the argument that al-ḥanīfiyya was a religion distinct from the religion of Muhammad, and also support for the claim that al-ḥanīfiyya is an early name for the religion which came later to be known as al-islām.

Charles J. Lyall’s article “The Words ‘Ḥanīf’ and ‘Muslim’” (1903), published only months after Margoliouth’s article (1903), sets out to refute Margoliouth’s claim that the terms muslim and hanīf are derived from the tribe name Ḥanīfah of the ‘false prophet’ Musaylimah. It also refutes Margoliouth’s evidence for the claim that if one were to derive a nisbah from the tribal name Ḥanīfah, it would be formed with the suffixed long – ī, rendering the name Ḥanāfī (like the Sunni legal school named after Abū Ḥanīfah). He further refutes Margoliouth’s claim, showing that Musaylimah’s preaching is attested as beginning the year of Muhammad’s death, making it unlikely that the former was influenced by the latter.⁴⁰

Lyall writes that “‘hanīf stands, in its religious signification, by itself, and the other derivatives of the root afford little assistance in fixing its history and meaning.”⁴¹

⁴⁰ Lyall, 778-79.
⁴¹ Lyall, 779.
His thesis states that ḥunafā’ existed as a religious group of practicing ascetics in the peninsula before Muhammad’s time, distinct from Christians or Jews.

Lyall cites Ibn Hishāms’ recension of Ibn Isḥāq’s Sīratu Rasūli l-Lāh, who names four people before Muhammad’s revelation who were known as ḥunafā’: first, Waraqah b. Naufal, of Quraysh (a cousin of Khadijah, Muhammad’s first wife); second, ‘Ubaid-āl-lāh b. Jaḥsh (a cousin of Muhammad by a Qurayshī mother); third, ‘Uthmān b. al-Ḥuwaitith of the Quraysh; and lastly Zayd b. ‘Amr b. Nufail of the Quraysh. The first three converted to Christianity, while the fourth died a hanīf, and is described by Ibn Isḥāq as such:

“He withdrew from the worship of idols, abstained from eating that which had died of itself, from blood, and from things sacrificed to idols, forbade the burying alive of female infants, and proclaimed that he worshipped the Lord of Abraham.”

Lyall points out that all of these ḥunafā’ mentioned have three things in common: first, they are all from the Ḫījāz and the West part of the Arabian Peninsula. Second, their doctrine was distinct from Christianity or Judaism and preceded Muhammad’s revelations. Third, the doctrine held several religious tenets common to Islam, worshipping the God of Abraham, rejecting idol worship and infanticide, and abstaining from unclean foods. Ascetic practices like wearing the sackcloth are also features of the Pre-Islamic ḥunafā’. In verses by Jāhilī poet Jirān al-‘Aud the root ḥnf occurs in the

42 cited in Lyall, 772-73.

43 Lyall, 773.
verbal form *tahannafa*, meaning “to act as a *hanīf*.” The verse reads, “the worshipper who acts as a *hanīf* [al-ʿābidu al-mutahānifu] had begun his prayers.”

Some have suggested that *tahannafa* is related to *tahannatha*, an ascetic worship which, one tradition relates, is the worship Muhammad performed in a cave on Mount Ḥirā’ before he received revelation. Further research has related the word *tahannatha* to Hebrew *tehinnōth*, meaning ‘prayers’. However, the actual root in Arabic and Hebrew suggests, Lyall states, that the word *hanīf* is related to the Hebrew word *hānēf*, meaning “heretic.” With regard to this possibility, he writes, “cases of identical roots which have violently opposed meanings in Hebrew and Arabic are by no means rare.” He unfortunately offers no further example of such opposed meanings.

Complementing Lyall’s argument for the *hunafā’* as an independent religious movement is Uri Rubin’s article “Hanīfiyya and Ka’ba: An inquiry into the Arabian Pre-Islamic Background of dīn ’Ibrāhīm.” Rubin begins his article by questioning the skepticism with which Western scholarship has approached the historicity of some traditional accounts of Pre-Islamic *hunafā’*. He writes that while some accounts of *hunafā’* were constructed apologetically, such as for Muhammad’s ancestors to give a monotheistic genealogy to the Prophet, there are traditional accounts of *hunafā’* who hold unfavorable legacies in traditional Islam, including enemies of Muhammad’s mission.

The first *hanīf* Rubin describes is Abū ’Amīr ʿAbd ‘Amr bin Sayfī, a leader of the ’Aws

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44 Lyall, 780.
45 Lyall, 781.
Tribe of Medina who fought against the Muslims at the Battle of Uḥud and allied with the Quraysh to destroy Muhammad’s group. Tradition holds that once Abū ’Amīr had fled to Syria, he ordered his group in Medina to build a mosque that would act as headquarters for a revolt executed alongside Byzantine forces he claimed to have rallied against Muhammad.

In this account of ’Amīr in which he is described as having abandoned al-ḥanīfiyya, the Jews of Medina tell Ibn Maslama, another man who came to support Muhammad’s preaching, that “nothing seemed to prevent him from embracing their religion, except for the fact that it was the religion of the Jews. They claimed he probably preferred al-ḥanīfiyya.” Here al-ḥanīfiyya stands as a relational opposite to the Judaism of Arabia.

’Amīr comes into opposition with Muhammad directly, when ’Amīr says to Muhammad, “You have introduced, O’ Muhammad, into al-ḥanīfiyya things which do not belong to it”. Muhammad denies his accusation and denies that ’Amīr is a ḥanīf. It has been postulated that the source of dispute between the two was ’Amīr and his group’s pacifistic disposition and their displeasure with Muhammad’s justice system.

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49 إنك أدخلت يا محمد في الحنيقية ما ليس منها

50 Rubin, 89.
Another more intriguing hanif is the poet Abū Qays bin al-Aslat, also of the ’ Aws Tribe, who lived with his allegiance divided between the Quraysh and Muhammad’s message, and composed these verses on al-ḥanīfiyya:

1. “Lord of mankind, serious things have happened / The difficult and the simple are involved.
2. Lord of mankind, if we have erred / Guide us to the good path.
3. Were it not for our Lord we should be Jews / And the religion of the Jews is convenient.
4. Were it not for our Lord we should be Christian / Along with the monks on Mount Jalīl.
5. But when we were created, we were created / With our religion distinct from (that of) any other generation.
6. We lead the sacrificial animals walking obediently in iron / Their shoulders bare under the clothes.”

Rubin points out that the sacrificial animals referred to here in Arabic as hady, the word also being found in the Qur’an were used specifically to refer to animals destined for sacrifice at the Ka‘ba. He adds that the ritualistic aspects described here, the animal wearing iron and its bare shoulders being clothed, were rituals of sacrifice observed at the Ka‘ba. Note here the familiar discourse which envisions al-ḥanīfiyya as a religion.

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51 cited in Rubin, 91.
kindred to Christianity and Judaism, but distinctive. Ibn Ishāq also reports these verses written by Abū Qays for the Quraysh tribe:

“Raise up for us a ḥanīfī religion /

You are our object; one is guided in travels by heights

Rise and pray to your Lord and rub yourselves /

Against the corner of this house between the mountains

If you perish, we shall perish, and the fairs by which men live /

These are the words of a truthful man.”

Take note of the centrality of the Ka’ba in al-ḥanīfīyya described above. Since the Quraysh were the keepers of the Ka’ba, those of the Quraysh tribe as well as the Jews of Arabia respected the sanctity of the Ka’ba in Mecca. This commonality, hearkening back to the Ka’ba’s mythical status at bait Ibrāhīm “the house of Abraham,” emphasizes the shared religious and cultural icon as a symbol of social cohesion between the ‘pagan’ Quraysh and the Jewish tribes of Mecca.

The third ḥanīf listed by Rubin is Umayya bin Abī Ṣḥalt. While some considered him a Jew, he was also grouped with the ḥunafā’. Jews and Christians referred to him in Qur’an 7:175 as, “him to whom we gave Our signs, but then he cast them off and Satan followed after him…” Umayya is described as “well versed in holy books… God-fearing and [he] used to mention Abraham and Ishmael and the ḥanīfīyya in his poems. He

52 cited in Rubin, 93.
prohibited wine drinking and did not believe in idols. He was a seeker looking for the true religion.”

Verses composed by Umayya are not unconditionally accepted as authentic, but as Rubin points out, they may reflect similar sentiments as those found in the Arabian religious climate without having imitated the Qur’an. The verses read:

“In God’s sight at the resurrection every religion /

But that of the ḥanīf is doomed to perish.”

It is reported in one account that Umayya said, “I know that the ḥanīfiyya is true, but I have my doubts concerning Muhammad.”

On reviewing these ḥunafā’, Rubin concludes that the religion known as ḥanīfiyya entails two standings: first, allegiance to the religion of Abraham, and second, a relationship with the Quraysh and Mecca, based on consecration of the Kaʿba. The Kaʿba has a very important role in the religion of the best known ḥanīf, Zayd bin ’Amr, a man known to have abandoned the Quraysh shirk but never converted to Christianity or Judaism. Before the preaching of Muhammad began, Zayd is known to have prayed toward the Kaʿba and named himself a follower of the religion of Abraham, saying during prayer:

“I seek refuge in what Abraham sought refuge /

53 Rubin, 95.

54 cited in Rubin, 95.

55 Rubin, 95.
When he was facing the qibla while standing (in prayer).”

This suggests that the Kaʿba was the direction in which prayer was made by ḥunafāʾ. The rituals described as being performed at the Kaʿba during the jāhiliyya are reminiscent of Abrahamic tradition, especially circumcision. Romano-Jewish historian Josephus in the first century A.D. remarked in his Antiquities of the Jews that “the Arabs circumcise after the thirteenth year, because Ishmael, the founder of their nation, who was born to Abraham of the concubine, was circumcised at that age.” In fact, the authority of the Quraysh among the Arabs as keepers of the Kaʿba was based on their position as descendants of Abraham and Ishmael, which was the accepted opinion at the time in Arabia.

To the preceding discussion, I add another occurrence of ḥanīf in the Islamic tradition, the alternate Qurʾanic reading by Ibn Masʿūd’s of Q 3:19. Ibn Masʿūd’s codex of the Qurʾan contains a variation on the ‘Uthmanic codex at Q 3:19 which changes al-islāmu for al-ḥanīfiyyah, rendering Masʿūd’s codex at 3:19 as ‘inna ad-dīna ‘inda llāhi l-ḥanīfiyyatu. 

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56 cited in Rubin, 102.

57 cited in Rubin, 104.

58 Rubin, 107.

59 Pickthall, 50, Q 3:19

60 Q 3:19—إنَّ الْذِّينَ عَندِ اللَّهِ ٱلْإِسْلَامُ وَمَا اخْتَلَفَ الَّذِينَ أُوتُوا ٱلْكِتَابَ إِلَّا مِنْ بَعْدِ مَا جَاءَهُمُ الْعِلْمُ بَغْيًا بَيْنَهُمْ وَمَن يَكْفُرْ بِآيَاتِ اللَّهِ اِنَّ الدِّينَ عِندَ اللَّهِ ٱلْحَنيفَةُ وَمَا اخْتَلَفَ الَّذِينَ أُوتُوا ٱلْكِتَابَ إِلَّا مِنْ بَعْدِ مَا جَاءَهُمُ الْعِلْمُ بَغْيًا بَيْنَهُمْ وَمَن يَكْفُرْ بِآيَاتِ اللَّهِ اِنَّ الدِّينَ عِندَ اللَّهِ ٱلْحَنيفَةُ

61 Q 3:19 “Lo! religion with Allah is [al-ḥanīfiyyatun]. Those who (formerly) received the Scripture differed only after knowledge came unto them, through transgression among themselves. Whoso disbelieveth the revelations of Allah (will find that) lo! Allah is swift at reckoning.”
‘Abdallah b. Mas‘ūd was a Companion and one of the early Muslims. He is said to have learned seventy surahs from the Prophet himself, and he was among the first to teach Qur’an recitation. He is said in ḥadīth to be one of the four to whom the community should turn for instruction in the Qur’an. He began to collect material for his codex during the lifetime of the Prophet and assembled it into a codex when he was sent to Kūfa by the Caliph to become a traditionist and religious authority. When the ‘Uthmanic codex was declared the only official text of the Qur’an, Mas‘ūd refused to give up his codex to be burned.  

Being that Mas‘ūd is a trusted authority of the Qur’an, it is fair to look at the implication of replacing in Q 3:19 al-islāmu for al-ḥanīfiyyatu. The verse’s subject matter is similar to the context of many of the other verses which contain mention of ḥanīf; the verse describes al-ḥanīfiyyah as God’s religion, and specifies that there was no dissention among the People of the Scripture, except after they received that knowledge, due to ensuing resentment between them.

It is interesting to note that the term ḥanīfiyya may belong to the early period of revelation of the Qur’an in Mecca and immediately following the hijra, during which time Muhammad’s community broke away from the Jews. “The technical use of muslim and islam is said not to be before the end of 2 A.H.” This may indicate, with further investigation, that ḥanīfiyya was distinct from later Islam in some regard, perhaps in its

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64 Watt, “Ḥanīf.”
conception as a religion without law for those non-Israelites who came to believe in God through reflection instead of revealed law, as the majority of Islamic Law is revealed in the later Medinan era.

The perspective which we have discussed above maintains that ḥanīfiyya represents a group of believers who viewed their religion as distinct from the Christianity and Judaism of Arabia, and who also, according to poetry of the ḥunafā’, conceived of their religion as the pure monotheistic religion of Abraham. While Islām certainly fits this description, which allows one to argue that ḥanīfiyya is synonymous with Islām, there was disagreement between some practicing ḥunafā’ and Muhammad as to whether Muhammad’s preaching represented the ḥanīfiyya religion properly. With this information, we may also conclude that what came to be known as Islām originated as one of several competing variants of ḥanīfiyya in Arabia, and that there ensued a struggle over ownership of the name ḥanīfiyya. As mentioned before, emulation of Abraham and his pilgrimage to the Ka‘ba was also central to the practices of the ḥanīfiyya. The discussion that follows will explore a second, related perspective which is commonly held by Muslim scholars, that ḥanīfiyya represents the monotheistic legacy left by Abraham himself in Arabia.
3. The Ḥanīfiyya as Urmonotheism

A second interpretation of the Ḥanīfiyya is as an Urmonotheism, or the notion that Ḥanīfiyya refers to the remnants of an original monotheism established first by Abraham in Arabia. It should be noted that this approach employs an evolutionary approach to the study of religion in Arabia.

