

We have made you nations and tribes...¹:
**A Qur'anically Based Vision of Multiculturalism
and Inter-Religious Relations**

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Religion is often seen as a major source of conflict and tension in the world. Perhaps no religion is as conspicuous in this regard as Islam. Islam's popular image is increasingly negative, particularly in Europe and North America. The Qur'an is often misconstrued and sometimes even reviled as a book that preaches hatred, intolerance, and violence. This impression is influenced in no small part by the actions of terrorists who portray themselves as Muslims acting in the name of Islam. However, the text is not the exclusive property of those individuals and groups, who are only a fraction of the world's Muslims. It is a text with a nearly 1500 year history of interpretation and implementation, which is read today as the sacred text more of than a billion of the world's people, from various cultures in both the East and the West. This essay seeks to present a literal and holistic reading of the Qur'an's discussion of humanity, gender, intercultural, and inter-religious relations.

¹ Qur'an 49:13

By literal and holistic, I mean a reading that focuses on the literal meanings of the Arabic text read within the context of the Qur'an as an entire book, applying the time-honored interpretive principles of *al-aṣl fil-kalām al-ḥaqīqa* (the fundamental principle of speech is literalness) and *tafsīr al-qur'ān bil-qur'ān* (explaining the Qur'an with the Qur'an). Such a reading demonstrates that rather than being a wellspring of intolerance and hatred, the Qur'an invites humanity to inter-religious and intercultural understanding and cooperation in striving to achieve social justice for humanity.

The examination of what the Qur'an has to say on these important issues will begin with the Arabic of the verses, followed a translation² and discussion

The verse that lays the foundation for the present discussion is chapter 49 (Sūrat al-Ḥujurāt), verse 13:

*yā ayyuhā al-nāsu innā khalaqnākum min dhakarīn wa unthā wa
ja 'alnākum shu'ūban wa qabā'ila li-ta 'ārafū inna akramakum īnda
allāhi atqākum inna allāha 'alīmun khabīr*

Which means:

O people! Indeed, we have created you from a male and a female, and have made you nations and tribes that you may get to know one another. Indeed, the most noble of you, in the sight of God, are those

² Unless otherwise noted, all translations are those of the author.

with the most *taqwa*. Indeed, God is Knower, Aware. (Sūrat al-Ḥujurāt, verse 13)

We will leave the idea of *taqwa* untranslated for the moment and return to it shortly. First, it is important to point out that this verse, which is addressed to humanity in general, rather than to Muslims, or believers, informs us that gender and national and tribal differences are divinely ordained, so that people may get to know one another. A key term used in this verse is *ta 'ārafū*, translated here as “get to know one another.” The verb *ta 'ārafū* is in the sixth form in Arabic, which carries the meaning of activity that is reciprocal and ongoing.³ Therefore, this verse does not simply refer to people of some groups learning about others, but various groups are actively engaged in relationships that are continuing and mutual, in which they are learning about one another.

The Qur'an also addresses various manifestations of national and ethnic differences. In chapter 30 (Sūrat al-Rūm) verse 22, the Qur'an declares:

*wa min āyātihi khalq uḥ-samāwāti wa aḥ-ardī wa akhtilāf alsinatikum
wa alwānikum inna fī dhālika la-āyātin lil'ālimīn*

Which means:

³ W. Wright, *A Grammar of the Arabic Language* vol. 1 (Beirut: Librairie du Liban, 1996) 39B

Among His signs is the creation of the heavens and the earth and the variations in your languages and colors. Certainly, in that are signs for the worlds. (Sūrat al-Rūm, verse 22)

In chapter 7 (Sūrat al-'Arāf) verse 26:

yā banī ādam qad anzalnā 'alaykum libāsan yuwārī saw'ātikum wa rīshan wa libāsu al-taqwā dhālika khayrun dhālika min 'āyāti allāhi la 'allahum yadhakkarūna

Which means:

Oh children of Adam, We have sent down to you garments to cover your nakedness, and as a means of adornment, but the best garment is the garment of *taqwa*. This is among the signs of God, so that perhaps you may reflect. (Sūrat al-'Arāf, verse 26)

