e-ISSN: 2600-9617

Available online at
https://journal.uitm.edu.my/index.php/e-JITU/about

E-Journal of Islamic Thought & Understanding 9 (2), 27-41

E-Journal of Islamic Thought & Understanding (E-JITU)

The Ethical and Dialectical Principles of Imam Ali al-Reza in Interfaith Debates: A Universal Model for Constructive Dialogue Across Religions and Civilizations

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 2026-07-13
Revised 2026-08-10
Accepted 2026-09-15
Published 2026-10-09

Keywords:
Imam Ali al-Reza
Interfaith dialogue
Ethics of debate
Islamic dialectics
Civilizational discourse Religious tolerance

DOI:
https://doi.org/10.24191/ejitu.v9i2.12621

ABSTRACT

Debate stands as one of the most powerful means of establishing truth and articulating well-reasoned positions before an interlocutor, a method consistently emphasised by the Holy Quran and Prophetic tradition and carried forward with distinction by the Imams of guidance. Among them, Imam Ali al-Reza, honoured with the title Alim Al Muhammad, engaged leading scholars of Christianity, Judaism, Sabianism and Islamic theology during the period of his crown princehood, primarily in the presence of Caliph al-Mamun. Despite extensive scholarship on his theological positions, no study has yet systematically synthesised the ethical and dialectical principles embedded in these debates into a coherent, applicable framework. This article addresses that gap through a qualitative thematic analysis of three primary classical hadith and historiographical sources: Uyun Akhbar al-Reza, Bihar al-Anwar and Al-Ihtijaj. The four major debates recorded across these sources were read closely, and recurring behavioural and argumentative patterns were inductively coded into two clusters of principles, then cross-checked against parallel teachings in Abrahamic scripture to assess their claim to universality. The analysis identifies eight ethical principles, including adherence to divine commandments during discourse, fairness and intellectual honesty, respect for the interlocutor, avoidance of personal attacks and gentleness of expression, alongside four scholarly and methodological practices, including mastery of the interlocutor's intellectual framework, engagement through shared premises,

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https://doi.org/10.24191/ejitu.v9i2.12621

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and freedom of expression. Read together, these findings show that Imam al-Reza's model integrates ethical conduct with argumentative rigour in a way that few classical or contemporary frameworks combine explicitly. The article concludes that his life and conduct constitute an enduring, transferable model for interfaith and civilizational dialogue, offering principled guidance against intolerance, sectarianism and ideological extremism in both classical and contemporary contexts.

1. INTRODUCTION

The history of Islamic intellectual tradition is replete with moments of profound cross-civilizational dialogue. Among the most significant are the interfaith debates of Imam Ali ibn Musa al-Reza (c. 765–818 CE), the eighth Imam of the Shia tradition, who engaged leading theologians of Christianity, Judaism, Sabianism and various Islamic schools during his tenure as crown prince under Caliph al-Mamun in Khurasan. These debates, preserved in classical sources such as Uyun Akhbar al-Reza by Shaykh al-Saduq, Bihar al-Anwar by Allama Majlisi and Al-Ihtijaj by Allama Tabrisi, represent far more than theological confrontations: they constitute a sophisticated, principled methodology of interfaith engagement.

A substantial body of scholarship already exists on interfaith dialogue in Islam and on the theological content of Imam al-Reza's debates individually. Fathi (2023), for instance, examined the Imam's general approach to dialogue with scholars of other religions, while Solihin and Osmani (2021) analysed the ethics of Qur'anic communication through contemporary exegesis. What remains absent from this literature, however, is a systematic, source-based synthesis that extracts the discrete ethical and methodological principles running across the Imam's four major interfaith debates and organises them into a single, applicable framework. Most existing accounts describe the theological outcomes of individual debates, or discuss Qur'anic communication ethics in the abstract, without connecting the two through a close reading of a specific historical case. This article addresses that gap.

This article undertakes a thematic analysis of the Imam's debates with two objectives: first, to identify the discrete ethical and methodological principles that guided his conduct; second, to demonstrate the contemporary relevance of this model for interfaith dialogue, civilizational exchange and the reduction of sectarian hostility. The study draws upon primary classical sources and contextualises the Imam's approach within the broader moral teachings of the Abrahamic traditions, showing that his principles find resonance across religious boundaries.