While the Qur’an and hadīth tradition should not be confused as one source, tradition holds that monotheism was brought to Arabia from his birthplace, the ancient Mesopotamian city of Ur, by the Prophet Abraham. Abraham is believed to have been in Mecca twice, the first time when he brought his female slave Hagar and his son from her, Ishmael, to Arabia after disputes between that family and his other family, Sarah and his other son, Isaac; later, he was ordered by God to go to Mecca and rebuild the Ka’ba, the “Sacred House.” The Ka’ba was built there in Adam’s generation but was wrecked by the Great Flood sent to reprimand the generation of Noah. The story tells that Ishmael helped Abraham to repair the Ka’ba, and at that time the rituals which Muslims still enact during the ḥajj were established.65

As mentioned in the previous section, there are several instances of Pre-Islamic and non-Islamic literature using the term Ḥanīfiyya to corroborate the tradition. To repeat for this discussion what is found in Lisān al-ʿArab and Lane’s compendium, Pre-Islamic

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usage of ḥanīf during al-jāhliya meant “him who was circumcised and performed the pilgrimage to the [Sacred] House; because the Arabs in the Time of Ignorance held nothing of the religion of Abraham except circumcision and that pilgrimage: acc. to Ez-Zejjaje, it was applied in the Time of Ignorance to him who made the pilgrimage to the [Sacred] House and performed the ablution on the account of [a state of impurity caused by sexual fluids] and was circumcised: also one who devotes himself to religious exercises; or applies himself to devotion.”

This approach places great emphasis on the legacy of Abraham, and ḥanīf is described as “one who was of Abraham’s religion, as he was a ḥanīf of the Arabs, and the idol worshippers of the jāhiliyya used to say: ‘We are ḥunafā’ of Abraham’s religion,’ therefore when Islām came they named the muslim ḥanīf. Everyone who was circumcised and who made the pilgrimage was called ḥanīf. The ḥanīf is one whose sunna [traditional behavior] is circumcision.” The occurrence of ḥunafā’ in Q 22:31 is defined as “those who had performed ḥajj.”

This position, which is held majorly by Muslim scholars, views shirk as “associating partners with God,” something other than pure paganism. This distinction is important to make because the associators, al-mushrikīn, of the time of Muhammad were perceived not as innately polytheistic, but instead as following a corrupted version of the monotheism Abraham had brought to Arabia. This distinction was based on the notion that the pagan Arabs still retained a “residual memory” of the Urmonotheism, seen in their veneration of the Ka`ba and the acceptance of Allāh as above the other local and

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66 Lane, 568.

tribal gods and goddesses. The theory suggests that Islam rose out of a corrupted monotheism that had come to border on polytheism, rather than holding the notion that Islam was born into a purely pagan environment.

Gerald Hawting suggests that the opposition between “debased monotheism (shirk) and pure monotheism” may be understood from the text of the Qur’an, while an opposition between “crude idolatry” and “simple monotheism” may be inferred from extra-Qur’anic traditional history. Hawting wishes to make this distinction between Qur’anic and traditional material in order to understand the nature of shirk in Arabia. Using descriptions he deduces from the Qur’an, Hawting claims that those who opposed Muhammad’s message may well have been Arabs who would have considered themselves monotheists. Therefore, when the Qur’an names them mushrikīn (associators), the term is used as an affront meant to polemicize the difference between how the group presented itself and how Muhammad’s group viewed it. On this interpretation, shirk and hanīfiyya are examples of a specialized language involved in the polemic between two groups that both claimed to be the monotheistic descendants of Abraham.

As Hawting recognizes, “the Urmonotheismus or high god approach again reflects monotheist suppositions and premises” which may reflect an apologetic account constructed by Muslim historians. However, it is a theory that cannot be ignored in the face of several Islamic traditional accounts ascribed to Muhammad, such as that which

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69 Hawting, Qur’anic, 416.
names the specific person, ṬAmr bin Luḥayy, as “the first who…set up idols around the Ka'ba and changed the ḥanīfiyya, the religion of Abraham.”

This interpretation presents the figure of Abraham as the “righteous heathen,” accepted by Jews, Christians, Muslims and possibly the Pre-Islamic associators as the first monotheist. From the viewpoint of an evolutionary religious approach, Abraham’s monotheistic conversion represents an ascent from the lowly idol worship to worship of the One God. In order to ascertain a precise meaning of the multiple usages of ḥanif, it is necessary to look at accounts of 7th century Arabian religious society, and I will discuss in the following section how Muhammad’s community found not only inspiration through claiming the figure of Abraham, but how they also found through the ḥanīfiyya a title under which to unite the three Abrahamic faiths, to challenge the legitimacy of Mosaic Law, and to criticize polytheistic influences they perceived in Arabian Judaism and Christianity.

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70 Hawting, Idolatry, 33-36.
4. The *Hanīfiyya* in Monotheistic Discourse

Francois de Blois in his article “Naṣrānī (Naζωραϊος) and ḥanīf (ἐθνικός): Studies on the Religious Vocabulary of Christianity and of Islam” (2002) takes the same comparative Semitic approach, but includes Christian Arabic sources in addition to Syriac Christian sources in his analysis. De Blois concludes that *hanīf* in the Qur’an connotes “a believing gentile” who is not subject to Judaic law, similar to the idea expounded by Paul in Romans 4.71

De Blois finds that Arabic Christian authors use the word *hanīf* to mean “pagan,” the same usage found for Syriac *hanpā*. Pre-Islamic usage of the word *hanīf* also evokes the meaning “pagan.” Muslim historian al-Ya‘qūbī uses the word *hunafā’* and explains it to mean “worshippers of the stars.” Muslim bibliographer an-Nadīm and master scholar al-Bīrūnī use *hunafā’* to name the polytheists of Ḥarrān (those Sabians who embraced astrological beliefs versus the pre-Judaic Sabians). Historian al-Mas‘ūdī states that *hanīf* is a Syriac loanword, and he refers to the Roman emperors before their conversion to Christianity as followers of “Sabianism, that is to say, al-*hanīfiyya*.” He also writes that

the Persians before the time of Zoroaster followed the doctrine of the hunafā’, who are the Sabians.\textsuperscript{72}

De Blois points out that Syriac versions of the New Testament use ħanpā to translate the Greek word meaning “gentile, non-Jew.” In 1 Corinthians 10:27 ħanpē is used to signify “unbelievers,” referring to “Gentiles.” Those Greek words which are translated as ħanpē are also translated as Syriac ‘ammē, coming from Hebrew ‘ammīm meaning “nations, gentiles.”\textsuperscript{73} However, the connotations of ħanpā in the New Testament are varied and may be positive. In Mark 7:26 “a Greek [woman], a Syrophoenician by nation” has her daughter cured by Jesus; in this verse the woman is described as ħanpā, though Syrophoenician and believing. In Romans 1:16 Paul writes that the Gospel offers salvation “to everyone that believeth, to the Jew first, and also to the gentile [or Greek]” rendered in some Syriac versions as ħanpā. Paul writes in Galatians 6:15, “For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision availeth any thing, nor uncircumcision, but a new creature.” With this verse and Romans 4:10-18, de Blois wants to highlight that Abraham, who was a believer when uncircumcised, is the example of salvation for the uncircumcised gentiles, meaning the non-Jews. Arabs are believed to be the descendants of Abraham and Hagar, but Gentiles because they are not Jews.\textsuperscript{74}

De Blois adds from non-Biblical sources that in Lives of the Saints of Za’farān (published by Mingana, 1917) Clement of Rome’s parents are described in Syriac as ħanpē, and “in them was fulfilled the word of the scripture”, that “Abraham believed in

\textsuperscript{72} de Blois, 19-20.

\textsuperscript{73} de Blois, 21.

\textsuperscript{74} de Blois, 23.
God, when he was a *hanpā.*” With these New Testament and non-Biblical examples of the use of Syriac *hanpē* meaning “Gentile,” de Blois states that *hanīf* in all the Qur’anic contexts may be interpreted as “Gentile” while carrying the connotation of a “believing Gentile” in context.⁷⁵

De Blois’ final conclusion in the article combines his argument that the Christians referred to in the Qur’an are Nazoraean Jewish Christians who considered observance of Mosaic Law as necessary for salvation, and his definition of *hanīf* as “believing gentile.” He therefore offers his translation of Q 3:67⁷⁶ as “‘Abraham was not a Jew and not a Nazoraean’ – that is, not one of those who, like the Jews and the Nazoraean Jewish Christians, considered the strict observance of Mosaic law to be the precondition of salvation – ‘nor was he one of the associators’, ‘but he was a submissive gentile.’ He was a *hanīf,* not subject to Jewish law, but also a *muslim,* a person submissive to God.”⁷⁷

As Ibn Kathīr reports, Q 2:135, 3:67, 3:95 and 4:125 all were revealed following dissention between the Jews, Christians and Muslims concerning their individual revelations. Ibn Kathīr comments that Q 3:67 was revealed to mean, “How is it that the Jew claims that he was a Jew when his time was before God sent down the Torah to Moses? And how does the Nazarene claim he was Nazarene when Christianity

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⁷⁵ de Blois, 23-24.

⁷⁶ Q 3:67 مَا كَانَ إِبْرَاهِيمُ يَهُودِيًا وَلَّ نَصْرَانِيًا وَلََٰكِن كَانَ حَنِيفًا مُّسْلِمًا وَمَا كَانَ مِنَ الْمُشْرِكِينَ

⁷⁷ de Blois, 24.
occurred after his time in age?" 78 Verse 3:95 was revealed after the Jews had come to
test Muhammad’s knowledge about the food forbidden to the Jews, the fluids of men and
women, and how male and female are conceived. 79 These all resemble the message found
in 3:19, that dissention between believers came about due to revealed knowledge.

Ibn Kathīr’s commentary on Q 4:125 is a particularly interesting case: “The
Muslims and the People of the Scripture were boasting, and the People of the Scripture
said: ‘Our Prophet is before your prophet, and our book is before your book.’ And the
Muslims said: ‘and our Prophet is the seal of the Prophets, and our book is preordained
over the books that were before it’.” 80 Verse 4:125 revealed in response to this dissention
reads: “Who is better in religion than he who surrendereth his purpose to Allah while
doing good (to men) and followeth the tradition of Abraham, the upright [hanīf]? Allah
(Himself) chose Abraham for a friend.” 81 This context obviously implicates Muslims as
well as Jews as a source of the dissention and again points to revealed knowledge as the
point of dissention.

Verse Q 3:19 is similar in meaning and context to other verses containing hanīf,
with Mas‘ūd’s reading which translates, ‘Lo! religion with Allah (is) [al-hanifiyya.]’
Those who (formerly) received the Scripture differed only after knowledge came unto
them, through transgression among themselves.” I suggest that the figure of Abraham and

79 Ibn Kathīr, 231.
80 Ibn Kathīr, 326.
81 Pickthall, 92.
his religion of ḥanīfiyya is evoked in contrast to those who follow revealed script or law because they accept belief only by virtue of their birth. This becomes clear with a closer look at the figure of Abraham.

Abraham is, as the comparative Semitic work has shown, a “Gentile, non-Jew,” a ḥanpā in Syriac religious sources. Abraham is born to Terah, named Azar in the Qur’an, an idol maker and worshipper, but rejects the religion of his father, and he arrives at monotheism through individual insight while observing God’s creation (Q 6:74-79). His belief does not come by way of revealed scripture or law, but “God has sought him out in the confusion of his thoughts.” Abraham is the first monotheist, common to Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, but he is at the time of his belief the uncircumcised son of an idol worshipper, apostate to his community. His circumcision, from which act comes the Jewish nation, “remains a never-ceasing atonement for Israel.” However, the Arabs, believed to be the descendants of Ishmael, are not of this nation. But with the name of ḥanīf, one not of the Jewish people may lay claim to Abraham’s message of monotheism.

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82 Pickthall, 129-130. Q 6:74-79: “(Remember) when Abraham said unto his father Azar: Takest thou idols for gods? Lo! I see thee and thy folk in error manifest. [75] Thus did We show Abraham the kingdom of the heavens and the earth that he might be of those possessing certainty: [76] When the night grew dark upon him he beheld a star. He said: This is my Lord. But when it set, he said: I love not things that set. [77] And when he saw the moon uprising, he exclaimed: This is my Lord. But when it set, he said: Unless my Lord guide me, I surely shall become one of the folk who are astray. [78] And when he saw the sun uprising, he cried: This is my Lord! This is greater! And when it set he exclaimed: O my people! Lo! I am free fro all that ye associate (with Him). [79] Lo! I have turned my face toward Him Who created the heavens and the earth, as one by nature upright [ḥanīf], and I am not of the idolaters [al-mushrikīn].”


85 Ginzberg, 240.
The Islamic precept of this is expressed in the hadith in which God says, “I created my worshippers as hunafā’, that is, with their members pure from sin.”\(^86\) Hence, a worshipper in his natural state is pure even without circumcision, i.e., without being from the tribe of Israel. This was a point of major contention between the Arabian Jews and Muhammad.

This type of self-reckoned belief in God is shown in Islamic tradition to be the best way one can believe in God, shown in the following hadith: “The most loved religions of God are the magnanimous hanīfiyya,”\(^87\) and “- Which are the most loved religions of God the Almighty? - The magnanimous hanīfiyya,”\(^88\) and the hadith ascribed to God: “I delegated the easy, magnanimous hanīfiyya.”\(^89\) Belief by individual insight is not only perceived in Islam as the best form of religion, but as the original form of religion in humans, which is later corrupted by dissention concerning revealed knowledge. This is shown in Q 30:30\(^90\) and in the following hadith ascribed to God: “Verily I created my worshippers as hunafā’, then the šayāṭīn [demons] mingled with them in their religion.”\(^91\)

\(^86\) Ibn Manzūr, 58.

\(^87\) Ibn Manzūr, 58

\(^88\) Ibn Kathir, 462-63.

