



Islamic Ethics and Human Fraternity: Resources and limitations

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ABSTRACT

This article aims to examine human fraternity as the basis for loyalty towards non-Muslims through the ethical thinking of two Muslim leaders and thinkers in France (A. Bidar and M. Zenati). The writings of these Muslim intellectuals reflect reformist Muslim sensibilities that are quite audible in French-speaking Europe (France, Belgium and Switzerland), in the face of pressing ethical and societal challenges to build a community of destiny and hope between Muslims and non-Muslims. These discourses on fraternity and loyalty also counter the communitarian and other collectivist conceptions conveyed by closed religious interpretations that dominate traditionalist Muslim circles (illustrated by the Salafist dogma of alliance and disavowal of non-Muslims). Our main task here is to discuss the ways Muslim thinkers envisage loyalty to non-Muslims as an element in shaping the identity of Muslim citizens in France while attempting to resolve the current tensions between community loyalties, human fraternity, and individualism.



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1. Introduction

In the aftermath of the First World War, reformist Islam began to recognize human brotherhood, *ukhuwwa fi 'l-insāniyya*, as the moral foundation for collaboration, peace, and solidarity between individuals and societies. However, under the influence of Western imperialism and the rise of Islamism and Salafism in the 1970s, the idea of human brotherhood was marginalized in Muslim theological and political discourse in favor of the concept of Islamic brotherhood, known as *ukhuwwa fi 'l-islām*. Today, the majority of Muslim scholars and intellectuals generally distinguish between religious brotherhood and human or national brotherhood, considering them to be two distinct but complementary types of brotherhood.

The Muslim ethical tradition has also emphasized human brotherhood as an innate bond between the descendants of Adam (Amir-Moezzi, 2015). In modern Islamic thought, there are several types of humanism; perhaps the best known is liberal Islamic humanism, represented by influential thinkers such as 'Abd al-Raḥmān Badawī (1917-2002), inspired by existentialism and Sufism. Mohammed Arkoun (1928-2010) and Naṣr Ḥāmid Abū Zayd (1943-2010) also combine classical Islamic ethics with modern humanism. Humanist Islam, which values human rights, religious diversity and non-violence, is another type of humanism that is more frequently encountered in religious discourse (Leirvik, 2020).

On 4 February 2019, Pope Francis and Sheikh Ahmed el-Tayeb, the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar, signed a joint statement, known as The Document on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together, the Abu Dhabi declaration, or the Abu Dhabi agreement, in Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates. This is arguably the most notable example of rapprochement in recent times between Christianity and Islam on human brotherhood. As a result of this initiative, human brotherhood became a subject of common interest between Muslims and Christians, even if each religion has its own definition of the concept, which its theology and ethics have long reflected on. This statement boldly advanced the idea of humankind's collective endeavors as brothers and sisters. In its opening words, this document states that faith enables one to see, in another person, a brother or sister who needs support and love. It also exhorts readers to promote a culture of mutual respect in the awareness of the great divine grace that makes all human beings brothers and sisters, urging people to work together and show love for one another (Vatican and al-Azhar, 2019). While the Document on Human Fraternity had an impact all over the world (Kulska, 2021, p. 42), fraternity is still a "forgotten principle" or "overlooked element" in

political theory (Solarz and Kulska, 2025), perhaps because post-secular identities are still negotiated in international relations, a field that is dominated by power and secular paradigms (Kulska and Solarz, 2021).

This article aims to examine human fraternity as the basis for loyalty towards non-Muslims through the ethical thinking of two Muslim leaders and thinkers in France (A. Bidar and M. Zenati). The writings of these Muslim intellectuals reflect reformist Muslim sensibilities that are quite audible in French-speaking Europe (France, Belgium and Switzerland), in the face of pressing ethical and societal challenges to build a community of destiny and hope between Muslims and non-Muslims. These discourses on fraternity and loyalty also counter the communitarian and other collectivist conceptions conveyed by closed religious interpretations that dominate traditionalist Muslim circles (illustrated by the Salafist dogma of alliance and disavowal of non-Muslims). Our main task here is to discuss the ways Muslim thinkers envisage loyalty to non-Muslims as an element in shaping the identity of Muslim citizens in France while attempting to resolve the current tensions between community loyalties, human fraternity, and individualism.