The remainder of this article is organised as follows. Section 2 reviews the relevant literature on debate as a scholarly category and on interfaith dialogue in Islamic thought, and articulates the research gap addressed here. Section 3 details the methodology, including source selection and the thematic analytic procedure. Section 4 surveys the major debates of Imam al-Reza as contextual background. Section 5 presents the findings, the ethical and methodological principles identified through the analysis, supported by textual evidence. Section 6 discusses these findings in relation to the existing literature and their contemporary implications. Section 7 concludes by synthesising the principles into a universal model applicable to contemporary interfaith and civilizational discourse.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Linguistic and philosophical foundations of debate

In the authoritative Arabic lexicon Lisan al-Arab, Ibn Manzur clarifies that Al-Munazarah (المناظرة) is etymologically derived from Al-Nazar (النظَر), which encompasses three primary linguistic meanings: Ruyah (الرؤية, physical or mental vision), Ghur-o-Fikr (الفكر, deep contemplation and reflection) and Intizar (الانتظار, waiting or expectation) (Ibn Manzur, 1984, Vol. 5, pp. 215–216). Within a scholarly context, these meanings converge to define debate as an intellectual process in which parties exercise foresight and deliberation to uncover the truth. In the Western tradition, Aristotle defines the essence of debate through the process of Dialectic. Originating from the Latin debattuere (to strike down or rigorously test), Aristotle characterises it as a systematic method of inquiry, asserting that dialectic is a process of criticism through which the principles of all inquiries are approached (Aristotle, trans. 1991). Thus, while Ibn Manzur highlights the multidimensional nature of vision and reflection, Aristotle focuses on the logical scrutiny required to validate a thesis.

2.2 Purpose and objective of debate

The purpose of debate is not merely for one party to gain dominance over the other or to demonstrate superiority; rather, its fundamental aim is to reach truth on a subject or issue. Debate promotes intellectual clarity, critical thinking and mutual understanding through the exchange of logical arguments and evidence. A further purpose of debate is education: it is an indirect method of teaching which, due to its distinctive style, becomes firmly established in the minds of participants and observers alike. A further dimension, especially evident in the debates of Imam Ali al-Reza, is the guidance and proper direction of those who are genuinely seeking truth.

2.3 Interfaith dialogue in recent scholarship and the research gap

Recent scholarship confirms the continuing relevance of this theme. Solihin and Osmani (2021) surveyed contemporary Qur'anic exegeses to identify communication ethics relevant to interreligious tension, concluding that Qur'anic guidelines on dialogue can help sensitise readers to relationship and communal conflict, but their study remained at the level of general exegetical principle rather than a specific historical case. Fathi (2023) examined Imam Reza's dialogic conduct with scholars of other religions and argued that his aim was persuasion rather than coercion, yet did not organise his conduct into a discrete, transferable set of principles, nor situate it against comparative ethical teachings in other Abrahamic traditions. Similarly, deClaisse-Walford (2019) and Maulana (2025) provide philological analyses of the shared Abrahamic scriptural material invoked in the Imam's debate with the Jewish scholar Ras al-Jalut, but their focus is textual-critical rather than dialectical or ethical.

Taken together, this literature establishes that interfaith dialogue in the Islamic tradition, and Imam al-Reza's debates specifically, are recognised as significant objects of study, but it has not yet produced a systematic thematic synthesis of the ethical and methodological principles that these debates embody, nor tested the claim that such a synthesis constitutes a genuinely cross-traditional model of dialogue. This article's contribution lies in closing that gap through the source-based thematic analysis presented in Sections 3 through 6.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research design

This study adopts a qualitative, library-based research design centred on thematic textual analysis, following the inductive coding logic set out by Braun and Clarke (2006). Rather than testing a pre-existing hypothesis the study inductively identifies recurring patterns of ethical conduct and argumentative strategy within a bounded set of primary narrations then organises these patterns into discrete named principles. This design is appropriate for a review article whose aim is conceptual synthesis rather than the statistical generalisation of findings.

3.2 Source selection

Three classical primary sources were selected for analysis: Uyun Akhbar al-Reza by Shaykh al-Saduq (Ibn Babawayh al-Qummi), Bihar al-Anwar (Volume 10) by Allama Majlisi, and Al-Ihtijaj by Allama Tabrisi. These three works were selected because they are the most widely cited and authoritative classical compilations narrating Imam al-Reza's interfaith debates within the Twelver Shia hadith and historiographical corpus, and because each independently corroborates the same core narrations, allowing cross-referencing between accounts. Among the debates recorded across these sources, four were selected for detailed analysis, the debates with Jathaliq, Ras al-Jalut, Imran al-Sabi'i and Sulaiman al-Marwazi, on the grounds that all three sources converge in treating these four as the most historically and theologically significant encounters, each representing a distinct religious or theological tradition (Christianity, Judaism, Sabianism and intra-Islamic theology respectively). This purposive selection ensures thematic breadth across traditions while keeping the corpus of primary narrations manageable for close reading.