\(^89\) Ibn Manzūr, 58.

\(^90\) Pickthall, 426. Q 30:30 “So set they purpose (O Muhammad) for religion [hanīf] – the nature (framed) of Allah, in which He hath created man. There is no altering (the laws of) Allah’s creation. That is the right religion, but most men know not.”

\(^91\) Ibn Kathir, 1054.
Note that the term *hanifiyya* most certainly belongs to the early period of revelation of the Qur’an in Mecca and immediately following the *hijra* - during which time Muhammad’s community broke away from the Jews, while “the technical use of *muslim* and *islam* is said not to be before the end of 2 A.H.”92 This important historical detail lends credence to the notion that, as Bruce Lincoln suggests in his Introduction to *Discourse and the Construction of Society*, discourse, in our case the *ḥanīf* discourse, was “employed as [an] effective instrument not only for the replication of established social forms, but more broadly for the construction, deconstruction, and reconstruction of society itself.”93

Lincoln goes on to describe the ways in which a powerful discourse building on a well-respected history or myth, such as that of Abraham as the first monotheist and patriarch of the Arabs:

“supplements force in several important ways, among the most important of which is ideological persuasion…

Discourse of all forms – not only verbal, but also the symbolic discourses…may be strategically employed to mystify the inevitable inequities of any social order…Yet discourse can also serve members of subordinate classes in their attempts to demystify, delegitimate, and deconstruct

92 Watt, “*Ḥanīf*.”

the established norms, institutions, and discourses that play
a role in constructing their subordination.”

In the case of the hanīfiyya, Abraham is a figure whose mythical status is recognized by the “associator” Quraysh, the Jews, and the Christians of Arabia, and for that reason is employed in the Qur’an as a powerful, progenitor symbol which conflates into one religion the common social and religious symbols, subverting exclusionary practices of Mosaic law employed by those Jews and Nazoreans of Arabia, who claimed religious precedent over Muhammad’s message.

There is evidence in the Qur’anic text to suggest that Jews, Christians, Muslims and Saebeans were all envisioned as People of the Scripture, and therefore all monotheists of the One God. However, equal evidence may be found that suggests that Muslims viewed themselves as separate from the other People of the Scripture and more truly monotheistic. On this question Lincoln’s following observation is useful for imagining the way in which the hanīfiyya discourse was utilized in a dynamic manner. He writes:

“Because there are virtually infinite grounds on which individual and group similarity/dissimilarity may be perceived and corresponding sentiments of affinity/estrangement evoked, the borders of society are

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94 Lincoln, 4-5.

never a simple matter. In practice there always exists potential basis for associating and for disassociating oneself and one’s group from others, and the vast majority of social sentiments are ambivalent mixes in which potential sources of affinity are (partially and perhaps temporarily) overlooked or suppressed in the interest of establishing a clear social border or, conversely, potential sources of estrangement are similarly treated in order to effect or preserve a desired level of social integration and solidarity."

I show in the following section that *al-ḥanīfiyya* functioned in the dynamic manner as Lincoln describes, as the potential source of affinity and distinction, speaking into being the conception of a “middle nation” (Q 2:143) that sought compromise amongst the confrontational social and religious structure of Arabian society.

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96 Lincoln, 10.

97 Pickthall, 22.
5: The Ḥanīfiyya as a Middle Nation

In this final chapter, I build on the concept of al-ḥanīfiyya as a “middle nation” as it is termed in Sūrat al-Baqarah and address the lack of critical attention in literature and lack of a language in which to speak about the middle place which al-ḥanīfiyya held in Arabian society. Building on Lincoln’s assertion that verbal and symbolic ideologies may be manipulated in discourse to act as both sources of cohesion and division in an infinite number of ways so as create “sentiments of affinity/estrangement”, 98 I look at the role of al-ḥanīfiyya in Arabian society as a middle nation and religion. Al-ḥanīfiyya as a “middle nation”, or in the Arabic of the Qur’an ‘ummatan wasatān 99, defies such “clear-cut categories” 100 of Arabian religions as Jew, Christian, Muslim and pagan which scholarly precedent confines us to today, and underscores “the brittleness of our textbook classifications” 101 with an example of a real-world practice and consciousness the English logosphere 102 has not yet classified.

98 Lincoln, 10
99 Q 2:143
100 Oberoi, 1.
101 Oberoi, 1.
102 “A logosphere is the linguistic mental space shared by all those who share the same language with which to articulate their thoughts, their representations, their collective memory, and their knowledge according to the fundamental principles and values claimed as a unifying weltanschung [world-view]” Arkoun, Mohammed. Islam: To Reform or to Subvert? Saqi Books. London, UK (2006): 19.
I want to draw attention to the significance of *al-ḥanīfiyya* because the three readings of the phenomenon of *al-ḥanīfiyya* – as a real world group of believers, as an original monotheism, and as a discursive symbol of authority called on in negotiation with the Quraysh, Christians and Jews - together address *al-ḥanīfiyya* as a dynamically functioning historical, spiritual, and social reality. Focusing on the religious society of *al-ḥanīfiyya* in the role of a middle group provides a lens through which we may view the emergence of Islam as subject to and in negotiation with its immediate religious and social environment.

While any conclusion about the past is made through a process of, as one scholar has put it, “critical backward projection”\(^\text{103}\) confined to limited cultural and linguistic worldviews, the question I raise below attempts to address the statement that “the borders of society are never a simple matter,”\(^\text{104}\) and to modify Lincoln’s point I add “the borders of religion” as well.

In asking critical questions of the data surrounding the Qur’anic *ḥanīf*, I refer to Oberoi who has posed questions similar to those I wish to ask of this topic:

> “How may these facts be represented and reconciled with the belief systems of the three grand religions of [Arabia]? Where do the boundaries of these grand religions begin and end? Is it possible that our taxonomies excluded people from their own history and prevented them making the statements they wished to make?”\(^\text{105}\)

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\(^{104}\) Lincoln, 10.

\(^{105}\) Oberoi, 4-5. These questions were originally posed by Oberoi about 19th century Sikhism in India.
A major challenge in this discussion is to find an academic language in which to speak clearly about the social and religious position that I suggest al-hanifiiyya held in its society. Because “the impact of the unthinkable and the unthought is immediately identifiable in the discourse articulated in a given language,” a lack of fitting expressions in English for the Qur’anic concept of ‘ummatan wasatān indicates that little has been elaborated on the concept in English scholarship in conjunction with al-hanifiiyya, and so we must translate the thoughts of this discussion between languages.

“Language is the authentic memory of what thought has achieved, or failed to achieve, in each logosphere,” and so to transplant notions from one logosphere, the Arabic-speaking one in which ‘ummatan wasatān and al-hanifiiyya were employed, to another successfully, we must begin at the root of meaningful discourse – lexemes – and understand the full scope of the meanings of the crucial Arabic terms ḥanīf and ‘ummatan wasatān and their potential connotations in English.

In Chapter One we saw the data and an analysis of the Arabic and other Semitic linguistic data on the word hanīf. I offer in this chapter a synthesis of that information and suggest that the Arabic word used in the Qur’an conveyed the meaning, in the accusative form ḥanīfan, of “after the Gentile or heathen manner” as it also means in pre-eight century Syriac usage.

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107 Arkoun, 20.
When conceiving of the meaning of ḥanīf, we must keep in mind that any rendering of the word in English is an interpretation and so it must be understood within its own unique social and temporal context. I do not wish to impose English-specific connotations, nor all the historical baggage which attaches itself to the word’s etymological record, which exist only within the English language logosphere. Any connotation of an English word I intend to project onto the word ḥanīf I detail and justify, and so any translation I propose is an interpretation, an explanation and a commentary.

In this way, “heathen” should not be understood in a purely negative sense, but should be taken as synonymous with “Gentile”, meaning non-Israelite people or nation, “of or pertaining to any or all of the nations other than the Jewish.” It is possible that ḥanīf as it was used in the Qur’an also retained some connotations similar to that of “heathen” in English, such as is suggested by meanings found in the Syriac usage like “godless, ungodly, profane, pagan, heathen.” However, here it conveys a meaning like certain connotations of the English word “heathen: of an individual or people: holding religious beliefs of a sort that are considered unenlightened, now esp. ones of a primitive or polytheistic nature.”

From this definition of heathen, I emphasize the concept “of a primitive nature” for the Qur’anic ḥanīf because, like I detailed in Chapter Three, al-ḥanīfiyya was often conceived of by classical Muslim scholars as an original or primitive monotheism in

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110 Payne Smith, 149.

Arabia which came before the revelation of Scripture, hence “unenlightened”, and by the time of Muhammad was believed to have been corrupted by polytheistic influences. More simply though, we should understand “heathen” as it is defined in the following entry: “the adj. plural, the heathen (cf. the faithful), is now collective; in O.T. = the Gentiles.”

The following chart presents the occurrences of hanîf in the Qur’an with the suggested interpretation hanîfân as “as a Gentile” substituted within Pickthall’s English translation with the Arabic text above.

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**Qur’anic Arabic Text of ḥanīf Occurrences and English Translations by M. Pickthall with suggested interpretation of /lists/* as “Gentile”**

**Pickthall:** And they say: Be Jews or Christians, then ye will be rightly guided. Say (unto them, O Muhammad): Nay, but (we follow) the religion of Abraham, [as a Gentile], and he was not of the idolaters.

**Pickthall:** Lo! religion with Allah (is) [Gentilism]. Those who (formerly) received the Scripture differed only after knowledge came unto them, through transgression among themselves. Whoso disbelieveth the revelations of Allah (will find that) lo! Allah is swift at reckoning.

**Pickthall:** Abraham was not a Jew, nor yet a Christian; but he was [a Gentile] who had surrendered (to Allah), and he was not of the idolaters.

**Pickthall:** Say: Allah speaketh truth. So follow the religion of Abraham, [as a Gentile]. He was not of the idolaters.

**Pickthall:** Who is better in religion than he who surrendereth his purpose to Allah while doing good (to men) and followeth the tradition of Abraham, [as a Gentile]? Allah (Himself) chose Abraham for friend.

**Pickthall:** Lo! I have turned my face toward Him Who created the heavens and the earth, [as a Gentile], and I am not of the idolaters.

**Pickthall:** Lo! As for me, my Lord hath guided me unto a straight path, a right religion, the community of Abraham, [as a Gentile], who was no idolater.

**Pickthall:** And, (O Muhammad) set thy purpose resolutely for religion, [as a Gentile], and be not of those who ascribe partners (to Allah).

**Pickthall:** Lo! Abraham was a nation obedient to Allah, [as a Gentile], and he was not of the idolaters;

**Pickthall:** And afterward We inspired thee (Muhammad, saying): Follow the religion of Abraham, [as a Gentile]. He was not of the idolaters.
Figure 3: Qur’anic Arabic Text of ُحنیف Occurrences and English Translations by M. Pickthall\textsuperscript{114} with suggested interpretation of ُحنیف as “Gentile.”

**Verses on Judaism and Christianity**

It is crucial at this stage to clarify the significance for Muhammad’s group of being a Gentile or non-Israelite in 7th century Arabia. To convey this I first show the nature of Judaism known by Muhammad and his followers, and also the social tension felt by his community which led to such discourse in opposition to the Jews and Christians of Arabia.

**The Meccan Period**

The period of revelation in Mecca represents the earliest time of Muhammad’s prophetic career. The verses revealed in Mecca are generally considered as dealing with theological and spiritual matters rather than concerns over governing a society, and they are deemed more pacifistic than Medinan verses which respond to a time of greater onslaught against the community. One half of all occurrences of ُحنیف in the Qur’an belong to the Meccan period and represent a definite stage in the development of

Muhammad’s message. These verses are marked by a message of compromise and unity towards the religious communities surrounding the ḥunafā’ in Mecca.

One of the earliest sūrah revealed which uses the term hanīf attempts to redress the Jewish and Christian disbelief in Muhammad’s message. Sūrat Yūnus, which narrates the stories of Noah, Aaron and Moses, signals that all of these men were prophets of people who rejected their message. The narration of Moses’ exodus from Egypt culminates in verse Q 10:93 and continues until verse 105 of the same sūrah:

(10:93) And We verily did allot unto the Children of Israel a fixed abode, and did provide them with good things; and they differed not until the knowledge came unto them. Lo! thy Lord will judge between them on the Day of Resurrection concerning that wherein they used to differ.

(10:94) And if thou (Muhammad) art in doubt concerning that which We reveal unto thee, then question those who read the Scripture (that was) before thee. Verily the Truth from thy Lord hath come unto thee. So be not thou of the waverers.

(10:98) And if thy Lord willed, all who are in the earth would have believed together. Wouldst thou (Muhammad) compel men until they are believers?

(10:104) Say (O Muhammad): O mankind! If ye are in doubt of my religion, then (know that) I worship not those whom ye worship instead of Allah, but I worship Allah Who causeth you to die, and I have been commanded to be of the believers.
(10:105) And, (O Muhammad) set thy purpose resolutely for religion, [ḥanīfān], and be not of those who ascribe partners (to Allah).\textsuperscript{116}

These verses from the Meccan period reveal similar themes encountered in several later sūrah involved in the ḥanīf discourse, including the assertion that revealed knowledge was a cause of dissention within a religious community. This statement recurs often throughout the ḥanīf discourse. In verse Q 10:94 Muhammad is uncertain of the revelation he is receiving and is encouraged to inquire about previous revelations, meaning the Torah and Gospel, and compare his message to the Scripture of the Jews and Christians. Muhammad’s inquiry into Christian and Jewish Scripture soon leads to an antagonistic debate which takes place over several years, in both Mecca and Medina, through a discourse in which the figure of Abraham the ḥanīf as a Gentile dominates.

Yet when these verse were revealed in the Meccan period, some four years before the hijra,\textsuperscript{117} it is clear that such violent rifts had not yet formed between the religious communities, and Muhammad is instructed that if it were God’s Will, then “all would have believed together.” The discourse Muhammad is ordered to repeat in Q 10:104 is clearly intended to be given in response to the disbelief of others in his message. Meanwhile, Muhammad is commanded, “‘aqim wajhaka liddīni ḥanīfān,” literally, “direct your face toward the religion ḥanīfān.”