Yet, studies on human brotherhood in Islamic discourses are rare. In 1916, Samuel Marinus Zwemer declared "there is no universal brotherhood in Islam" (Zwemer, 2016, p. 55). A hundred years later, the Indian Muslim thinker Wahiduddin Khan (1925-2021) asserts in his text on "Human brotherhood" that "The teaching of Islam in this regard is that despite differences of colour, language, etc., people should harbour no ill-will towards those who are apparently unlike themselves, for discriminating between one man and another is not approved by God. They should rather promote fellow feeling towards others, even if at first glance they appear like total strangers to them. Bearing in mind that they are all traceable back to Adam and Eve, they should be each other's well-wishers and willingly come to one another's assistance, like members of the same large family" (Khan, 2016, p. 27). The same year, Meraj Ahmad Meraj published his „The Quranic concept of universal brotherhood" argued that the "Quran provides a framework of social equality and universal brotherhood. This framework produces a flexible social structure which motivates an individual to grow on the basis of efficiency and good character. It introduces social equality among human beings irrespective of colour, race, and geography" (Meraj, 2016, p. 5). Rosanna Maryam Sirignano, a Muslim researcher from Italy, asserts that universal brotherhood starts from the common origin of humanity in God which goes

beyond the single religious confession, to rediscover the spiritual rather than juridical or sociological meaning. Mutual knowledge between believers can generate respect, collaboration, solidarity and new bonds of fraternity (Sirignano, 2021, p. 201). More recently, the Saudi scholar Hamdan bin Humaid bin Braik Al-Salami (2023) argued that human brotherhood features in the Qur'an shows as a "charter that binds individuals in different societies within the framework of ethical values and governing justice in building a peaceful society...and that the Quran calls to unite all human hearts, and abolish the differences of color, race and language, and among its lofty purposes is acquaintance and human cooperation" (al-Salamī, 2023, p. 119). Although it is true that these Islamic scholarly works seriously questioned and challenged Zwemer's thesis, they are not critical academic works that examine particular texts or Muslim movements to understand the extent and bounds of human brotherhood in Islam. These works are normative and lack analytical depth, contextualization and critique

2. Methodology

Using textual analysis method to study Muslim discourses on human fraternity in France, we propose here to fill the gap in academic literature by analyzing the notion of human brotherhood as it is employed by prominent Muslim leaders in French politics and Islamic space (with focus on Abdenour Bidar and Moncef Zenati). These two Muslim intellectuals were selected for two reasons: 1. having written at least one book on human fraternity; and 2. representing different Muslim intellectual paradigms in France (liberal for Bidar and reformist for Zenati) so that the comparison and discussion produce more representative results. We steer clear of the normative approach that defines Islamic literature on human brotherhood and examine how this discourse functions within the context of contemporary political and social discussions between Muslims and non-Muslims in France, showing its resources and limits.

Clifford Geertz was the most notable practitioner of qualitative textual analysis, which focuses on analytical induction, theory building, and cultural interpretations of social phenomena as meaning-centered (Geertz, 1973). This method is particularly useful in studying ethical issues in Muslim contexts. I utilize Geertz's thick description to delve deeply into the meaning that is communicated, going beyond the rhetoric and assertions expressed in the texts. Here, I deploy this framework as a hermeneutics that views ethics as independent and having its own meaning structure rather than just reflecting societal circumstances.

3. Results

The contribution of Muslim reformism: Contemporary Muslim ethics and human brotherhood

As early as 1923, Muslim reformists were advocating world peace and human brotherhood, *al-ukhuwwa al-insāniyya*. Drawing on Quran 13:49¹, the eminent Syrian reformist theologian Muḥammad Rashīd Riḍā (1865-1935) believed in the equality of all ethnic groups, peoples and tribes as the foundation of human unity. According to him, the Qur'an's call for human unity implies friendship, mutual understanding and the cessation of hostility and conflict between human communities (Riḍā, 1985, p. 276). In the aftermath of the First World War, Muḥammad Rashīd Riḍā asserted that "the human need for spiritual and civilizational reform based on secure foundations has intensified. Only in this way will the enslavement of the weak by the powerful, the derision of the poor by the rich, and the danger that Bolshevism poses to the rich be brought to an end. Moreover, it [reform] will nullify ethnic distinctions so that the general brotherhood of humanity can be realized" (Willis, 2010, p. 718). Although Riḍā (like the rest of his generation of reformist theologians) was a staunch opponent of Western modernism, secularism and imperialism, he also believed in universal brotherhood that transcended political, religious and ethnic divisions.