3.3 Analytical procedure

Each debate narration was read closely in translation, and recurring behaviours, statements and argumentative moves attributed to Imam al-Reza were manually coded. Codes were then grouped into higher-order themes along two axes: (a) ethical principles, concerning the Imam's conduct and disposition toward his interlocutors (for example, gentleness, fairness, avoidance of personal attack), and (b) methodological or scholarly principles, concerning his argumentative strategy (for example, engagement through the interlocutor's own scripture, protection of the opponent's freedom of expression). Each resulting theme was retained only where it recurred across at least two of the four debates or was explicitly generalised in the primary sources themselves, in order to distinguish structural principles from incidental features of a single encounter. To assess the article's claim that these principles have cross-traditional resonance, each theme was subsequently compared against parallel passages in Jewish and Christian scripture identified through targeted review of the Hebrew Bible, the New Testament and relevant secondary literature.

3.4 Limitations

This methodology has three principal limitations that should be borne in mind when interpreting the findings. First the analysis relies on Twelver Shia hadith compilations sources from other Islamic schools may frame the same debates differently and this potential variance in transmission is not adjudicated here. Second the study relies on published English translations of the primary Arabic sources, which introduces a layer of interpretive mediation. Third as a qualitative thematic synthesis of a single historical figure's

conduct, the findings are illustrative of a coherent model rather than statistically generalisable their value lies in conceptual and pedagogical transferability rather than empirical measurement.

4. CONTEXTUAL BACKGROUND: THE MAJOR DEBATES OF IMAM ALI AL-REZA

Although the number of debates attributed to Imam al-Reza is large, four are of special historical and theological importance for this study, as explained in Section 3.2. These have been narrated by Shaykh al-Saduq in Uyun Akhbar al-Reza and Kitab al-Tawhid by Allama Majlisi in Bihar al-Anwar (Volume 10) and by Allama Tabrisi in Al-Ihtijaj:

(i) Debate with Jathaliq, the chief bishop and highest-ranking Christian religious authority.

(ii) Debate with Ras al-Jalut, the greatest Jewish scholar of the era.

(iii) Debate with Imran al-Sabi'i, a renowned Sabian theologian.

(iv) Debate with Sulaiman al-Marwazi, a renowned scholar of Islamic theology and dialectics.

These four debates took place in a gathering convened by Caliph al-Mamun in the presence of Muslim scholars and dignitaries of Khurasan. Table 1 summarises each debate, its central theological dispute, the Imam's primary argumentative strategy and its outcome; these summaries form the evidentiary basis for the thematic findings presented in Section 5.

Table 1. Major interfaith debates of Imam Ali al-Reza

Interlocutor	Tradition	Core dispute	Imam's key argument	Outcome
Jathaliq (Chief Bishop)	Christianity	Divinity of Prophet Jesus based on his miracles	Prophets Elisha and Ezekiel performed identical miracles; miracles alone cannot confer divinity without an absurd conclusion	Jathaliq accepted the argument as true
Ras al-Jalut (Jewish scholar)	Judaism	Prophethood of Muhammad (s.a.w.w.) as foretold in the Torah	Deuteronomy 18:18, 33:2 and Genesis 21 prophesy a prophet from Paran (Mecca) via the lineage of Ishmael	Scholar fell silent, unable to rebut the scriptural evidence
Imran al-Sabi'i (Sabian theologian)	Sabianism	Divine nature, theology of creation, and the concept of Bada	Engaged through shared rational premises; invited fairness and free inquiry throughout	Imran accepted Islam; honoured with gifts as a model of guidance over humiliation
Sulaiman al-Marwazi (Islamic theologian)	Islamic theology	Concept of Bada and divine knowledge	Calm, reasoned explanation of Bada; protected opponent's right to continue	Demonstrated that freedom of expression must be preserved even against weak reasoning

	speaking despite contradictions

Source: compiled by the author from Ibn Babawayh al-Qummi (n.d.) and Tabrisi (1966)

In these debates, although Imam al-Reza was placed before his interlocutors by the will of Caliph al-Mamun, he took full advantage of the opportunity to guide those who were sincerely capable of guidance. His aim was never the humiliation of the opponent but clarification and direction toward truth.

4.1 The debate with Jathaliq: miracles and divinity

In his debate with Jathaliq, the Imam made every effort to guide the Christian scholar and his followers away from the belief in the divinity of Prophet Jesus (a.s.) and toward the principles of monotheism. Jathaliq argued that the extraordinary miracles of Jesus reviving the dead and healing incurable illnesses, established his right to worship. The Imam countered by demonstrating that this quality was not exclusive to Jesus. He presented the example of Prophet Elisha (Yasa), who likewise revived the dead (2 Kings 4:32–35), healed the blind (2 Kings 6:17–20) and cured lepers (2 Kings 5:1–14), yet was never considered divine by his community. He also cited Prophet Ezekiel, who revived certain individuals after death (Ezekiel 37:1–10) drawing the same logical conclusion.