It will become clearer looking at more verses that the term ḥanīf is frequently employed in discourse with the People of the Scripture. One such occurrence comes

\textsuperscript{116} Pickthall, 208-10.

\textsuperscript{117} Pickthall, 197.
from a late Meccan chapter, *Sūrat Al-ʿAnʿām* verses 6:155-161 revealed after the previously mentioned verses. It acknowledges the divide between the People of the Scripture and the Meccans. By emphasizing that Muhammad’s scripture is intended for the Arabs who cannot read the Gospel and Torah, the verse focuses on the accountability of the Arabs as a new People of the Scripture:

(6:155) And this is a blessed Scripture [*kitāb*] which We have revealed. So follow it and ward off (evil), that ye may find mercy.

(6:156) Lest ye should say: The Scripture was revealed only to two sects [*tāʿayn*] before us, and we in sooth were unaware of what they read;

(6:157) Or lest ye should say: If the Scripture had been revealed unto us, we surely had been better guided than are they. Now hath there come unto you a clear proof from your Lord, a guidance and mercy; and who doeth greater wrong than he who denieth the revelations of Allah, and turneth away from them? We award unto those who turn away from Our revelations an evil doom because of their aversion.

(6:159) Lo! As for those who sunder [*farraqu*] their religion and become schismatics [*shiʿān*], no concern at all hast thou with them. Their case will go to Allah, Who then will tell them what they used to do.

(6:161) Say: Lo! As for me, my Lord hath guided me unto a straight path, a right religion, the community [*millata*] of Abraham, [*ḥanīfān*], who was no idolater.120

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118 Q 6:155

وَهَذَا كِتَابٌ أَنزَلْنَاهُ مُبَارَكٌ فَاتَّبِعُوهُ وَاتَّقُوا لَعَلَّكُمْ تُرْحَمُونَ

116 Q 6:156

أَن تَقُولُوا إِنَّمَا أُنزِلَ الْكِتَابُ عَلَىَٰ طَائِفَتَيْنِ مِن قَبْلِنَا وَإِن كُنَّا عَن دِرَاسَتِهِمْ لَغَافِلِينَ

117 Q 6:157

نَ كَذَّبَ بِآيَاتِ اللهَِّ وَصَدََ َيْنَا الْكِتَابُ لَكُنَّا أَهْدَىَٰ مِنْهُمْ فَقَدْ جَاءَكُم بَيِّنَةٌ مِّن رَّبِّكُمْ وَهُدًى وَرَحْمَةٌ فَمَنْ أَظْلَمُ مِمَّ أَوْ تَقُولُوا لَوْ أَنَّا أُنزِلَ عَلَيْنَا سَنَجْزِي الَّذِينَ يَصْدِفُونَ عَنْ آيَاتِنَا سُوءَ الْعَذَابِ بِمَا كَانُوا يَصْدِفُ

119 Q 6:159

إِنَّ الَّذِينَ فَرَّقُوا دِينَهُمْ وَكَانُوا شِيَعًا لَّسْتَ مِنْهُمْ فِي شَيْءٍ إِنَّمَا أَمْرُهُمْ إِلَى اللهَِّ ثُمَّ يُنَالُونَ

120 Q 6:161

قُلْ إِنَّنِي هَدَانِي رَبِّي إِلَىَٰ صِرَاطٍ مُّسْتَقِيمٍ دِينًا قِيَمًا مِّ

118 Ibn Kathīr, 461.

120 Pickthall, 141.
Verse 6: 156 addresses the Arab Meccans who were illiterate and could not read the dirāsa, or “Scriptures,” of the Jews and Christians. The verse contains the pretext given by the Meccans for not believing in One God alone, that they “were unaware of what they [Jews and Christians] read.”

Not only does this passage show how the revelation of an orally recited scripture brought illiterate Arabs into knowledge of al-kitāb and through that discourse made them a part of the People of the Scripture, but the verse also indicates that the Meccans listening to it were most likely aware of the concept of al-kitāb, a Jewish and Christian Scripture, that was revealed by Allah (although their conceptions of Allah differed), to whom the Meccans already prayed.  

In verses Q 6: 155-157 it is clear that the Meccan community was well-aware of the monotheistic message and of the fact that two other sects [ṭāʿifatayn] had been given a scripture while it had not. The Arabs of Mecca possibly considered themselves monotheists and, by the period of Muhammad’s revelations, monotheism already had a relatively strong presence in Arabia, causing the Arabs to consider themselves one sect, or ṭāʿif, of the larger monotheistic community settled in Arabia.

The Jewish and Christian colonies from outside of Arabian tribal society that principally inhabited the peninsula did not belong to any Arab tribe or clan. These people from outside were individuals detached from clan and temple who began to establish

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121 Bamyeh, 98-99.


123 See Q 2:135, 143, 144.
their own matrixes of bonds in the manner common to their societies, by way of preferred common languages, common laws, and common scripture. ¹²⁴

By recognizing the literacy and scripture of the Jewish and Christian societies, the Meccans became aware of their own lack of revealed knowledge. This restructuring of Mecca lead to the change of religious mindsets in the local Meccans, as Arab tribal identity conformed to another system of social organization. Muhammad’s message was framed within the larger monotheistic picture of the People of the Scripture because it incorporates the local Meccans into the surrounding society by giving them the status of a people with Scripture. Identification with al-ḥanīfiyya allowed for an Arab to become part of the Scriptural tradition “without political implications, for Christianity was linked with the Byzantine and Abyssinian empires, and Judaism had support in the Persian empire…[giving] the Arabs a monotheism independent of the empires,”¹²⁵ and not depriving the Arab Meccans of their authority as rulers of the Ka’ba.

Verses Q 6:59 and 61 emphasize integration into the society of the People of the Scripture by warning of those who farraqu dīnahum wa kānū shiʿān, “divided their religion and were sectarians.” In opposition to this is Abraham, the ḥanīf, a model for believers. It is apparent here that a ḥanīf is one who did not belong to the People of the Scripture, though he or she was aware of their scripture as revelation from God.

From this point one can see that the religious faith of Abraham is placed in contrast to those who divide their religion into sects, meaning those groups which

¹²⁴ Lapidus, 69.

distinguished between monotheistic believers. Therefore, al-hanīfiyya was envisioned as an element of the monotheistic community which would unite the People of the Scripture with the Meccan Arabs under one religion, dismissing any incidence of multiple sects.

Muhammad however found his message rejected by the local Meccans and criticized by the People of the Book. From the late Meccan period, verses 6:74-80

narrate Abraham’s period of reckoning and his earliest stage of monotheistic belief, comparing it to Muhammad’s experience in Meccan society:

(6:74) (Remember) when Abraham said unto his father Azar: Takest thou idols for gods? Lo! I see thee and thy folk in error manifest.

(6:76) When the night grew dark upon him he beheld a star. He said: This is my Lord. But when it set, he said: I love not things that set.

(6:77) And when he saw the moon uprising, he exclaimed: This is my Lord. But when it set, he said: Unless my Lord guide me, I surely shall become one of the folk who are astray.

(6:78) And when he saw the sun uprising, he cried: This is my Lord! This is greater! And when it set he exclaimed: O my people! Lo! I am free from all that ye associate (with Him).

(6:79) Lo! I have turned my face toward Him Who created the heavens and the earth, [hanīfān], and I am not of the idolaters.

(6:80) His people argued with him. He said: Dispute ye with me concerning Allah when He hath guided me? I fear not at all that which ye
set up beside Him unless my Lord willeth aught. My Lord includeth all things in His knowledge. Will ye not then remember?  

These verses tell of Abraham’s conversion to monotheism, his confrontation with his people, including with his father. In verses Q 6:82-83 the “argument” or *hujja* given to Abraham by God is detailed for Muhammad, which Muhammad then recites in similar debates “against his folk” in Mecca:

(6:82) Those who believe and obscure not their belief by wrongdoing, theirs is safety; and they are rightly guided.

(6:83) That is Our argument. We gave it unto Abraham against his folk. We raise unto degrees of wisdom whom We will. Lo! thy Lord is Wise, Aware. 

This *sūrah* belongs to the late Meccan period, one year before the *hijra*.

Muhammad’s attempt to establishment of a single religious community came in his efforts to incorporate the Arab clans and the People of the Scripture into a larger alliance based on the common religious figure of Abraham and his monotheism, and this way resolve disputes erupting between the Arab Meccan religious community and the newer Jewish and Christian colonies in Mecca. “Muhammad fused tribal society, the monotheistic religious mentality, with religious community, trading confederacy and political organization to create a new society…”

The verses continue alluding to the shared “argument” of Abraham as a compromise with the People of the Scripture, and this argument becomes even more


128 Q 6:82  
\[\text{ذَٰلِكُمْ هُمُ الْأَنْبَأُ وَهُمْ مُهْتَدُونَ} \]

Q 6:83  
\[\text{وَتِلْكَ حُجَّتُنَا آتَيْنَاهَا إِبْرَاهِيمَ عَلَىَٰ قَوْمِهِ نَرْفَعُ دَرَجَاتٍ مَّن نَّشَاءُ إِنَّ رَبَّكَ حَكِيمٌ عَلِيمٌ} \]

129 Pickthall, 130.

130 Lapidus, 72.
central to Muhammad’s mission as he is forced to flee Mecca and join a community of Jews and Christians in Medina. These People of the Scripture who accepted Muhammad and his community eventually begin debating him concerning his prophecies. The figure of Abraham as a *hanīf* becomes an important discursive tool during those altercations.

**The Medinan Period**

The nature of the Judaism encountered by Muhammad is not clear from historical evidence. However, the most telling indication of the atypical and contentious form of Judaism of 7th century Medina are from the Qur’an, verses Q 9:30-31, 34 which read:

“...And the Jews say: Ezra is the son of Allah, and the Christians say: The Messiah is the son of Allah...[9:31] They have taken as lords beside Allah their rabbis and their monks and the Messiah son of Mary, when they were bidden to worship only One God...[9:34] many of the (Jewish) rabbis and the (Christian) monks devour the wealth of mankind wantonly and debar (men) from the way of Allah.”

Verse Q 9:30 which claims that the Jews accepted “Ezra” as the son of God was later criticized by Jews as having no basis in truth, yet Muslim historians at-Ṭabarî and Ibn Ḥazm held that some Arabian Jews in that era did hold this figure mentioned in the Qur’an as the son of God. Classical Muslim scholars in fact accepted and admired Ezra

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131 From Q 9:30

132 Pickthall, 183.

as a pious and knowledgeable Jewish sage from the time of the Second Temple after exile in Babylon. Scholars debate concerning the origin of the Jews of Medina, whether they were ethnically Jewish or Jewish converts, and also over whether they were learned in Judaism or “‘Bedouin of Ḥijāz, ignorant of crafts and sciences, and even of the knowledge of their own law or the legal aspects (fiqh) of their book and religion.’”

The controversy in the Qur’an however lies in the perception that Jews and Christians hold any figure as the son of God. Therefore, whether it were historically proven or not, Muhammad and his followers were interested in dispelling such beliefs which they found to be polytheistic.

Following the disintegration of the bonds between Mecca and Muhammad’s group, he and his followers made the hijra to Yathrib (Medina). It is believed that Muhammad initially thought his message would be readily acknowledged by the “Children of Israel” in Yathrib to be an extension of the same covenant they held with God, as seen in verse Q 2:40. Muhammad’s group however did not find mutual acceptance, and many verses which deal with this polemic do so through a discourse of pure monotheism and allusion to Abraham the ḥanīf.


137 Pickthall, 9, Q 2:40 “O Children of Israel! Remember My favour wherewith I favoured you, and fulfil your (part of the) covenant, I shall fulfil My (part of the) covenant, and fear Me.”

Q 2:40 يَا بَنِي إِسْرَائِيلَ اذْكُرُوا نِعْمَتِيَ الَّتِي أَنْعَمْتُ عَلَيْكُمْ وَأَوْفُوا بِعَهْدِي أَوْفُوا بِعَهْدِكُمْ وَإِيَّاِي فَارْهَبُونِ
Revealed in 1 A.H., *Sūrat Al-Bayyinah* 98:1-5\(^{138}\) continues the dialogue with the People of the Scripture but with a new audience of Medinan Jews and Christians. The verses stress that Muhammad’s message is part of the monotheistic *ṣuḥuf* and *kutub*, both words meaning “Books,” for those misguided among the People of the Scripture and the *mushrikīn*, associators or idolaters:

(98:1) Those who disbelieve among the People of the Scripture and the idolaters could not have left off (erring) till the clear proof [*al-bayyinah*] came unto them,

(98: 2) A messenger from Allah, reading purified pages [*ṣuḥfān*]

(98: 3) Containing correct scriptures [*kutubun*].

(98: 4) Nor were the People of the Scripture divided until after the clear proof came unto them.

(98:5) And they are ordered naught else than to serve Allah, keeping religion pure for Him, as [*hunafā’*], and to establish worship and to pay the poor-due. That is true religion.\(^{139}\)

Verses Q 98:1-3 convey to the Medinans that the Qur’an establishes itself within the same Scriptural tradition as the Jews and Christians. A messenger who comes with books and scripture is the *bayyinah* or “clear proof” that the religion is situated in that same monotheistic tradition. The discourse of the faith names its followers *hunafā’* and promotes only monotheism and pious deeds common to all the Scriptural traditions,

\(^{138}\) Q 98:1

\(^{139}\) Pickthall, 725.
presenting itself as the common denominator among religions which encompasses all believers.

Verses Q 2:135-36\(^1\) (revealed 1 until 2 A.H.) are exemplary of the debates which later ensued between Muhammad and the Jews and Christians of Medina. The verses read:

(2:135) And they say: Be Jews or Christians, then ye will be rightly guided. Say (unto them, O Muhammad): Nay, but (we follow) the religion of Abraham, [\(\text{ḥanīf}\), and he was not of the idolaters.

(2:136) Say: We believe in Allah and that which is revealed unto us and that which was revealed unto Abraham, and Ishmael, and Isaac, and Jacob, and the tribes, and that which Moses and Jesus received, and that which the prophets received from their Lord. We make no distinction between any of them, and unto Him we have surrendered.\(^{141}\)

In the first verse, there is clear dissention between Muhammad and the Jews and Christians of Medina taking place within the first or second year after the \(\text{hijra}\).