This general attitude of reformist Islam can be observed until the early 1950s. Thus, Sayyid Muḥammad Jād al-Ḥaqq, an Egyptian religious scholar from al-Azhar, asserted in 1952 that Islam is a religion of human brotherhood, *al-Islām dīn al-ukhuwwa al-insāniyya* (Jād al-Ḥaqq, 1952, p. 50). Although his discourse is apologetic, he believes that since the prophets and messengers of God guide people to faith in the same way, all religions are equal in terms of friendship, brotherhood, honesty and loyalty. However, they differ in terms of the era and the people they address and thus are essentially half-brothers (born of a common faith) (Jād al-Ḥaqq, 1952, p. 50). This particular type of Islamic humanism, which views people as *homo religiosus*, overestimates the influence of religious ethics on social and political interactions. Yet the role that religions can play in world

¹ (O mankind! We created you from a single (pair) of a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes, that ye may know each other (not that ye may despise (each other)). Verily the most honoured of you in the sight of Allah is (he who is) the most righteous of you. And Allah has full knowledge and is well acquainted (with all things). Quran, trans. Abdullah Yusuf Ali, accessed January 6, 2026, <https://surahquran.com/english-aya-13-sora-49.html>

politics has been further reduced by the secularization of the West and, to some extent, by the secularization of Muslim societies themselves. In this context, geopolitical hegemony and economics have proved to be more decisive factors than any other, including in the Middle East.

In the second half of the 20th century, most Muslim scholars, both reformists and Salafists, emphasized Muslim brotherhood and often rejected human brotherhood. The divide between Muslims and non-Muslims widened due to the rise of Islamism in the 1970s and the wounds caused by wars and conflicts with the West, the Soviet Union and Israel. Islamism and the few Muslim states that support an Islamic foreign policy have promoted Islamic brotherhood as a means of bridging the gaps and tensions within the umma. Islamism employs umma as a geopolitical entity, political alliance, and a community of solidarity that supposedly enables Muslims to oppose foreign powers and utilize it to achieve influence in different parts of the Muslim world. This political rhetoric is also used by states (Iran, Turkey, Saudi Arabia among others) or movements (the Muslim Brotherhood, al-Qaida and many others) to claim a Muslim shared political destiny (Piscatori and Saikal, 2019). The Islamist umma is a militant community with a set of causes to defend (from Muslims in the West to the Philippines) (Widhiyoga, 2019). Islamism needs the rhetoric of the umma to sustain the narrative of Muslim victimhood and thus justify the many battles Islamist organizations are engaged in to allegedly uphold the umma. Ironically, these Islamist movements contributed to the weakening of nation-states and undermined the authority and sovereignty of states, and, thus, served the geopolitical interests of foreign powers

Discourses on Muslim brotherhood in France

The tension between Muslim brotherhood and human brotherhood in contemporary Islamic ethics is also reflected in Muslim discourses on brotherhood in France. In this discourse, the value of Muslim brotherhood is clearly dominant, and its proponents urge French Muslims to seek unity and emphasize Muslim solidarity. This preponderance can be partly attributed to the impact of ideas and movements from the Muslim world, which was particularly sensitive to the solidarity of the umma between the 1970s and 1990s. This is therefore a political aspect of Muslim brotherhood. On the other hand, faced with the difficulties encountered by Muslim communities in integrating into French society, Muslim theologians and intellectuals have emphasized the need for community institutions of solidarity. Muslim brotherhood is sometimes necessary to overcome the

poverty and social fragility of Muslims in France. Hani Ramadan and Hébri Bousserouel, two prominent members of the Muslim intellectual scene in France, illustrate this discourse of Muslim brotherhood. In his book *L'islam et la fraternité* (2006), Hébri Bousserouel, an Algerian traditionalist Muslim medical doctor and theologian who lived in France until his death in 2021 (Hâbis, 2021), laments the absence of true brotherhood among Muslims in France. According to him, sincerity, patience, forgiveness, tolerance, respect and politeness should be the cornerstones of authentic Muslim unity. To promote a sacred bond of brotherhood, charity and solidarity among Muslims, Bousserouel draws mainly on the Qur'an and the tradition of the Prophet (Bousserouel, 2006, pp. 159-215).