A particularly memorable exchange arose when the Imam stated that his only criticism of Jesus was that he was "less attentive in prayer and fasting." Jathaliq reacted with indignation insisting that Jesus fasted by day (Matthew 4:2) and spent his nights in worship (Luke 6:12). The Imam then asked calmly to whom was he offering his prayer and for whom was he observing his fast? Jathaliq was left speechless. The question exposed a fundamental logical inconsistency acts of prayer and fasting presuppose a worshipped being greater than the worshipper which is incompatible with the claim of divinity for the one performing those acts. Ultimately, Jathaliq accepted the truth of the Imam's position (Ibn Babawayh al-Qummi, n.d., pp. 277–282).

4.2 The debate with Ras al-Jalut: scriptural prophecy

Turning to the Jewish scholar Ras al-Jalut, Imam al-Reza began by affirming the principle of divine prophecy through the interlocutor's own scriptures. He asked whether Moses had not instructed the Children of Israel that a prophet would arise from among their brethren and that they must confirm and obey him (Deuteronomy 18:18–19). He then established that the only "brethren" of the Israelites through the lineage of Abraham were the descendants of Ishmael the ancestral line from which the Prophet Muhammad (s.a.w.w.) came (deClaisse-Walford, 2019).

Seizing the scholar's acknowledgment that no prophet other than Muhammad fit this description the Imam cited Deuteronomy 33:2, "The Lord came from Sinai, rose from Seir and shone forth from Mount Paran and explained that Sinai represents the revelation to Moses (a.s.), Seir the mission of Jesus (a.s.) and Mount Paran the ancient peaks of Mecca, the final and radiant glory of Prophet Muhammad (s.a.w.w.) (Ibn Babawayh al-Qummi, n.d., pp. 285–286). The geographical identification of Paran with the region surrounding Mecca, corroborated by the settlement of Hagar and Ishmael in that wilderness (Genesis 21:14–21, 21:20–21), provided a compelling historical link connecting the Abrahamic scriptural tradition directly to the prophethood of Muhammad (Maulana, 2025).

The Imam further argued for intellectual consistency in evaluating testimony the narrations confirming the miracles of Jesus were transmitted through successive and widely accepted chains of narrators, exactly as the miracles of Moses were preserved. He asked how it could be just to accept the transmitters of Moses's miracles, including the parting of the sea, the staff and the water from the rock (Exodus 14:21–29, 7:8–12, 17:5–6) while rejecting those who reported the miracles of Jesus (Ibn Babawayh al-Qummi, n.d., pp. 287–288). The scholar fell silent unable to answer.

5. FINDINGS: ETHICAL AND DIALECTICAL PRINCIPLES IN IMAM AL-REZA'S DEBATES

Applying the coding procedure described in Section 3.3 to the four debates summarised above yields twelve recurring themes, organised here into two clusters eight ethical principles concerning the Imam's conduct and disposition (Sections 5.1 to 5.8) and four scholarly-methodological principles concerning his argumentative strategy (Sections 5.9 to 5.12). Each theme is presented with the textual evidence from which it was derived and, where a comparative teaching exists its parallel in Abrahamic scripture.

5.1 Observance of divine commands during debate

Imam al-Reza, even during intense theological debates, consistently prioritised the performance of formal prayer over the continuation of intellectual discourse. It is narrated that during one such interfaith gathering, when the time for Dhuhr prayer arrived, the Imam calmly stated that the time for prayer had come and proceeded to fulfil his religious obligation despite Imran al-Sabi'i's request to prolong the discussion due to its intellectual importance (Ibn Babawayh al-Qummi, n.d., p. 293). The Imam chose to pray first and then return.

This conduct reflects a broader ethical principle present across Abrahamic traditions, in which religious obligation is given precedence over continuous worldly engagement. Similar emphasis appears in the biblical tradition's command to maintain faithfulness in worship above other concerns (Exodus 20:8–9) and in the Gospel tradition's instruction that devotion to God is a primary duty (Matthew 6:33).

5.2 Observance of conversational etiquette

In interfaith discussions and debates with scholars of various religious traditions the etiquette demonstrated by Imam al-Reza reflects a model of dialogue grounded in intellectual humility, patience and respect for differing viewpoints. His method of engagement avoids arrogance, dismissal of opposing arguments or any diminishment of the intellectual worth of others. Instead, the Imam's approach emphasises that truth-seeking dialogue should remain open-ended, allowing the interlocutor freedom to accept or reject the argument without coercion or insult.

Similar ethical principles of speech and restraint in disagreement are found across earlier Abrahamic moral teachings. Scriptural wisdom literature in the Hebrew tradition emphasises controlled and gentle response in conflict situations (Proverbs 15:1) while teachings associated with the Christian scriptures highlight humility, patience and avoidance of retaliation in interpersonal disputes (Matthew 5:39–44). These parallels show a shared ethical emphasis on dignity in disagreement rather than confrontation.