Muhammad’s followers felt great pressure from the Jews especially, who influenced many Bedouins to convert to Judaism.\(^{142}\) Debate with the Jews were taken seriously by Muhammad. In Medina among the Jewish tribes, he faced a community which held great

\(^{140}\) Q 2:135

\(^{141}\) Pickthall, 21.

\(^{142}\) Gil, 151.
prestige in Arabian society as literate and cultured people with ties to powerful empires, and so could have easily persuaded Muhammad’s followers into accepting Judaism.\footnote{The monotheistic religions of foreigners to the peninsula found in the Jewish and Christian settlements in Arabia, like Yemen and the border regions in the north, Lakhm and Chassan, and small oasis populations fell under the political pressure of Byzantium and Abyssinia, giving overt social and political significance to new religious ideas in the peninsula. Beside the primary tribal groups and pagan societies, the monotheistic believers were a minority, yet because of their affiliation with empire religion, they were overwhelmingly persuasive, “both by the force of their teaching and by force of representing what was felt to be a more powerful, more sophisticated, and more profound civilization.” See Lapidus, Ira M. “The Arab Conquests and the Formation of Islamic Society” in \textit{Studies on the First Century of Islamic Society}, ed. G.H.A. Juynboll. Southern Illinois University Press. Carbondale and Edwardsville, IL (1982): 69.}

To counter the case for conversion to Judaism or Christianity, the figure of Abraham is called on, labeling him a \textit{ḥanīf}. This context places the term \textit{ḥanīf} in opposition to Jews, Christians and associators. Because Abraham is known to have believed in One God before his circumcision or revelation of law and scripture,\footnote{Q 6:79} \textit{ḥanīf} indicates a term which implied a monotheistic religion pre-dating Judaism and Christianity. This could point towards the \textit{Urmonotheism} discussed in Chapter Three, accepting the prophets which followed Abraham as well, as Q 2:140\footnote{Q 2:140} shows:

\begin{quote}
(2:140) Or say ye that Abraham, and Ishmael, and Isaac, and Jacob, and the tribes were Jews or Christians? Say: Do ye know best, or doth Allah? And who is more unjust than he who hideth a testimony which he hath received from Allah? Allah is not unaware of what ye do.\footnote{Pickthall, 22.}
\end{quote}

This verse reiterates that Abraham and his direct descendants were something other than Jewish or Christian; they were \textit{ḥunafā’}, which we know from the polemical context must mean those who practiced a monotheistic religious antecedent of Judaism. This mention
of ḥanīf continues with verses Q 2:142-145 which frame the change of prayer direction towards the Ka'ba within the Abrahamic discourse, aiming to unite the monotheists of Medina:

(2: 142) The foolish of the people will say: What hath turned them from the qiblah [direction of prayer] which they formerly observed? Say: Unto Allah belong the East and the West. He guideth whom He will unto a straight path.

(2: 143) Thus We have appointed you a middle nation [ummatan wasatān], that ye may be witnesses against mankind, and that the messenger may be a witness against you. And We appointed the qiblah which ye formerly observed only that We might know him who followeth the messenger, from him who turneth on his heels. In truth it was a hard (test) save for those whom Allah guided. But it was not Allah's purpose that your faith should be in vain, for Allah is Full of Pity, Merciful toward mankind.

(2: 144) We have seen the turning of thy face to heaven (for guidance, O Muhammad). And now verily We shall make thee turn (in prayer) toward a qiblah which is dear to thee. So turn thy face toward the Inviolable Place of Worship [al-masjid al-harām], and ye (O Muslims), wheresoever ye may be, turn your faces (when ye pray) toward it. Lo! Those who have received the Scripture know that (this revelation) is the Truth from their Lord. And Allah is not unaware of what they do.

(2: 145) And even if thou broughtest unto those who have received the Scripture all kinds of portents, they would not follow thy qiblah, nor canst thou be a follower of their qiblah; nor are some of them followers of the qiblah of others. And if thou shouldst follow their desires after the

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147 Q 2:142 إِلَىَٰ صِرَاطٍ مُّسْتَقِيمٍ مَغْرِبُ يَهْدِي مَن يَشَاءُ سَيَقُولُ السُّفَهَاءُ مِنَ النَّاسِ إِلَىَٰ صِرَاطٍ مُّسْتَقِيمٍ مَغْرِبُ يَهْدِي مَن يَشَاءُ.
knowledge which hath come unto thee, then surely wert thou of the evil-doers.

(2: 150) Whencesoever thou comest forth turn thy face toward the Inviolable Place of Worship; and wheresoever ye may be (O Muslims) turn your faces toward it (when ye pray) so that men may have no argument against you, save such of them as do injustice - Fear them not, but fear Me! - and so that I may complete My grace upon you, and that ye may be guided.148

The direction of prayer, or the qiblah, of Muhammad’s group was initially Jerusalem, but this verse discusses the institution of the Meccan Ka’ba as the new qiblah. The Arabic words used to refer to the Ka’ba in these verses, al-masjid al-ḥarām, Hawting writes was the more commonly used appellation among non-Jewish and Christian Arabs, and its use here “may be an attempt at harmonization” between the monotheists and the tribal Arabs.149

Likewise, another discursive indication of the harmonizing role of the ḥanīf is found in Q 2: 143 appointment of Muhammad’s community as ‘ummatan wasaṭān, translated by Pickthall as “a middle nation.” I suggest that the role of the “middle nation” amongst the People of the Scripture and the Arabs is fundamental to understanding the function of al-ḥanīfiyya within its society and within the development of Islam.

**The Significance of ’Ummatan Wasaṭān**

In order to more fully grasp the role of al-ḥanīfiyya as ‘ummatan wasaṭān, a middle nation, I begin by outlining the connotations of both words’ root letters in the Classical Arabic lexicon.

148 Pickthall, 22-23.

On the lexeme ‘ummatan of the Qur’anic phrase ‘ummatan wasaṭān, under Lane’s entry of the root hamza – mīm - mīm, we find the nominal entry ‘ummatun to mean “A way, course, mode, or manner, of acting, or conduct, or rule of life; Religion.”

Another word which expresses this same meaning used in the Qur’an is shir’a, “one course, which people follow, in religion.” One example given is, “Such a one has no religion; no religious persuasion.” Alternatively, ‘ummatun may be rendered as “the people of a [particular] religion; a people to whom an apostle is sent, unbelievers and believers; followers of the prophet; a nation; a people; a race; a tribe, distinct body or family.” The Qur’anic example given is from 2:213, “Mankind was [a people] of one religion;” or may be seen in Q 10:19, “Mankind were but one community; then they differed.” From this information, I propose the concise interpretation of ‘umma as “religious community” which emphasizes the communal aspect of the word and the reason for community – religion, forming one group of people bound by a shared religious persuasion.

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150 Lane, 90.
151 Lane, 90.
152 Lane, 90.
153 Lane, 90.
154 From Q 2: 213
155 Lane, 90.
156 From Q 10:19
157 Pickthall, 200.
Under Lane’s entry for \textit{wāw – sīn- ḏā’}\textsuperscript{158}, one finds the most literal translation of the root, the nominal form, to mean “middle or midst,” such as in the phrase “I broke the middle, or middle part, of the spear.”\textsuperscript{159} When used as a verb \textit{wasaṭa} may carry the less literal meaning of “to occupy the best place,” such as in the phrase, “The man occupied, or held, a middle place, [meaning the best place, or one of the best places] among his people, in respect of truth and equity.”\textsuperscript{160} In the accusative form, we find as an example given the precise verse of the Qur’an (2:143)\textsuperscript{161} that we wish to define for the purposes of this chapter, translated “[We have made you to be a nation] conforming, or conformable, to the just mean; just; equitable; or good.”\textsuperscript{162}

The key qualities of the adjective may be interpreted in the static sense, as “moderate, equitable” religious group. However more precisely in this context, the noun-adjective in the Arabic accusative should take a participial quality in English that implies action, such as “conforming, moderating, or bringing into accord.” This distinction takes into account the following qualifying clause, “Thus We have appointed you a middle nation, that ye may be witnesses \textit{[shuhadā’]} against mankind, and that the messenger may be a witness \textit{[shahīd]} against you.”\textsuperscript{163} It is clear from the verse that there is reciprocal action as a result of being appointed a “middle” religious community, plainly

\textsuperscript{158} Lane, 2940.
\textsuperscript{159} Lane, 2940.
\textsuperscript{160} Lane, 2941.
\textsuperscript{161} Q 2:143:
\textsuperscript{162} Lane, 2942.
\textsuperscript{163} Pickthall, 22.
demonstrating that being witnesses to other people and receiving witness from the messenger is the role of a “middle nation.”

In Arabic *shahīd*, translated by Pickthall as “witness,” more specifically means a person “possessing much knowledge with respect to external things.”\(^{164}\) The preposition following *shahīd* is ‘*alā*, translated as “against” by Pickthall, may also be rendered “in opposition to.”\(^{165}\) In summary the Qur’anic phrase in a more detailed interpretation reads: “Thus We have appointed you a middle [religious community], that ye may be [persons possessing much knowledge with respect to external things] [in opposition to] mankind, and that the messenger may be a [person possessing much knowledge with respect to external things] [in opposition to] you.”

From this detailed interpretation, it is clear that “middle” or *wasaṭān* should imply a reciprocal role for the religious community; its “middle” role indicates that it gives and receives knowledge of external matters, and so must conform itself according to the messenger’s knowledge, and also reform others by way of its own knowledge.

From the information above, I offer my interpretation of ‘*ummatan wasaṭān* as “reforming and conforming religious community,” a mediating influence in its social environment. So, while Lane offers the interpretation of accusative adjective *wasaṭān* as “conforming; conformable,” I suggest that it is significant to express that the action was reciprocal for the religious community. Its “middle” role rested on its crucial position as appointed reformer of society and conformer to Scripture.

\(^{164}\) Lane, Book I 1610.

\(^{165}\) Lane, 1609.
Muhammad and his followers struggled to come to a peaceful understanding with the People of the Scripture in Medina for 18 months. With the constant contradicting truth-claims between the People of the Scripture and Muhammad’s group in Medina came the self-referential name ḥanīf to describe his followers who were monotheists but not Jews or Christians. This was a period of active opposition yet Muhammad’s followers continued to live at the mercy of People of the Scripture and in pursuit of a peaceful resolution to their religious division.

Gibb writes on the ḥunafā’ that “such communities certainly existed in Arabia…independently of the organized churches and hence ‘heretical’ in their eyes.” So “heretic” may also be used to translate ḥanīf; and so it is similar to the Hebraic root meaning “heretic,” yet should not be understood as an accusation of disbelief, but rather as “one who maintains opinions upon any subject at variance with those generally received or considered authoritative.” He goes on to point out that while this group appeared in a Jewish or Christian environment, the discourse of Qur’anic verses that appear from the era contiguous with the hijra period, and for our purpose those concurrent with the use of ḥanīf:

“seem to be an almost deliberate avoidance of the distinctive confessional elements of either Judaism or

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166 Rubin, 403.

Christianity, and an emphasis on the basic themes of a monotheistic faith divorced from both the rival creeds.”

Gibb adds that when considering the categories of Arabian monotheism, one must “leave room for an intermediate group or groups.” He cites Arab traditional sources which attribute the “bitter rivalry” between religious groups in Arabia to imperial powers neighboring the peninsula which encouraged conflict between groups. Gibb writes that such competition “could well have been good reason for a native monotheistic movement in Arabia to seek an independent middle course,” citing the ‘ummatan wasaṭān of Qur’anic verse 2:143.

Discussing the ’umma of the ḥunafā’, Denny writes that ḥanīf is a crucial term in qualifying the ’umma of Muhammad, and even the Qur’anic perception of believers from Abraham’s time. Denny describes the term ḥunafā’ as having “a kind of religio-communal dimension to it…one which in its very essence seems to reflect purposeful spiritual and ritual activity.” Later in this chapter, I will discuss in detail the ritual aspects of al-ḥanīfiyya and their significance to the conforming and reforming role of the ḥanīf religious community.

In its temporal sense, the term wasaṭ may be “designating a subdivision of a culture … or historical period that is intermediate between two other subdivisions

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169 Gibb, 271.

170 Gibb, 277.

similarly named (called ‘Early’ and ‘Late’).”

So, behind its immediate action of conforming and reforming, the ḥunafā’ represented a group which was reacting to a hostile environment by conforming temporarily in order to attract people to its message, thereby also reforming society. This was the purpose of al-hanīfiyya within the development of Islam as one of several phases of the religion Muhammad preached. This phase emphasizes elements common to the three groups surrounding Muhammad, “so that men may have no argument against you [Muhammad] and so that I [God] may complete My grace upon you, and that ye may be guided.”

In the beginning of his mission in Mecca, adherence to or belief in Muhammad’s teaching did not necessarily mark one as a different, revolutionary or sectarian. It was a gradual process of schism, most often circumstances in which his followers were forced to secede. Al-hanīfiyya was an attempt at mitigating the oncoming schism.

The earliest name applied to those who took up Muhammad’s message was the term mu’minūn, “believers,” and occurs with more frequency in the Qur’an, totaling 179 times. Along with this name was another term, at-tazakkī, principally used to describe the religious and moral practices of Muhammad’s group, occurring in (Q 20:76/78; 35:18/19; 79:18; 80:3,7; 87:14; 92:18). The word does not occur in participle form, but rather as verb tazakkā and verbal noun al-tazakkī. The term may connote other practices of righteousness and morality, but is most often translated to mean “to purify oneself,” “to give alms,” “to purify by almsgiving.” Watt infers from the Qur’anic contexts in which


173 Q 2:150 ﴿لَّلّ يَكُونَ لِلنَّاسِ عَلَيْكُمْ حُجَّةٌ إِِّ وَمِنْ حَيْثُ خَرَجْتُ فَوَلِّ وَجْهَكَ شَطْرَ الْمَسْجِدِ الْحَرَامِ وَحَيْثُ مَا كُنتُمْ فَوَلُّوا وُجُهَكُمْ شَطْرَهُ لِئَلَّا يَخْشَوْهُمْ وَاخْشَوْنِي وَلأُِتِمَّ نِعْمَتِي عَلَيْكُمْ وَلأُهْتَدُونَ﴾ 

الذين ظلموا منهم فلا تطمعوا منهم واعفونو ولأنتم فائقون عليكم ولكلكم نبتذلون
the verb tazakka is used that the meaning did not imply conversion of any sort, and more likely speaks to simply taking up the practice of almsgiving or righteous behavior. He names this very early period “the period of passive opposition” in which Muhammad plays the role of the nādhīr “warner.”