As for Hani Ramadan, he published *Le devoir de fraternité ou comment rester unis* (The Duty of Brotherhood, or How to Remain United) in 2012. Hani Ramadan is a Swiss imam of Egyptian origin who wields a certain amount of influence in France (although he was expelled from France in 2017) and in French-speaking Muslim communities in Europe (Belgium and Luxembourg, besides France and Switzerland); he is the brother of Tariq Ramadan, the son of Saïd Ramadan, and the grandson of Hassan al-Banna, the founder of the Muslim Brotherhood. According to Hani Ramadan, anyone who reflects on the state of the Muslim community cannot fail to be aware of the imminent threats it faces: more overt external animosity, which makes it vulnerable to media manipulation and deliberate discrediting by populist organizations. There is also an internal threat, that of the lack of unity among Muslims, for which they themselves are largely responsible. The author affirms his convictions: Muslims must unite if they want to put an end to the attacks they are regularly subjected to. Above all, unity is also necessary because it is based on the explicit commandments of the Qur'an and prophetic precepts. Ramadan expects Muslims to learn to be pious, fear God and understand what indulgence and forgiveness entail, as well as the principles of diversity as taught in Islamic ethics (Ramadan, 2012). It should be noted that Ramadan and Bousserouel both promote a normative vision of Muslim brotherhood while decrying the current state of societal relations among Muslims, which falls short of these ideals.

French Muslim discourses on human fraternity as the foundation for loyalty towards Non-Muslims

In addition to discourse on Muslim fraternity, there are intellectual efforts among Muslims in France to promote human fraternity. The two most widespread conceptions of human fraternity among Muslim intellectuals and theologians will be the focus of our attention in the following sections: the philosophically argued conception and the Islamically justified conception; the philosopher Abdennour Bidar represents the former, while the theologian Moncef Zenati illustrates the latter.

Bidar and the advocacy for universal brotherhood

Abdennour Bidar was born in 1971 in Clermont-Ferrand, France. He was raised by his mother (a French citizen who converted to Islam) in a dual French and Muslim culture, nourished as much by classical music as by the Qur'an, Western spiritual thinkers such as Teilhard de Chardin and René Guénon, and the mystics of Islam (Ibn 'Arabī, Rūmī) and India (Ramana Maharshi). His academic career led him to the École Normale Supérieure in Fontenay Saint-Cloud and the Sorbonne, where he obtained his MA. At the same time, he spent several years in a Sufi brotherhood (the Moroccan Qādiriyya-Būdshishiyya brotherhood). In 2003, he published "Letter from a European Muslim" in the journal *Esprit*, which brought him to prominence as a Muslim intellectual. He then devoted his doctoral thesis in philosophy to the thought of the Indian Muslim reformist Mohammed Iqbal (1873-1938). Abdennour Bidar is one of the authors of the Charter of Secularism in Schools (2013), written at the request of Vincent Peillon, then Minister of National Education. He has published several books, including *Self Islam*, *Histoire d'un islam personnel* (Self Islam, Story of a Personal Islam) (2006), *L'islam sans soumission: Pour un existentialisme musulman* (Islam without submission: Towards a Muslim existentialism) (2008) (Bidar, 2026).