This intellectual ethic is encapsulated in a poetic passage attributed to Imam al-Reza, the core philosophy of which lies in the mastery of the ego and the elevation of character. He conveys that a true scholar's response must be measured according to the intellectual and moral standing of the interlocutor:

silence in the face of the ignorant preserves one's dignity, forbearance with an equal is a testament to moral superiority, and ready acknowledgment of a superior's excellence is the hallmark of a sincere truth-seeker.

5.3 Fairness and intellectual honesty in debate

Fairness, honesty and clarity in speech are among the fundamental principles of meaningful discussion. In many debates, individuals become so concerned with proving themselves correct that discourse turns into a contest of humiliation rather than a sincere search for truth. The Quranic approach to interfaith discussion emphasises wisdom, justice, patience and dignified discourse “Invite to the way of your Lord with wisdom and good instruction and argue with them in the best manner” (Quran 16:125) also “And do not argue with the People of the Book except in a way that is best” (Quran 29:46).

Imam al-Reza consistently observed these principles and frequently reminded his opponents to maintain justice during discussion. In his debate with Imran al-Sabi'i he stated: “Ask whatever you wish, O Imran but observe fairness and avoid falsehood and injustice” (Ibn Babawayh al-Qummi, n.d., p. 289). Likewise, whenever the opposing side spoke fairly, the Imam openly acknowledged it, remarking to a Christian scholar: “Now you have spoken with fairness, O Christian.” This acknowledgment demonstrates that the Imam valued truth above sectarian rivalry.

5.4 Respect and honour for the opponent

One of the most prominent ethical principles reflected in the debates of Imam al-Reza was respect and honour toward the opposing party. In none of his debates did the Imam resort to insult, humiliation or offensive language. He consistently treated others with dignity and courtesy and instructed his companions to maintain politeness so that an atmosphere of mutual respect could prevail.

This approach is closely aligned with Quranic principles of respectful engagement. The Quran addresses Jews and Christians with the honourable expression “People of the Book” (Quran 3:64) rather than using inflammatory labels and instructs believers to engage others through wisdom and gracious speech (Quran 16:125, 29:46). Imam al-Reza reflected this by addressing his interlocutors with respectful titles: “O Christian,” “O Jew,” “O People of the Book.”

Despite his immense scholarly rank, the Imam never demeaned his opponents during debate. When some of his own companions mocked Sulaiman al-Marwazi as his arguments became inconsistent, the Imam immediately stopped them advised them to observe respectful conduct and calmly continued the discussion (Al-Qurashi, n.d., p. 195). In his debate with Imran al-Sabi'i, the Imam invited him to sit closer honoured him with kindness and after the debate gifted him garments and ten thousand dirhams (Majlisi, 1983, p. 318).

5.5 Avoidance of personal attacks and character criticism

Another important principle in the debates of Imam al-Reza was the complete avoidance of personal attacks. Rather than targeting the personality or personal life of his interlocutors the Imam focused exclusively on arguments, evidence and intellectual discussion. A careful study of his debates demonstrates that he never resorted to insulting the character of his opponents, accusing them of deliberate falsehood or humiliating them personally.

This ethical approach is rooted in Quranic teachings that discourage ridicule, mockery and insulting speech even in situations of religious difference (Quran 49:11) and instruct believers to speak to others in

a gracious and respectful manner (Quran 2:83, 16:125). Similar teachings appear in biblical wisdom literature, which emphasises restraint in speech (Proverbs 15:1) and in Christian scripture, which encourages gentleness and patience rather than abusive conduct (Ephesians 4:31–32).

When Jathaliq reacted emotionally to the Imam's statement, saying, “By Allah, you have corrupted your knowledge and weakened your argument” (Ibn Babawayh al-Qummi, n.d., p. 280) the Imam did not retaliate through insult or personal attack. Rather, he calmly continued the debate through rational questioning. This demonstrates that in the Imam's method of dialogue, the objective was clarification of truth through ethical discourse not the humiliation of the opponent.

5.6 Welcoming opposing views

During the medieval period, when ecclesiastical authority often exercised strict control over philosophical and theological discourse, many dominant religious institutions were reluctant to tolerate viewpoints that challenged established doctrinal interpretations. A frequently cited historical example is the case of Galileo Galilei a Roman Catholic, whose support for heliocentric theory brought him into conflict with Church authorities in seventeenth-century Europe (Heilbron, 2010).

By contrast, the intellectual approach reflected in the debates of Imam al-Reza demonstrates a markedly different model. While firmly presenting and defending Islamic teachings, the Imam did not attempt to silence alternative viewpoints through coercion or hostility. Rather, he welcomed questions, objections and intellectual challenges, responding through reasoned dialogue, evidence and rational argumentation. The Quran itself instructs “Invite to the way of your Lord with wisdom and good instruction, and argue with them in the best manner” (Quran 16:125). The Quran also repeatedly encourages reflection and contemplation rather than blind imitation or forced conformity (Quran 39:9, 3:190–191).