_Sūrat Quraysh_ (Q 106) is an early Meccan chapter in the Qur’an that addresses specifically the Quraysh tribe, the rulers of the Ka’ba and of Mecca. This sūrah is traditionally conceived of as the latter half of _Sūrat Al-Fīl_, reminding the Quraysh of their miraculous deliverance from an attack by the Christian ruler of Yemen, Abraha, who brought with him elephants in order to ruin the structure of the Ka’ba. The Ka’ba and the city’s welfare were preserved as the attack failed. This deliverance is recalled and in the proceeding _Sūrat_ 106, the Quraysh are told to “worship the Lord of this House (Ka’ba)” for the protection from hunger and safety from fear they receive during their seasonal journeys.

These two chapters are an example of the malleable message that first came to the Meccans. The message was not revolutionary, but rather a call to pay gratitude for the miracles and blessings the Quraysh tribe had already received. The message is centered around the Ka’ba and on the bountiful blessings surrounding it and its protectors, the Quraysh. It is homage to the prosperity of the tribe which is given by “the Lord of this House”. There is no call to change religion or to worship that which they had never

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174 Watt _Early Islam_, 34-38.
175 Q 160:3
176 Pickthall, 733.
worshipped. The Quraysh already worshiped the Lord of the Ka'ba, but as we know adored other idols within it and associated other gods with His worship.\footnote{Watt \textit{Early Islam}, 34-38.}

\textit{Sūrat al-Quraysh} states that the \textit{hijra} was instituted for the ‘īlāf, “protection, covenant…which they obtained when they went forth on mercantile expeditions, and whereby they became secure,” of the Quraysh tribe which ruled the Ka'ba. Lane writes that this protection was provided to the Quraysh due to their position as guardians of Mecca and though they travelled for provisions into other kingdoms, such as that of the Greeks, “when any cause of mischief occurred to them, they said, ‘We are people of a scared territory,’” and no one opposed them.\footnote{Lane, Book I 79.}

The importance of the Ka’ba is emphasized within the ḥanīf discourse for its legendary past as Abraham’s house, a symbol vital to the Arab tribes’ safety and sustenance. \textit{Al-ḥanīfiyya} was a religion which conformed to social norms by exaggerating the significance of the Ka’ba in Scriptural and tribal discourse, meanwhile it reformed society by furthering the mercantile prosperity of the powerful Arab tribes by way of extending the religious reverence of Mecca to the communities of People of the Scripture.

Immediately before the \textit{hijra}, the Meccan families of Muhammad’s followers had begun to interfere with the religious practices and lives of those family members, including imprisoning the individual or preventing their prayer. At the same time, Muhammad lost clan protection in Mecca and, as reflected in \textit{Sūrat al-Kāfūrūn} (109) and \textit{al-Ikhlāš} (112), the end of his relationship with the Quraysh also spelled the end of the social neutrality of Muhammad’s group. Around this period the followers of Muhammad
are described as following a dīn, religion or code of conduct. Following Muhammad now marked a great change for a person’s way of life.\(^{179}\)

Around two years following the hijra and after the Battle of Badr, Muhammad’s army made significant victories against the Meccans on the battlefield and showed promise for future success and independence. Following this year, the terms muslim and islām were first known as appellations of the religion of Muhammad, who up until then were known as mu’minūn or hunafā’. Muslim and islām until that point had been used to evoke the literal sense of the words, “those who have submitted” and “submission,” and were not be used as proper nouns until after 2 A.H..\(^{180}\)

Shortly after that period, revealed in 3 A.H., Sūrat al-‘Imrān verses 3:64-65, 67\(^{181}\) appeal for a compromise between Muhammad’s group and the People of the Scripture (Jews and Christians):

(3:64) Say: O People of the Scripture! Come to an agreement between us and you: that we shall worship none but Allah, and that we shall ascribe no partner unto Him, and that none of us shall take others for lords beside Allah. And if they turn away, then say: Bear witness that we are they who have surrendered (unto Him).

(3:65) O People of the Scripture! Why will ye argue about Abraham, when the Torah and the Gospel were not revealed till after him? Have ye then no sense?

(3:67) Abraham was not a Jew, nor yet a Christian; but he was [hanīfān], and he was not of the idolaters.\(^{182}\)

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\(^{179}\) Lapidus, 99.

\(^{180}\) Watt, Early Islam 34-38.

\(^{181}\) Q 3:64 فَلْنَّ أَأَهْلَ الْكِتَابِ تَخَالُوا إِلَى كَلِمَةٍ سَوَاءٍ بَيْنَنَا وَبَيْنَكُمْ أَلَّا تَتَّخِذَ بَعْضُكُمْ بَعْضًا أَرْبَابًا مِّن دُونِ اللَّهُِّ وَلَّ يَتَّخِذُوا بَعْضًا بَعْضًا قُلْ يَا أَهْلَ الْكِتَابِ

Q 3:65 تَعَقِّلُونَ يَا أَهْلَ الْكِتَابِ لِمَ تُحَاجُّونَ فِي إِبْرَاهِيمَ وَمَا أُنزِلَتِ التَّوْرَاةُ وَالِْْنجِيلُ إِلَّّ مِن بَعْدِهِ أَفَلَّيْنَّ أَتَتَّجَهُ بِمَا لَمْ تَحْذَرُكُمْ بِهِ مِنُّهُ؟

Q 3:67 يَا أَهْلَ الْكِتَابِ لِمَ تُحَاجُّونَ فِي إِبْرَاهِيمَ وَمَا أُنزِلَتِ التَّوْرَاةُ وَالِْْنجِيلُ إِلَّّ مِن بَعْدِهِ أَفَلَّيْنَّ أَتَتَّجَهُ بِمَا لَمْ تَحْذَرُكُمْ بِهِ؟

Q 3:65 وَمَا كَانَ إِبْرَاهِيمُ بَيْهُدِيًا وَلَا نَصْرَانِيًا وَلَكِنْ كَانَ حَنِيفًا مَّسْلِمًا وَمَا كَانَ مِنْ النَّحْرِينِ

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69
Here the position of Abraham as a monotheist who believed before the revelation of the Torah and Gospel is emphasized and the name ḥanīf is applied to him for that reason. In the verses which immediately follow (Q 3:68-69), there are hints of the conflict which occurred in Medina over ownership of the figure of Abraham and also over the religious persuasion of Muhammad’s followers:

(3:68) Lo! those of mankind who have the best claim to Abraham are those who followed him, and this Prophet and those who believe (with him); and Allah is the Protecting Guardian of the believers.

(3:69) A party of the People of the Scripture long to make you go astray; and they make none to go astray except themselves, but they perceive not.

(3:75) Among the People of the Scripture there is he who, if thou trust him with a weight of treasure, will return it to thee. And among them there is he who, if thou trust him with a piece of gold, will not return it to thee unless thou keep standing over him. That is because they say: We have no duty to the Gentiles [‘ummiyīn]. They speak a lie concerning Allah knowingly.

On verse 3:68, Ibn Kathīr explains "those who are most deserving of following Abraham are those who follow his religion [dīn]." While “Abraham’s religion” could refer specifically to the discourse on Abraham in the verse at hand, it could also point to the real-world religion al-ḥanīfiyya which pre-dated Islam in the Arabian Peninsula and

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182 Pickthall, 55-56.
183 Q 3:68 إن أولى الناس بإبراهيم لذئذ الْبَيْغَةَ وَهَذَا الْبَيْتِ وَالذُّينَ آمَنُوا وَاللٰهُ وَلِيُّ المؤمنين
Q 3:69 وَدَّت طائفة من أهله الكتاب لم يََُّسْلُونَكَ وَمَا يَسْلُونَ إِلَّا أنفسهم وما يَشْعُرونَ
Q 3:75 وَمَن أهله الكتاب من إن تأمله بِقَطْنٍ يَؤَدَّهَ إِلَيْكَ إِلَّا ما ذََٰلِكَ يََّلِدُونَ وَمَن أهله الكتاب معَهَ في الأُمِّيِّينَ يَتََوَّلُونَ على الله الْكَبْرَاء وَهُمْ يَغْلُونَ
184 Pickthall, 56.
185 Ibn Kathīr, 225.
claimed its origin to be Abraham and his descendents from Ishmael.\textsuperscript{186} In this case, it should be pointed out that the claim to Abraham is not purely for justification of belief, but also functions as an assertion of Abrahamic ethnicity, as the Arabs allege to be the descendents of Ishmael, Abraham’s son of Hagar.\textsuperscript{187} This argument would have been crucial in challenging the authority of the Jewish tribes because claiming Abraham’s religion and direct lineage circumvents the authority of Judaism as the oldest monotheistic religion in Arabia, and shows that “although the Arabs (who according to legend are descended from Abraham) have fallen away [from monotheism], their archetypal model still beckons.”\textsuperscript{188}

Verse Q 3:75 is significant because it demonstrates negotiation with the People of the Scripture. The verse stresses that there are trustworthy believers among the Jews and Christians. It cautions however that some of them are untrustworthy, and that these do not feel any obligation of truthfulness to the “‘\textit{ummīyīn},” translated by Pickthall as “Gentiles.” Lane defines the adjective in its singular form ‘\textit{ummī} as:

“[a relative noun from ‘\textit{umma}, and thus properly meaning Gentile: whence in a secondary sense, a heathen:] one not having a revealed scripture, so applied by those having a revealed scripture, [and particularly] an Arab…one who is in the natural condition of the nation to which he belongs in respect of not writing, or not having learned writing; thus remaining in his natural state…as his mother brought him forth; …

\footnotesize


Mohammad was termed ‘*ummī* [meaning A Gentile, as distinguished from an Israelite…] because the nation (‘*umma*) of the Arabs did not write.’

This passage reveals that the Qur’anic ‘*ummī* may be used to understand the more enigmatic meaning of *hanīf*. While the two are not completely synonymous, the terms share very similar connotations. Both are used by people with scripture to designate one without scripture, the two refer specifically to a non-Israelite ethnicity and, for the purposes of interpretation, both are found in usages which are translated into English as “Gentile” and “heathen.”

The majority of *hanīf* occurrences in the Qur’an occur in dialogue with the People of the Scripture. Judaic and Christian authority is circumvented in verses Q 123-25 of *Sūrat An-Nisā’* (4 A.H.) utilizing Abrahamic discourse to set precedent in matters of the afterlife:

(4:123) It [entrance to paradise] will not be in accordance with your desires, nor the desires of the People of the Scripture. He who doeth wrong will have the recompense thereof, and will not find against Allah any protecting friend or helper.

189 Lane, Book I 92.


191 For the case of *hanīf*, usage in this sense is found in its Syriac root, see Payne Smith, 149.


193 Q لَيْسَ بِأَمَانِيِّكُمْ وَلَا أَمَانِيِّ أَهْلِ الْكِتَابِ مَن يَعْمَلْ سُوءًا يُجْزَ بِهِ وَلَّ يُظْلَمُونَ نَقِيرًا Q وَمَن يَعْمَلْ مِنَ الصَّالِحَاتِ مِن ذَكَرٍ إِبْرَاهِيمَ خَلِيلً Q وَمَنْ أَحْسَنُ دِينًا مِّمَّنْ أَسْلَمَ وَجْهَهُ لِلَّهِ وَهُوَ مُحْسِنٌ وَاتَّبَعَ مِلَّةَ إِبْرَاهِيمَ حَنِيفًا والْحَدَّاثُ اللَّهُ إِنَّهُ خَيْمَةً
(4:124) And whoso doeth good works, whether of male or female, and he (or she) is a believer, such will enter paradise and they will not be wronged the dint in a date-stone.

(4:125) Who is better in religion than he who surrendereth his purpose to Allah while doing good (to men) and followeth the tradition of Abraham [ḥanīfān]? Allah (Himself) chose Abraham for friend.194

Ibn Kathīr narrates on the first verse that it is “a reminder to us that the Muslims and the People of the Scripture boasted, and the People of the Scripture said: ‘Our Prophet is before your Prophet, and our Book is before your Book, so we are the first before you in God.’ And the Muslims said: ‘We are the first before you in God, and our Prophet is the seal [ḥātim] of the Prophets, and our Book passes judgment against the Books that were before it.’ So God sent down [verse Q 4:123].” 195

Abraham’s faith in One God before any revealed Scripture abrogates any claim of definitive scriptural or prophetic authority, which all communities in his narration wished to use for their own benefit. This hadīth explains that the verse Q 2:123, “It [entrance to paradise] will not be in accordance with your desires,” addresses Muhammad and his followers. They, along with the other People of the Scripture, had begun to boast and differ “only after knowledge came unto them, through transgression among themselves,” (Q 3:19)196 forgetting the religious precedent set through Abraham’s monotheism. The hadīth echoes the message from verse Q 3:19, which in the codex of Ibn Mas‘ūd holds the occurrence of al-hanīfiyya, naming it “the religion with Allah.”197 198

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194 Pickthall, 92.


196 Q 3:19

197 Pickthall, 50.

198
This section has expounded on hanîf functioning as both a convergent and divergent discursive force between Muhammad’s group and the surrounding People of the Scripture and the other Arabs. The discourse surrounding the Qur’anic hanîf is centered on the figure of Abraham as progenitor of the Arabs and archetypal monotheist. “The Qur’an’s claim of affinity to Abraham was in effect a denial of dependence on, or derivation from, either Judaism or Christianity,” while it simultaneously embedded itself into the same tradition it opposed.  

This twofold position which denies and accepts the veracity of the greater monotheistic tradition defines the role of al-hanîfiyya as a reforming and conforming religious community within Arabian society and within its autonomous religious trajectory.