However, Bidar's thinking has continued to evolve, even if it is difficult to see this evolution as linear. After exploring the ideas of humanism in his two books *Histoire de l'humanisme en Occident* (History of Humanism in the West), published in 2014, and *Plaidoyer pour la fraternité* (A Plea for Fraternity), published in 2015, Bidar was alarmed by the terrorist attacks in France in 2015. He then adopted an extremely critical stance towards Muslims in his book *Lettre ouverte au monde musulman* (Open Letter to the Muslim World), published in 2015, before returning to his two favorite subjects: secularism and mystical Islam. He then published *Grandir en humanité, Libres propos sur l'école et l'éducation* (Growing in Humanity: Free Thoughts on School and Education) in 2022 and *Les cinq piliers de l'islam et leur sens initiatique* (The Five Pillars of Islam and Their Initiatory Meaning) in 2023. If there is one

constant in Bidar's thinking, it would be liberal Islam, understood here as a free Islamic spirituality. We can therefore understand Bidar's desire to reconcile this free Islamic spirituality with liberal secularism and the philosophy of the Enlightenment.

Drawing on E. Lévinas, Bidar calls in his 2014 book *Histoire de l'humanisme en Occident* (History of Humanism in the West) for a shift from natural fraternity to ethical, humanist, and universal fraternity. For Bidar, developing humanistic fraternity means having the ability to learn to care about all those who, by definition, are not important to us. It is based on understanding the limits and dangers of ignorance and apathy towards those we do not know personally or whom we know only from afar because of the great cultural or social divides that separate us. This ethical fraternity would help us realize that, in reality, others—perhaps even more than our immediate family members—also need fraternity. This is especially true for people who are marginalized, lonely, uprooted, or isolated (Bidar, 2014, p. 33).

A year later, the January 11, 2015 attacks against Charlie Hebdo motivated him to write *Plaidoyer pour la fraternité* (A Plea for Fraternity), in which he makes an argument for self-criticism, both from the intellectual and political world and from Muslims in France. Bidar describes human fraternity as a universal spiritual dimension shared by all people and calls for it to enable peaceful coexistence, a project for society and civilization (moving from the "clash of civilizations" to the fraternity of hearts and cultures), transcending all ties of blood or religion. He maintains that "fraternity brings us back to the very essence of our humanity, that is, to the fundamental truth that we are nothing without each other" (Bidar, 2015, p. 64). He asserts that other civic principles such as freedom, equality, secularism, and citizenship depend on the cohesion that only human fraternity can cement. Thus, without fraternity, he says, "freedom and equality are empty ideals, because if I do not perceive the other as my brother, what do I really care about his right to freedom, and in what abstract sense would he be my equal? Of the three sisters, she is the most talented! That is why we must reverse the order of our motto and put it first: 'Fraternity, liberty, equality' (Bidar, 2015, p. 68). Bidar proposes several measures to foster cohesion in French society: creating a Ministry of Fraternity, instituting compulsory civic service, creating a minimum "citizen's income," focusing school ethics on the culture of fraternity, changing the culture of the working world, breaking down the logic of urban ghettos and creating spaces for fraternity in neighborhoods and

communities, and organizing a national conference on Islamic thought (Bidar, 2015, pp. 95-107).

Bidar's advocacy of universal fraternity could be contested for being overly idealistic. While many Western voices support this kind of discourse, others, especially the emerging far-right parties in France and Europe, tend to believe that particular groups, cultures, or ethnicities are superior. Furthermore, the concept of universal fraternity is called into question by the political reality of rivalry and war both inside and outside of Europe. While humanitarian activity demonstrates how many people, both inside and outside of the West, value human fraternity as a universal standard, various Muslim and non-Muslim agents undermine universal fraternity. Even though it does not call into doubt the ideal itself of fraternity, the bloodshed, wars, and conflicts we have witnessed in recent years can make us rethink seriously the reality of human brotherhood.

Moncef Zenati: Human brotherhood and loyalty

Moncef Zenati is a Franco-Tunisian Muslim theologian and imam (born in 1970), member of the organization *Musulmans de France* (MF), formerly *Union des organisations islamiques de France* (UOIF), the largest Muslim organization in France (close to the Muslim Brotherhood). Born in France, he grew up in Tunisia. He then obtained a bachelor's degree in mathematics and another in Islamic theology at the European Institute of Human Sciences, the largest private Muslim higher education institution in France, where he still teaches, while also serving as an imam in Le Havre. He has published several short theological works and translations of Islamic books from Arabic (Zenati, 2026). In 2008, he published his book *La fraternité humaine en islam* (Human Fraternity in Islam).