This method of welcoming opposing ideas produced several important outcomes:

(i) Encouragement of intellectual exchange, freedom of expression and open inquiry.

(ii) Rational and scholarly engagement with opposing schools of thought, clarifying Islamic teachings through evidence and dialogue.

(iii) Establishment of an ethical model for interaction with followers of different religions and intellectual traditions.

(iv) Demonstration that confidence in one's beliefs does not require hostility toward differing viewpoints.

5.7 Gentle and respectful language in dialogue

One of the essential factors behind the effectiveness of speech in dialogue and debate is the use of gentle language, warmth in tone and a balanced, respectful manner of expression. Harsh communication often closes the door to understanding, whereas kindness in speech creates an atmosphere in which ideas can be heard with openness. The Quran illustrates this principle in the command given to Prophets Musa and Harun (a.s.) when they were sent to confront Pharaoh despite his tyranny: Allah commanded them “So speak to him with gentle words so that he may take heed or fear Allah” (Quran 20:44).

Likewise, the Quran attributes the success of the Prophet Muhammad (s.a.w.w.) to his gentleness “It is by the mercy of Allah that you are gentle with them and if you had been harsh and hard-hearted, they would

have dispersed from around you" (Quran 3:159). A similar ethical teaching appears in the Hebrew wisdom tradition "A gentle answer turns away wrath but a harsh word stirs up anger" (Proverbs 15:1).

A careful study of the expressions and tone employed by Imam al-Reza in his debates demonstrates that he paid attention not only to the intellectual dimension of discussion but also to the emotional condition of his audience. His debates reveal that he consistently expressed his arguments in soft, respectful and measured language while completely avoiding offensive or hurtful expressions. During his debate with Sulaiman al-Marwazi on the concept of Bada, for instance, Sulaiman became so intellectually engaged by the Imam's calm and reasoned explanation that he eagerly requested further clarification.

5.8 Correct understanding of the opponent's meaning in debate

One of the fundamental principles of sound debate is the correct understanding of the opponent's words, intention and underlying meaning. Without accurately grasping what the other party is actually saying, any response risks becoming based on misunderstanding rather than truth, which can lead to sophistry, confusion and logical fallacy.

Imam al-Reza consistently emphasised this intellectual discipline, directing attention toward careful reflection and fair understanding of complex theological issues. As he said to Imran al-Sabi'i: "O Imran! I will explain to you in detail what you have asked, but reflect carefully on what I say and use your intellect and understanding in grasping it, because these are among the most difficult and complex issues. Those who are devoid of intellect, weak in reasoning and afflicted with ignorance are unable to understand them. Only those who are rational, fair-minded, seekers of truth and possess insight can comprehend them" (Ibn Babawayh al-Qummi, n.d., p. 297). This statement highlights that intellectual engagement is not merely about hearing words but about accurately comprehending meaning, context and conceptual depth.

5.9 Mastery of the interlocutor's intellectual framework

A distinguishing methodological feature of Imam al-Reza's debates was his thorough command of the doctrinal vocabulary, scripture and intellectual assumptions of each tradition he engaged. This scholarly preparation allowed him to meet each interlocutor on the interlocutor's own conceptual ground rather than imposing an external framework, a methodological choice that is elaborated further in Section 5.10.

5.10 Debate through accepted premises and common grounds

One of the most effective methods of scholarly discussion is to present arguments on the basis of principles, beliefs and premises already accepted by the opposing party. Imam al-Reza considered it ineffective to argue with non-Muslims solely through the Quran, since its divine authority had not yet been established for them. Therefore, he adopted the method of engaging followers of other religions through their own scriptures, accepted beliefs and intellectual traditions.

This approach reflects the Quranic principle of inviting people toward shared foundations "Say: O People of the Book! Come to a common word between us and you" (Quran 3:64). When al-Mamun requested Jathaliq to debate with the Imam, the Christian scholar replied "How can I debate with a man who argues with me using a book that I do not accept? The Imam responded "O Christian! If I argue with you using your Gospel, will you accept it?" The scholar replied that he could not reject what the Gospel contains (Ibn Babawayh al-Qummi, n.d., p. 277; Tabrisi, 1966, p. 202).

This declaration illustrates not only the Imam's scholarly mastery over the doctrines and scriptures of different religions, discussed in Section 5.9, but also his deep awareness of the ethics and methodology of interfaith dialogue. He stated explicitly: “When he hears me debating the People of the Torah through their own Torah, the People of the Gospel through their own Gospel, the People of the Psalms through their own Psalms, the Sabian in their Hebrew tongue, the Herbadhs in Persian, the People of Rome in their Roman language and the adherents of every doctrine in their own respective languages, then the truth will become clear to them” (Ibn Babawayh al-Qummi, n.d., p. 262).