The hunafâ’ characterized as Gentiles represents only part of the signification of the Qur’anic hanîf. I infer from the Qur’anic occurrences to follow that there were theological and ritual connotations that colored the term al-hanîfiyya as well.

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**The Rituals of Al-Ḥanîfiyya**

In this section on the ritual aspects of al-hanîfiyya, I point out that hanîf, while signifying a Gentile in opposition to the People of the Scripture, connoted a specific population of Gentiles who practiced certain rituals of faith framed within a discourse in refutation of Mosaic Law, resembling Paul’s arguments against the supremacy of Jewish Law in Romans.

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198 See Jeffery *Materials*, 32.

Revealed in 3 to 4 A.H. verses Q 3:93-98 reads, concerning dietary laws and pilgrimage:

(3:93) All food was lawful unto the Children of Israel, save that which Israel forbade himself, (in days) before the Torah was revealed. Say: Produce the Torah and read it (unto us) if ye are truthful.

(3:95) Say: Allah speaketh truth. So follow the religion of Abraham, [hanīfān]. He was not of the idolaters.

(3:96) Lo! the first Sanctuary [bait] appointed for mankind was that at Becca [Mecca], a blessed place, a guidance to the peoples;

(3:97) Wherein are plain memorials (of Allah's guidance); the place where Abraham stood up to pray; and whosoever entereth it is safe. And pilgrimage to the House [hajj al-bait] is a duty unto Allah for mankind, for him who can find a way thither. As for him who disbelieveth, (let him know that) lo! Allah is Independent of (all) creatures.

(3:98) Say, "O People of the Scripture, why do you disbelieve in the verses of Allah while Allah is Witness over what you do?"

These verses about ritual utilize a discourse centered on Abraham and his legendary status as founder of the Ka'ba. Jewish dietary restrictions are confronted within the Abrahamic discourse, abrogating the strict dietary restrictions practiced by the Israelites.

In Sūrat An-Nahl, generally regarded as a late Meccan chapter, verses 16:114-25 contain two occurrences of ḥanīf. The first occurrence addresses the dietary

Q 3:93: كل الطعام كان حلالًا لبني إسرائيل إلا ما حرم إسرائيل على نفسه من قبلي أن تنص الله في التوراة فقلوا بالتوراة فاتولوها إن كنتم الصادقين

Q 3:95: قل صدق الله فاتولوا متى إبراهيم حنيفًا وما كان من المشركين

Q 3:96: إن أول بيت وضع للناس الذي بعده ممادًا وهدى للعالمين

Q 3:97: فيه أين بنيت مقام إبراهيم ومن دخلة كان آمنًا ورده إلى الناس حق البيت من استطاع إليه سبيلًا ومن كفر فإن الله غفورٌ رحيم

Q 3:98: قل يا أهل الكتاب لم تقنعون بابات الله وأنا شهيد على ما تناصروه

200 Q 16:114: دعون فكلوا مما رزقكم الله وحشوا الخنزير ومن كفر فإن الله غفورٌ رحيم

201 Pickthall, 59.

202 Q 16:115: إنما حرم عليكم الميتة والدم ولحم الخنزير وما أهل بغير الله به فمن ضرب أسيح بغير الله عذاب ولا عذاب فإن الله غفورٌ رحيم.
restrictions of the *hanîf* in contrast to the dietary restrictions of the Jews, and the second occurrence discounts the necessity of the Sabbath for the *hanîf*:

(16:114) So eat of the lawful and good food which Allah hath provided for you, and thank the bounty of your Lord if it is Him ye serve.

(16:115) He hath forbidden for you only carrion and blood and swineflesh and that which hath been immolated in the name of any other than Allah; but he who is driven thereto, neither craving nor transgressing, lo! then Allah is Forgiving, Merciful.

(16:116) And speak not, concerning that which your own tongues qualify (as clean or unclean), the falsehood: "This is lawful, and this is forbidden," so that ye invent a lie against Allah. Lo! those who invent a lie against Allah will not succeed.

(16:118) And unto those who are Jews We have forbidden that which We have already related unto thee. And We wronged them not, but they were wont to wrong themselves.

(16:120) Lo! Abraham was a nation obedient to Allah, [*hanîfân*], and he was not of the idolaters;

(16:121) Thankful for His bounties; He chose him and He guided him unto a straight path.

(16:123) And afterward We inspired thee (Muhammad, saying): Follow the religion of Abraham, [*hanîfân*]. He was not of the idolaters.

(16:124) The Sabbath was appointed only for those who differed concerning it, and lo! thy Lord will judge between them on the Day of Resurrection concerning that wherein they used to differ.

(16:125) Call unto the way of thy Lord with wisdom and fair exhortation, and reason with them [People of the Scripture] in the better way. Lo! thy
Lord is Best Aware of him who strayeth from His way, and He is Best Aware of those who go aright.\(^{203}\)

At the concluding verse of these laws for the hanîf, the time period of this revelation becomes obvious from the positive and encouraging tone which the Qur’an takes concerning debates with the Jews. As I showed earlier to be common to the Meccan verses which is less notable in Medinan verses, Muhammad is instructed to reason with the Jews, as *al-ḥanîfiyya* is described as sharing some dietary restrictions with Jewish law, while it also establishes a clear break in ritual with Jewish tradition. This is yet another example of the conforming and reforming attempted by the religious community of the ḥunafā’.

Believed to be revealed at Medina, *Sūrat al-Ḥajj* verses 22:25-34\(^{204}\) speak of the pilgrimage to Mecca as a ritual of the hanîf, as well as some mention of dietary restriction. The word “ritual” *mansak* (also meaning pilgrimage, sacrifice, ceremony) in the final verse is used expressly to refer to the instated practices of *al- hanîfiyya*:

\(^{203}\) Pickthall, 275-76.

\(^{204}\) Q 22:25 ِّبِإِلْحَادٍ بِظُلْمٍ نَ عَن سَبِيلِ اللهَِّ وَالْمَسْجِدِ الْحَرَامِ الَّذِي جَعَلْنَاهُ لِلنَّاسِ سَوَاءً الْعَاكِفُ فِيهِ وَالْبَادِ وَمَن يُرِدْ إِنَّ الَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا وَيُشْرِكُونَ عِنْ سَبِيلِ اللهِِّ فَلْيَتَّخِذُوا مَنَافِعًا مِّن شَكْرٍ عَلَى رَبِّهِمْ.

Q 22:26 َٰبْيِّنَ فِي النَّاسِ بِالْحَجِّ يَأْتُوكَ رِجَالٌ يَأْتِينَ مِن كُلِّ فَجٍّ عَمِيقٍ إِذْ بَوَّأْنَا لِِْبْرَاهِيمَ مَكَانَ الْبَيْتِ أَن لَّهُ مَسْجِدٌ مَّعْلُومٌ إِلَّا لِيَشْهَدُهُ مَنَافِعًا لَهُمْ وَيَرِيَ صِفُّ الْمُؤَمِّنَاتِ وَيَرِيَ صِفُّ الْمُؤَمِّنَاتِ وَيَكُونَ مِنْ أَيْامٍ مَّعْلُومَاتٍ عَلَىَٰ مَا رَزَقَهُم مِّن بَهِيمَةِ الأَْنْعَامِ فَكُلُوا مِنْهَا وَأَطْعِمُ مَنْ فِي الْجَمَاعَةِ وَالْحَجِّ إِنَّ الَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا وَيُشْرِكُونَ عِنْ سَبِيلِ اللهِِّ ذَٰلِكَ وَمَن يُعَظِّمْ حُرُمَاتِ اللهَِّ فَهُوَ خَيْرٌ لَّهُ عِندَ رَبِّهِ وَأُحِلَّتْ لَكُمُ الأَْنْعَامُ إِلَّا مَا يُتْلَٰى عَلَى النَّاسِ.*

Q 22:27 َٰيَٰ عَلَيْكُمْ فَاجْتَنِبُوا الرِّجْسَ مِنَ الأَْوْثَانِ وَاجْتَنِبُوا قَوْلَ ذََٰلِكَ وَمَن يُعَظِّمْ حُرُمَاتِ اللهَِّ فَهُوَ خَيْرٌ لَّهُ عِندَ رَبِّهِ وَأُحِلَّتْ لَكُمُ الأَْنْعَامُ إِلَّا مَا يُتْلَٰى عَلَى النَّاسِ.*

Q 22:28 َٰثُمَّ لْيَقُِْوا تَفَثَهُمْ وَلْيُوفُوا نُذُورَهُمْ وَلْيَطَّوَّفُوا بِالْبَيْتِ الْعَتِيقِ وَأَذِّن فِي النَّاسِ بِالْحَجِّ يَأْتُوكَ رِجَالٌ يَأْتِينَ مِن كُلِّ فَجٍّ عَمِيقٍ إِذْ بَوَّأْنَا لِِْبْرَاهِيمَ مَكَانَ الْبَيْتِ أَن لَّهُ مَسْجِدٌ مَّعْلُومٌ إِلَّا لِيَشْهَدُهُ مَنَافِعًا لَهُمْ وَيَرِيَ صِفُّ الْمُؤَمِّنَاتِ وَيَرِيَ صِفُّ الْمُؤَمِّنَاتِ وَيَكُونَ مِنْ أَيْامٍ مَّعْلُومَاتٍ عَلَىَٰ مَا رَزَقَهُم مِّن بَهِيمَةِ الأَْنْعَامِ فَكُلُوا مِنْهَا وَأَطْعِمُ مَنْ فِي الْجَمَاعَةِ وَالْحَجِّ إِنَّ الَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا وَيُشْرِكُونَ عِنْ سَبِيلِ اللهِِّ ذَٰلِكَ وَمَن يُعَظِّمْ حُرُمَاتِ اللهَِّ فَهُوَ خَيْرٌ لَّهُ عِندَ رَبِّهِ وَأُحِلَّتْ لَكُمُ الأَْنْعَامُ إِلَّا مَا يُتْلَٰى عَلَى النَّاسِ.*
(22: 25) Lo! those who disbelieve and bar (men) from the way of Allah and from the Inviolable Place of Worship, which We have appointed for mankind together, the dweller therein and the nomad: whosoever seeketh wrongful partiality therein, him We shall cause to taste a painful doom.

(22: 26) And (remember) when We prepared for Abraham the place of the (holy) House, saying: Ascribe thou no thing as partner unto Me, and purify My House for those who make the round (thereof) and those who stand and those who bow and make prostration.

(22: 27) And proclaim unto mankind the pilgrimage. They will come unto thee on foot and on every lean camel; they will come from every deep ravine,

(22: 28) That they may witness things that are of benefit to them, and mention the name of Allah on appointed days over the beast of cattle that He hath bestowed upon them. Then eat thereof and feed therewith the poor unfortunate.

(22: 29) Then let them make an end of their unkemptness and pay their vows and go around the ancient House.

(22: 30) That (is the command). And whoso magnifieth the sacred things of Allah, it will be well for him in the sight of his Lord. The cattle are lawful unto you save that which hath been told you. So shun the filth of idols, and shun lying speech,

(22: 31) [Hunafā’] unto Allah (only), not ascribing partners unto Him; for whoso ascribeth partners unto Allah, it is as if he had fallen from the sky and the birds had snatched him or the wind had blown him to a far-off place.

(22: 34) And for every nation have We appointed a ritual [mansak], that they may mention the name of Allah over the beast of cattle that He hath given them for food; and your god is One God, therefore surrender unto Him. And give good tidings (O Muhammad) to the humble.205

The verses narrate in detail the prescribed practices of the hunafā’ when performing the pilgrimage, which is said to be practiced first by Abraham at the Ka’ba. An abundance of pilgrims is promised for the Arab tribes who proclaim the pilgrimage of Abraham, and the verses detail the state of cleanliness in which pilgrims should be to perform the rite, as well as the manner in which sacrifices should be offered.

205 Pickthall, 341-42.
An example of the conforming and reforming actions of *al-ḥanīfiyya*, establishing a *ḥarām*, a shared sanctuary, like the *Kaʿba* permitted for worship, trade, and social and political negotiations to take place in peaceful surroundings between otherwise opposed communities. Until Muhammad and his Companions take back Mecca while perform their *ḥajj*, the Quraysh continued to control Mecca although the city had become host to something other than tribal organization. Features of tribal coalitions mingled with the monotheistic groups’ religious collective fidelities around the place of the *Kaʿba*, allowing Mecca to only increase commercial and civil order in western and northern Arabia under *al-ḥanīfiyya* by maintaining the covenant which brought them immunity from foreign discrimination when travelling. The annual religious pilgrimage at Mecca and other places of pilgrimage, which brought a great number tribes of the peninsula together to worship in a common space also brought about consciousness of common religious beliefs, and these sites of pilgrimage embodied a growing awareness that the custom of each community held something in common with the surrounding communities. Ritualistic pilgrimage to Mecca signals an appreciation for the collective identity of monotheists transcending the individual clan, all the while maintaining Mecca’s stability and source of sustenance.206

Although *al-ḥanīfiyya* purported dietary restrictions similar to those of the Jewish tribes, it distinguished itself by rejecting the Sabbath day and much of Jewish law. *Al-ḥanīfiyya* also called for pilgrimage to the *Kaʿba* at Mecca in the tradition of Abraham, which ensured continued prosperity for the Arab tribes while incorporating the People of the Scripture into the ritual. This inclusion of all monotheists in one ritual supported yet

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206 Lapidus, 49-70.
reshaped the existing power structures in Mecca and Medina, an example of the role of *al-hanīfiyya* as a reforming and conforming religious community attempting to unite the various communities into one monotheistic unit.

The following section addresses a Meccan chapter which outlines the theological foundation of *al-hanīfiyya* as humankind’s natural state created by God. It is one of the earliest occurrences of *hanīf* in the Qur’an and offers insight into the beliefs of *al-hanīfiyya* as a self-contained belief system rather than one only existing in contrast with other religious creeds.