The context of publishing *La fraternité humaine en islam* predates the wave of terrorist attacks of 2012-2017 (although the small-scale terrorist attacks of the 1990s in France had a considerable impact on French society and Muslims as well). Nevertheless, doubts about the loyalty of Muslims to France and the refusal of certain extreme Muslim voices to pledge loyalty to France were debated in the aftermath of September 11, 2001. Thus, Zenati opposes the Salafis who believe that no loyalty, alliance, affection, or friendship should be shown to non-Muslims, while also opposing the anti-Muslim French opinion that maintains prejudices against Muslims.

For Zenati, human fraternity is based on the exchange of knowledge, mutual assistance, dialogue, the common good, justice, equity, the fight against racism, respect, and tolerance (Zenati, 2008, p. 86). Zenati asserts that

some Muslims have misunderstood the doctrine of alliance and disavowal; he argues that the form of "alliance" or 'loyalty' (*al-walā'*) that is prohibited in Islamic ethics is that "shown by Muslims toward non-Muslims who have committed acts of aggression against Muslims. This type of loyalty is detrimental to Muslims and implies an alliance with an enemy of the nation and religion, who practices all forms of treason and espionage" (Zenati, 2008, p. 86).

Thus, disloyalty toward non-Muslims can only be justified if it is a reaction to prior disloyalty on the part of non-Muslims, and is only valid "if non-Muslims shift their loyalty from one nation to another, from one people to another, which constitutes, in contemporary jargon, an act of high treason" (Zenati, 2008, p. 87). In this case, Muslims are forbidden from forming alliances or friendly relations, making peace, or acting kindly toward those who declare war on Muslims, offend them, and oppress them, for no one should take enemies as allies when they are working diligently "to triumph over their own nation, submitting completely to the enemy and spying on Muslims" (Zenati, 2008, p. 89).

Zenati clearly explains the context of Muslims' disloyalty toward non-Muslims, which is that of non-Muslims' aggression toward Muslims. Leaving aside this exceptional case, Zenati argues that "there is no harm in forming alliances with non-Muslims in the secular sphere, nor in showing them sympathy and friendship" (Zenati, 2008, p. 91). He thus puts forward an *argumentum e contrario* (if the ratio legis of disloyalty towards non-Muslims is aggression towards them, and such a reason does not exist in the French context, the normal course of events is to be loyal to those who share citizenship with Muslims). Thus, he says, the Salafis' mobilization of the dogma of alliance and disavowal is both "reductive and erroneous" (Zenati, 2008, p. 91).

Furthermore, Zenati adds that "alliances and friendships can develop between Muslims and non-Muslims due to proximity, work, studies, or the human qualities that we perceive in others; none of these relationships contradict the Islamic principle of '*al-walā'*'" (Zenati, 2008, p. 91). He illustrates this socially constructed loyalty by pointing to Islamic law's authorization of mixed marriages between Muslim men and non-Muslim women (Jewish and Christian), a marital relationship based on love, tranquility, and tenderness which, for him, shows that Muslims are permitted by Islamic law to show loyalty to non-Muslims (Zenati, 2008, p. 92). Islamic law trusts Jewish and Christian women as long as the orientation of the family is defined by the Muslim husband (which is not the case when a Muslim woman wants to marry a

Jewish or Christian man, which is a form of marriage prohibited by Islamic law because the orientation of the family would in this case be defined by the non-Muslim man) (Zenati, 2008, p. 92).

Zenati's argument, at least in part, undermines the Salafist interpretation of alliance and disavowal as a prohibition on loyalty to non-Muslims. In normal social relations, it is unthinkable to be disloyal to one's wife because she is a non-Muslim or to one's children because their mother is a non-Muslim, given that for most people, the family is not only the heart of social structures but also a space where the identities of individuals and social groups are formed. For Zenati, the principles of universality, humanism, and peace (which he considers essential to Islamic ethics) are simply ignored by Salafism and its binary conceptions of loyalty/disloyalty. Salafism also rejects the fundamental principles of social interaction, from family to commerce, which are all based on trust and the ability to establish trust with others as individuals and communities.