5.11 Freedom of expression

An important feature of the debates of Imam al-Reza was the genuine allowance of freedom of expression and intellectual engagement. He granted full opportunity to participants to express their views, objections and interpretations without fear or restriction. Even when opposing arguments were weak, repetitive or inconsistent, the Imam did not deprive his opponents of the right to present their positions.

During his discussion with Sulaiman al-Marwazi, when Sulaiman had fallen into repeated contradictions, Caliph al-Mamun expressed frustration that Sulaiman was circling the same points without producing new evidence. Imam al-Reza responded with an important ethical instruction advising restraint in silencing the opponent, noting that preventing Sulaiman from speaking might create the impression that he was not being allowed to present his arguments freely, and that the discussion should therefore continue within the framework of open dialogue (Ibn Babawayh al-Qummi, n.d., p. 317). This demonstrates the Imam's commitment to intellectual fairness even when the opponent's reasoning was weak.

5.12 Avoidance of intellectual narrowness and broad-mindedness toward others' views

One of the distinguishing features of the debates of Imam al-Reza was his complete avoidance of intellectual prejudice and narrow-mindedness when engaging with followers of other religions and schools of thought. His approach was grounded in intellectual fairness, openness and a refusal to dismiss any viewpoint without due examination. Even when addressing individuals who did not accept the foundational principles of Islam, the Quran or the Prophet Muhammad (s.a.w.w.), the Imam engaged them through principles they themselves recognised and accepted, ensuring that the argument remained intellectually binding and logically consistent.

This method reflects a broader principle of rational dialogue: true engagement requires entering the intellectual framework of the other party rather than imposing one's own assumptions. Intellectual openness in the debates of Imam al-Reza was not merely a rhetorical posture; it was a structural commitment embedded in his method of engagement. Rather than dismissing opposing opinions at their first appearance, the Imam allowed them to develop fully and unfold completely before offering any response. This practice transformed moments of disagreement into genuine opportunities for clarification and mutual understanding, rather than occasions for confrontation or point-scoring.

In the debate with Jathaliq, when the opponent reacted strongly and accused the Imam of ruining his knowledge, the Imam maintained complete composure and dignity. Instead of responding emotionally, he continued the discussion and addressed the theological question regarding the divinity of Prophet Jesus (a.s.) through rational and structured reasoning, while preserving respect and balance throughout.

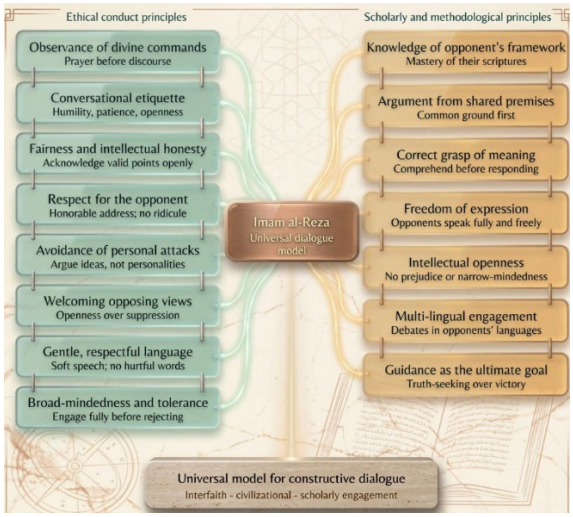


Figure 1: Framework of ethical and dialectical principles in Imam al-Reza's interfaith debates. Left: ethical conduct (Sections 5.1–5.8). Right: scholarly methods (Sections 5.9–5.12). Centre: the integrating model discussed in Section 6

6. DISCUSSION

The findings presented in Section 5 show that Imam al-Reza's approach to interfaith debate cannot be reduced to either a purely ethical code of conduct or a purely argumentative strategy the two clusters of principles operate together, as Figure 1 illustrates. The ethical principles (Sections 5.1–5.8) establish the relational conditions, dignity, fairness, gentleness and restraint, under which genuine persuasion becomes possible, while the methodological principles (Sections 5.9–5.12) supply the intellectual technique, engagement through shared premises, mastery of the interlocutor's framework and protection of the opponent's freedom of expression, that gives that persuasion its rational force. This integration is significant because it addresses a limitation in the existing literature identified in Section 2.3: Fathi (2023) documents the Imam's general disposition toward dialogue but does not disaggregate that disposition into transferable components, while Solihin and Osmani (2021) derive communication ethics from Qur'anic exegesis without anchoring them in a specific historical case that demonstrates how those ethics interact with argumentative strategy in practice. The present analysis suggests that it is precisely this interaction, ethical conduct enabling methodological rigour and methodological rigour in turn reinforcing ethical credibility, that distinguishes Imam al-Reza's model and gives it its claim to being a coherent, teachable framework rather than a loose set of admirable qualities.