**The Ḥanīf Fitra**

*Sūrat Ar-Rūm* is a middle Meccan chapter which expounds on the nature of God and his creation, addressing a wide range of natural miracles such as rain which revives the earth, passing away of generations, varying languages and colors of humans, the earth and sky and the cyclical pattern of each life. Verses 30:30-32\(^7\) sets up a discussion of *hanīf* within the larger discourse of God’s Natural Law:

(30: 30) So set thy purpose (O Muhammad) for religion [*ḥanīfān* - the nature (framed) [*FITRA*] of Allah, in which He hath created man. There is no altering (the laws of) Allah's creation. That is the right religion, but most men know not -

(30: 31) Turning unto Him (only); and be careful of your duty unto Him and establish worship, and be not of those who ascribe partners (unto Him);

\(^7\) Q 30: 30

لِكَ الدِّينُ الْقَيِّمُ وَلََٰكِنَّ أَكْثَرَ النَّاسِ لَّ يَعْلَمُونَ

فَأَقِمْ وَجْهَكَ لِلدِّينِ حَنِيفًا فِطْرَتَ اللهَِّ الَّتِي فَطَرَ النَّاسَ عَلَيْهَا لَّ تَبْدِيلَ لِخَلْقِ اللهَِّ ذََٰلِكَ الْقَدْرُ عَلَيْهِ وَلَكِنَّ أَكْثَرَ النَّاسِ لَّ يَلْبَمُونَ

Q 30: 31

مُنِيبِينَ إِلَيْهِ وَاتَّقُوهُ وَأَقِيمُوا الصَّلَّةَ وَلَّ تَكُونُوا مِنَ الْمُشْرِكِينَ

Q 30: 32

يْهِمْ فَرِحُونَ منَ الَّذِينَ فَرَّقُوا دِينَهُمْ وَكَانُوا شِيَعًا كُلُّ حِزْبٍ بِمَا لَدَ
(30: 32) Of those who split up their religion [farraqū dīnahum] and became schismatics [sh’iān], each sect [ḥizb] exulting in its tenets.

This verse is unique in the understanding it provides of the theological underpinnings of al-ḥanīfiyya as a religion. Verse Q 30:32 frames ḥanīf within a context condemning the divisive sects within the greater monotheistic community, but surrounding this occurrence of ḥanīf one finds an argument supporting al-ḥanīfiyya which deals closely with the concept of fiṭra.

Fiṭra is defined by Lane as “the natural constitution with which a child is created in his mother’s womb…it is said to have this signification in Kur. xxx. 29… nature; constitution, innate or original disposition; the faculty of knowing God, with which He has created mankind.”

This term is key to understanding the way in which the hunafā’ perceived their own religion. It was conceived of as a natural religion, a spiritual pattern on which every soul is fashioned. Deviation from this innate ḥanīf disposition results in sectarianism, taking one’s religion to be defined by that which sets it apart from other religions “exulting in its tenets.”

This prototypical self-perception is the theological foundation of al-ḥanīfiyya which created the culture of the ḥanīf era that sought to revert, rather than convert, the surrounding monotheists to what it proposed to be a natural religion, one of belief in One God and pious deeds, simply. It opposed division of the believing monotheistic community. Muhammad’s message called for a reunification of believers returning to the inborn human fiṭra.

208 Lane, Book I 2416.
Conclusion

Within tradition, *al-hanifiyya* is one aspect of Islam often cited in support of the concept of religious tolerance prevalent in the early periods of revelation. Two prominent *ḥadīth* on the topic read: “‘Let (the) Jews know that in our religion there is latitude; I was sent with the *ṣahma* (magnanimous) *hanīfiyya,*” and: “‘The religion most beloved to Allah is the *ṣahma* (magnanimous) *hanīfiyya.’” The Arabic word *ṣahma* used in these *aḥadīth* are of the same root as *tasāmuḥ* or *samāḥa,* the modern Arabic words used to mean “tolerance.” Because of this *al-hanifiyya* may support the notion that, as a “middle nation,” Muhammad’s early message conformed to other religions in the Arabian tribal and monotheistic societies.

The Arabian Peninsula did not evolve out of polytheistic idol worship of the “pagan” Arabs, but at the conception of Muhammad’s mission the peninsula was quite possibly inhabited by many who considered themselves monotheists, a historical reality of the religious ambience of mid-millennium Arabia. By the period of Muhammad’s revelations, monotheism already had a relatively strong presence in Arabia, which indicates that Muhammad’s message would naturally be framed with a larger monotheistic tradition. From the information that I presented, one may paint an image

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209 Friedmann, 1-2.

210 See Q 2:135, 143, 144.
of the social environment of Arabia and Mecca, specifically around the era of Qur’anic revelation, concluding that millata `Ibrahīma hanīf “the religion of Abraham the hanīf” represented in its time ‘ummatan wasaṭan, “a middle nation” mediating and offering resolution to the quarrels between Mecca’s monotheists, facing masjid al-ḥarām, the Kaʿba in prayer as a symbol of the common ancestral and social values of the People of the Scripture as well as the tribal Arabs.\textsuperscript{211}

The social environment out of which al-ḥanīfiyya took shape was a context distinguished from a completely tribal or purely sedentary society. The interactions between mingling religions allowed for the formation of the conflating theology of al-ḥanīfiyya, highlighted in the “transcendental trends…the idea of Allah itself” encompassed in verse Q 30:30’s discussion of the ḥanīfīṭra. The textual, highly elaborated and exclusive beliefs of the Christian and Jewish groups are negated through the Abrahamic ḥanīf discourse. Meccans who accepted al-ḥanīfiyya were in a position to reconcile conflicting theologies rather than simply remain alienated from their environment and justify “exclusive totalities.”\textsuperscript{212}

In Chapter Three, I recounted detailed sources which are accounts of al-ḥanīfiyya in practice. Al-ḥanīfiyya held an intermediary position between the Quraysh who ruled the Kaʿba and the Judaism and Christianity of Arabia which exerted strong influences as literate and politically significant communities. The familiar discourse which envisions al-ḥanīfiyya as a religion kindred to Christianity and Judaism hoped to incorporate the

\textsuperscript{211} See Q 2:135, 143, 144.

\textsuperscript{212} Bamyeh, 26.
People of the Scripture and the Arabs into one society united by one scriptural, ritual and theological foundation.

The theological model of *al-hanīfiyya* is heavily based on the concept of *fitra*, which states that *al-hanīfiyya* is humankind’s innate disposition in religion and any diversion from that is against human nature. In the Qur’anic and prophetic tradition one finds verses which resemble this verse of *hanīfī* poetry:

“In God’s sight at the resurrection every religion /
But that of the *hanīf* is doomed to perish”\(^{213}\)

In *hanīfī* poetry, pilgrimage rites are described, for example a beast wearing iron with its bare shoulders clothed, rituals of sacrifice observed at the *Ka’ba* before the time of Muhammad. The commonality of the *Ka’ba*’s mythical status at *bait ʿIbrāhīm* “the House of Abraham,” which emphasizes a shared religious and cultural icon became a symbol of social cohesion between the Quraysh and the Jewish tribes of Mecca.

“At a later stage, Muhammad was to vehemently capitalize on that point, for he envisioned Islam not only as a fraternal doctrine to the book of religions but also as a logical conclusion to a divine plan of historically progressive revelations leading to the true faith. Thus, such a conceptualization ascribed a unity to various traditions anchored upon the

\(^{213}\) cited in Rubin, 95.
same divine source while sharply distinguishing it from the profane practice of paganism.”\textsuperscript{214}

However, recall that it was sometimes fellow ḥunafā’ who challenged Muhammad’s call to al-ḥanīfiyya most strongly. It was reported that Umayya said “I know that the ḥanīfiyya is true, but I have my doubts concerning Muhammad.”\textsuperscript{215} It was Zayb bin ’Amīr who accused Muhammad saying: \textit{innaka adkhalta, ya muḥammad, fī l-ḥanīfiyya ma laysa minhā, “You have introduced, O’ Muhammad, into al-ḥanīfiyya things which do not belong to it.”}\textsuperscript{216} For this reason, one must allow for a ḥanīf identity which existed beyond Muhammad’s time.

A broad societal acceptance of an omnipotent, omniscient God who shared His dominion with no other was the theological mission of al-ḥanīfiyya. Corollary to this mission was the maintenance of Mecca’s vitality in the world and the successful social cohesion of the people inhabiting the region. In the scheme of events, focus would be taken away from past polemics and naturally the discourse of the religion would evolve to meet new demands and crises.

The theologically heterogeneous ḥanīfiyya that Muhammad preached would eventually cease to take a conforming role, and in fact it was nearly forced out of the position. It would eventually congeal and form its own standard of religion and society,\textsuperscript{217} uniting the region by way of instituted monotheistic beliefs into which subsequent generations would be born and have no intimate memory of its malleable and

\textsuperscript{214} Bamyeh, 98-99.

\textsuperscript{215} Rubin, 95.

\textsuperscript{216} Rubin, 89.

\textsuperscript{217} Donner, 93-95.
conformable past. It was ultimately Islam, “a code name for a full-fledged system, rather than Hanifism [al-hanīfiyya], that came to be referenced as the complete body of knowledge.”^218

From this perspective, it is clear that Islam went through many transitional periods, the more impactful resulting in a change of designation which would represent the new orientation of the religion. Al-hanīfiyya emerged in usage at a time when Muhammad’s group was a “middle nation” (Q 2:143) that attempted to mediate conflict between the Quraysh, itself, and the People of the Scripture so as to remedy the social disjuncture created by the introduction of new powerful monotheistic societies into tribal Arabia.

*Al-hanīfiyya* represents a dynamic religion essential to understanding the development of Islam as a religion that was formed in negotiation with its surroundings. The figure of Abraham is evoked in order to unite every single group involved in conflict with Muhammad under one ancestry, sharing as well a common reverence and pilgrimage to *bait Ibrāhīm*, the *Ka’ba*.

In addition to religious unity, Muhammad’s *hanīfiyya* sought to integrate the Arab clans and the People of the Scripture not belonging to Arab clans into a larger social confederacy based on religious devotion and brotherhood. This aimed to resolve the disagreement erupting between the traditional tribal society and the Jewish and Christian religious social structures.

^218^ Bamyeh, 99.
Al-ḥanīfiyya represents a precursor to Islam and presents itself theologically as a less revolutionary religious model built on decision-based commitment. It renounced neither sphere of influence – the Quraysh nor the People of the Scripture – but accommodated both through maintaining an emphasis on shared Abrahamic ancestry and the common pilgrimage site of the Kaʿba. A ḥanīf was a Gentile whose appointed role was to reform the disunited society around it and conform its own religious community to a just and moderate standard, as a “middle nation.”
References


Appendix A: Transcriptions of Occurrences of ḥ-n-f in Qur’an

Al-Baqarah (2:135) wa qālū kūnū hūdan ‘aw naṣārā tahtadū qul bal millata ‘ibrāhīma ḥanīfan wa mā kāna mina l-mušrikīn

‘Ālu ‘Imrān (3:67) mā kāna ‘ibrāhīmu yahūdiyyan wa lā naṣrāniyyan wa lākin kāna ḥanīfan musliman wa mā kāna mina l-mušrikīn

‘Ālu ‘Imrān (3:95) qul šadaqa llāhu fa ttabi ‘ū millata ‘ibrāhīma ḥanīfan wa mā kāna mina l-mušrikīn

Al-Nisā’ (4:125) wa ttabi’a millata ‘ibrāhīma ḥanīfan

Al-‘An’ām (6:161) ‘innī wajjahtu wajhī li lladhī faṭara s-samāwāti wa l-arḍa ḥanīfan wa mā āna mina l-mušrikīn

Yūnus (10:105) wa ‘ana ‘aqim wajhaka li d-dīni ḥanīfan wa lā takūnanna mina l-mušrikīn

An-Nahl (16:120) ‘inna ‘ibrāhīma kāna ‘ummatan qānitan li llāhi ḥanīfan wa lam yaku mina l-mušrikīn

An-Nahl (16:123) th’umma ‘awhaynā ‘ilayka ‘ani ttabi’ millata ‘ibrāhīma ḥanīfan wa mā kāna mina l-mušrikīn
Al-Ḥajj (22:31) ḥunafā‘a li llāhi ghayra muṣrikīna bihi

Ar-Rūm (30:30) fa ‘aqim wajhaka li d-dīni ḥanīfan fiṭrata llāhi llatī faṭara n-nāsa

‘alayhā

Al-Bayyinah (98:5) wa ma ‘umirū ‘illā li ya‘budū llāha muxliṣīna lahu d-dīna ḥunafā‘a
Appendix B: English Translations of Occurrences of ḥ-n-f in Qur’an
Appendix B: English Translations of Occurrences of ḥnf in Qur’an

(2:135) And they say: Be Jews or Christians, then ye will be rightly guided. Say (unto them, O Muhammad): Nay, but (we follow) the religion of Abraham, the upright, and he was not of the idolaters.

(3:67) Abraham was not a Jew, nor yet a Christian; but he was an upright man who had surrendered (to Allah), and he was not of the idolaters.

(3:95) Say: Allah speaketh truth. So follow the religion of Abraham, the upright. He was not of the idolaters.

(4:125) Who is better in religion than he who surrendereoth his purpose to Allah while doing good (to men) and followeth the tradition of Abraham, the upright? Allah (Himself) chose Abraham for friend.

(6:79) Lo! I have turned my face toward Him Who created the heavens and the earth, as one by nature upright, and I am not of the idolaters.

(6:161) Say: Lo! As for me, my Lord hath guided me unto a straight path, a right religion, the community of Abraham, the upright, who was no idolater.

(16:120) Lo! Abraham was a nation obedient to Allah, by nature upright, and he was not of the idolaters.

(16:123) And afterward We inspired thee (Muhammad, saying): Follow the religion of Abraham, as one by nature upright. He was not of the idolaters.

(22:31) Turning unto Allah (only), not ascribing partners unto Him; for whoso ascribeth partners unto Allah, it is as if he had fallen from the sky and the birds had snatched him or the wind had blown him to a far-off place.

(10:105) And, (O Muhammad) set thy purpose resolutely for religion, as a man by nature upright, and be not of those who ascribe partners (to Allah).

(30:30) So set thy purpose (O Muhammad) for religion as a man by nature upright - the nature (framed) of Allah, in which He hath created man. There is no altering (the laws of) Allah's creation. That is the right religion, but most men know not –

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(98:5) And they are ordered naught else than to serve Allah, keeping religion pure for Him, as men by nature upright, and to establish worship and to pay the poor-due. That is true religion