That said, Zenati's discourse has a significant flaw in that it addresses Muslims using religious terminology while they reside in France, a secular context that requires a shared philosophical foundation that goes beyond religious vocabulary and emphasizes citizenship and humanism as modern values. Additionally, it is a context where friendship and charitable ethics are less important to social interactions than politics, realism, and rationalism. While in secular contexts, it is difficult to redefine fraternity, it is important to recognize the aspects of traditional ideas about brotherhood that are out of date and make an effort to overcome them. Daily interaction on friendly terms (as promoted by Zenati) is key for maintaining social harmony, but the modern value of fraternity is more firmly rooted in social contracts, explicit civic duties and rights, and public reason.

4. Discussion

Resources and limitations of Muslim discourses on human fraternity

Now that we have discussed the principles and consequences of human fraternity for Zenati and Bidar, let us compare the two points of view on human fraternity as the basis for loyalty towards Non-Muslims. We will focus in particular on the resources and limitations of these discourses.

Let us begin by examining the references that these discourses make explicit in order to promote unity within French society. A notable similarity between Zenati and

Bidar is their humanist foundation of allegiance to non-Muslims. It is on the basis and reference point of this humanism that they diverge. Zenati advocates Islamic humanism, which is a devoted bond between Muslims and non-Muslims based on their common social and human identity and supported by the Islamic principles of neighborliness and friendship. Bidar is categorical about universal humanism inspired by Western philosophy. He promotes Western humanism, which emphasizes human rights, equality, freedom, secularism, enlightenment, and human beings as the center of the universe. Even though he criticizes the social and economic injustices that exist in the West, this humanism is intended to be universal and cosmopolitan. Bidar may use verses from the Quran to emphasize the importance of humanity as God's vicegerent on earth, but this is not his primary argument. He opposes what could be described as specifically Islamic humanism. Like everyone else, Muslims should follow liberal humanism, or what he calls universal humanism.

The resources offered by both humanisms can contribute to creating a united French society. Islamic humanism is aimed at followers of the Muslim religion who are receptive to the arguments of religious authority. Providing these audiences with Quranic and prophetic guidance on how to get along with non-Muslims as neighbors and members of the same political community remains crucial. Universal humanism uses reason-based arguments to argue that, in an ideal world, French Muslims and non-Muslims would share philosophical and natural qualities that would bind them together in order to build a just society for all. Furthermore, Zenati and Bidar both give specific examples of their concrete commitments to human fraternity. Zenati emphasizes the social ties that exist in everyday life through trade, marriage, education, and other types of exchanges. Bidar offers many more institutional possibilities for promoting fraternity, including a minister of human fraternity, education, and social justice policies. The common idea taught by Zenati and Bidar is that, despite their different religious beliefs, all members of society share a common destiny through a variety of interactions, including exchange and institutionalization.

As for the limitations of this discourse on human brotherhood, Bidar has already identified one significant limitation, namely inequality, which is the main threat to fraternity (Fleury, Ozouf and Perrot, 2022, p. 29). Firstly, it must be acknowledged that inequality affects all societies around the world, not just French society, which has a social system that somewhat mitigates disparities. Nevertheless, the percentage of people living below the

poverty line has increased by 500,000, from 7.7% in 2009 to 8.2% in 2019. Furthermore, data indicates that inequality is worsening in France: in 2021, the percentage of French citizens living in poverty rose to 14.5% (Albouy, Jaubertie and Rousset, 2023). More than nine million people live below the monetary poverty line, set at 60% of median income, or €1,158 per month for a single person, with half of citizens living on less than €924 per month (Albouy, Jaubertie and Rousset 2023). Due to their vulnerability as immigrants, Muslim populations in France are subject to discrimination, particularly with regard to access to employment, housing, and education (Brinbaum, Safi & Simon, 2018). As demonstrated by the “yellow vest” protests and riots in French suburbs, inequality breeds animosity and conflict. Young people from immigrant backgrounds are particularly dissatisfied with these differences (Jetten, Mols and Selvanathan, 2020). This could seriously hamper French society's ability to build a solid foundation for human fraternity.