The cross-traditional parallels documented throughout Section 5 (for example the convergence between Proverbs 15:1 and the Imam's emphasis on gentle speech or between Ephesians 4:31–32 and his avoidance of personal attack) further suggest that the model's applicability is not contingent on doctrinal agreement. A Christian, Jewish or secular interlocutor need not accept the theological conclusions of any given debate to recognise the legitimacy of the conduct through which those conclusions were reached. This has direct implications for contemporary interfaith and civilizational dialogue, where disagreement over substantive doctrine is often mistaken for a justification of disrespect or hostility. The debate with Sulaiman al-Marwazi (Section 5.11) is particularly instructive here: the Imam protected his opponent's right to speak even while that opponent's own reasoning was breaking down under scrutiny, a distinction between defeating an

argument and silencing a person that speaks directly to contemporary concerns about polarisation, deplatforming and the erosion of good-faith disagreement in both religious and civic discourse.

At the same time, the analysis should not be read as claiming that Imam al-Reza's debates offer a ready-made template for resolving substantive theological disagreement between traditions the outcomes recorded in Table 1, an interlocutor's silence, acceptance or admission of an unresolved objection, indicate rhetorical and evidentiary success within the terms of that specific encounter, not confirmation of interfaith consensus in the modern sense. What the model offers, more modestly and more durably, is a procedural standard: a demonstration that firm doctrinal commitment and respectful, good-faith engagement with an opposing tradition are not merely compatible but mutually reinforcing. This procedural emphasis aligns with, and arguably anticipates, features of contemporary comparative-theology methodology which likewise privileges close engagement with another tradition's own sources over abstraction from them.

The limitations identified in Section 3.4 also bear on how these findings should be interpreted. Because the analysis draws on Twelver Shia compilations and translated primary texts, some of the finer argumentative detail and possibly alternative framings preserved in other transmission chains, may not be captured here. Future research could usefully extend this thematic framework through comparative analysis of parallel narrations in Sunni historiographical sources, or through empirical study of whether contemporary interfaith practitioners trained in this model report measurable differences in dialogue outcomes.

7. CONCLUSION

The scholarly debates of Imam Ali al-Reza with theologians, philosophers and representatives of different religions present a comprehensive model that transcends the boundaries of any single era or civilization. His approach was not merely a theological exercise confined to the early Islamic period it represents a timeless ethical and intellectual framework applicable to every culture, society and human tradition.

The principles demonstrated by Imam al-Reza intellectual openness, avoidance of bias, respect for the opponent, freedom of expression, use of commonly accepted premises, gentleness in speech and commitment to rational discourse, collectively form a universal code of ethical dialogue. As Section 6 discussed, these principles are not exclusively Islamic in their application but are broadly human in their relevance finding resonance across the moral teachings of the Abrahamic and world traditions.

In the contemporary world, where religious extremism, sectarian tension, ideological polarisation and intolerance continue to deepen divisions within and between societies the need for such a principled model of dialogue has never been greater. The approach modelled by Imam al-Reza demonstrates that debates, when conducted with intellectual discipline and ethical sincerity, need not result in hostility or confrontation. Instead, they can become powerful instruments for clarity, understanding and even transformation of thought. His debates serve as evidence that confidence in one's beliefs does not require the suppression or humiliation of opposing viewpoints.

Ultimately, this model calls upon individuals, scholars and institutions across all cultures and civilizations to embrace a culture of dialogue that is inclusive, ethically grounded and intellectually honest, one that emphasises understanding before response, reasoning before rejection, and engagement before judgment.

8. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS AND FUNDING

No funding was acquired for this work.

9. CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no competing interests. No financial or non-financial interests exist that could potentially influence the results or interpretation of the work presented in this paper.

10. AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

Ali Raza: Conceptualisation, methodology, source analysis, investigation, writing – original draft, writing – review and editing.

11. DECLARATION OF GENERATIVE AI IN THE WRITING PROCESS

During the preparation of this work the author used AI-assisted tools in order to improve the language, grammar and readability of the manuscript. After using this tool/service the author reviewed and edited the content as needed and takes full responsibility for the content of the publication.

12. DATA AVAILABILITY

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new datasets were generated or analysed during the current study. All primary sources analysed are published classical texts cited in the reference list.

13. ETHICS STATEMENT

The author declares that this research did not involve human or animal subjects. The study is a library-based textual and thematic analysis of published classical primary sources.

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Note. Verses from the Quran and the Bible are cited in text by book/surah and verse (e.g., Quran 16:125; Deuteronomy 18:18) following the journal rule.