In addition to inequality, an unbalanced foreign policy of the recent French governments hinders the development of human fraternity between Muslims and non-Muslims in France. Muslims in France harbor strong animosity toward French colonization of North and West Africa. Furthermore, some Muslims believe that France's current foreign policy in the Middle East is unfair to the Palestinian people and other local populations. Because of its support for dictatorships and its control of natural resources in certain African nations, France is viewed unfavorably by many Africans across the continent. It therefore appears that in international relations, fraternity is currently limited to discourse between different religions, while economic power and geopolitical hegemony remain the driving forces behind foreign policy. This situation is at the root of conflicts and resentment among some French Muslims towards France.

In 2018, Imène Ajala explored, in *European Muslims and their Foreign Policy Interests: Identities and Loyalties*, the loyalties of French and British Muslims in foreign policy, particularly towards Palestine. Ajala highlights how “the securitization of Islam affects the perception of Muslim loyalties in France and how the context surrounding global Islam diverts Muslim expression on foreign policy in the French context. The September 11 attacks reinforced the problematization of Muslims in Europe within the security paradigm, and Muslims are increasingly perceived as an internal threat and constructed as “the other,” raising questions about their loyalty” (Ajala, 2018, p. 79). She also draws attention to the French political system, which “rejects ethnic group

politics. In an environment that is unfavorable to the expression of specific interests and characterized by strong centralization, it is even more difficult for ethnic groups to mobilize and exert influence” (Ajala, 2018, p. 43). Ajala's work has shown that loyalty to French foreign policy is a matter of loyalty to the French state, which makes any disagreement with that policy a form of disloyalty.

Hannah Arendt posited that the idea of brotherhood creates erroneous ideas of political community that disregard past animosities toward others and endanger contemporary political existence. Her critiques bring up important issues regarding Muslim discourses on plurality and democracy that affect any group that encourages its members to behave more like “brethren” than like “citizens” (Starkman, 2013, p. 595). Still, hard social and political realities challenge the ideas of citizenship and human brotherhood. At the same time, initiatives to strengthen links of citizenship and human fraternity are being taken both within and outside of Western societies, by Muslims and non-Muslims, resisting the temptations of isolation and conflict (Petito, Daou and Driessen, 2021).

Following his successful meeting with Islamic leaders in Abu Dhabi and the publication of the Document on Human Fraternity for World Peace and Living Together, also known as the Abu Dhabi declaration in 2019, Pope Francis released the document *Fratelli tutti* in 2020, which had a profound effect both in the West and abroad. Some Western scholars have interpreted *Fratelli tutti* in an Islamic theological framework, using the concept of *walāya*, or friendship/sainthood, as a means of resisting injustice and neo-liberalism (Oaks Takács, 2022). Others draw attention to the document of human brotherhood and *Fratelli tutti*’s audacious assertions of neighborhood and social justice (Nguyen, 2022), while some see it as a reflection of Pope Francis’ own thoughts on the idea of authentic religion, which forbids all forms of violence (Traore and Serge, 2021). Enthusiasm for the Abu Dhabi declaration and *Fratelli tutti* was noteworthy, and generated a great deal of scholarly, religious, and philosophical reflections in the West (Hayward, 2026; Ujházi, 2026).

6. Conclusion

This article’s unique contribution stems from the fact that it is the first scholarly work to analyze Muslim perspectives authored by Muslim leaders on human fraternity in the West. Therefore, its findings will help in better understanding the concepts that Muslims in the West are endorsing regarding human fraternity. Zenati

and Bidar point to the humanistic basis of loyalty toward non-Muslims; while Zenati emphasizes the social bonds that are formed through trade, marriage, education, and other forms of interaction in everyday life, Bidar proposes a plethora of other institutional possibilities to foster fraternity, such as social justice programs, education, and a minister of human fraternity, among others. However, social inequalities and cultural differences between Muslims and non-Muslims in France have generated conflicts that threaten fraternity; young people from immigrant families are particularly dissatisfied with these inequalities, as their resentment builds. Human fraternity between Muslims and non-Muslims in the West is also hampered by the colonial past. Muslims in France feel deep resentment toward France for colonizing North and West Africa. In the end, the primary goal of fraternity discourses is to foster social cohesiveness and create a shared society that upholds social harmony, overcoming the resentment of the past. By highlighting this ideal, relationships between Muslims and non-Muslims in Western countries and elsewhere are likely to strengthen and flourish.

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