It is clear from these verses that variations color, language, and even clothing styles are divinely ordained. The Qur'an also makes it clear that such variations should not be a source of discrimination or derision in verse 11 of Chapter 49 (Sūrat al-Hujurāt).

yā ayyuhā alladhīna āmanū lā yaskhar qa wmun min qa wmin 'asā an yakūnū khayran minhum wa lā nisā'un min nisā'in 'asā an yakunna khayran minhunna wa lā talmizū anfusakum wa lā tanābazū bil-alqāb...

Which means:

O you who acknowledge, one people should not deride another, for it may be that they are better than them; nor should some women deride others, for it may be that they are better than them; and do not insult each other or ridicule each other with nicknames.... (Sūrat al-Ḥujurāt, verse 11)

So, according to the Qur'an, the differences in languages and colors, and even modes of dress are signs of God, which the Qur'an compares to the creation of the heavens and the earth; moreover, these differences should not be sources of rivalry or discrimination. On the contrary, the verb *ta 'ārafū* in 49:13 indicates that people should recognize and appreciate such God-given differences.

A distinction that is sometimes popularly used to argue for an inevitable class of civilizations is the dichotomy of East and West. This issue is also addressed in the Qur'an, in chapter 2 (Sūrat al-Baqara) verse 115: *wa li-llahi al-mashriqu wa al-maghribu fa-aynamā tuwallū fa-thamma wajhu allāhi inna allāha wāsi'un 'alīm.* [To God belongs the East and the West, thus wherever you turn, there is the face of God. Certainly God is all-encompassing, all-knowing] (Sūrat al-Baqara, verse 115). Far from envisioning a clash between East and West, the Qur'an thus makes it clear that God is found wherever you turn, East or West. Both are equally encompassed by God.

In addition to an East/West dichotomy, religious differences are also alleged as part of an inevitable clash of civilizations. Here is how the Qur'an addresses differences in religious affiliation: chapter 5 (Sūrat al-Mā'ida) verse 69:

inna al-ladhīna āmanū wa al-ladhīna hādū wa al-ṣābi'ūna wa al-naṣārā man āmana bil-lāhi wa al-yawm il-ākhirī wa 'amila ṣāliḥan fa-lā khawfun 'ala yhim wa lā hum yaḥzanūn

Which means:

Certainly, those who believe, those who are Jewish, the Sabians, and the Christians, whoever acknowledges God and the Last Day and does good, will have nothing to fear, nor will they grieve. (Sūrat al-Mā'ida, verse 69)

Some Muslims argue that this verse was abrogated by Qur'an 3:85.⁴ "*wa man yabtaghi ghayr al-islāmi dīnan fa-lan yuqbalā minhu wa huwa fil-ākhirati min al-khāsirīn*" [Whoever seeks a religion other than *al-islām* it will not be accepted from him, and on the Last Day, he will be among the losers.] However, the idea of abrogation here is also problematic. First, because as John Burton and Abu Yousuf al-Corentini have demonstrated, there a number of serious issues related to the question of abrogation itself, not the least of which is that there has never been agreement among Muslim scholars on the existence of abrogation within the

⁴ M.T. al-Hilali and M.M. Khan, *Interpretation of the Meanings of the Noble Qur'an* (Riyadh: Maktaba Dar-us-Salam, 1996), p. 165 n. 1

Qur'an, let alone on the issue of specific verses are abrogating and which are abrogated.⁵ Moreover, for those scholars who accept the existence of abrogation within the text of the Qur'an, a key criterion is the chronological order of revelation: earlier verses are abrogated by later verses.⁶ According to both Muslim and non-Muslim chronologies of the Qur'an, chapter 5 was revealed *after* chapter 3.⁷ So the claim that 3:85 abrogates 5:69 is problematic. Yet there seems to be a conflict between the notion expressed in 5:69 and that expressed in 3:85.

Applying the exegetical principle of *tafsīr al-Qur'an bil-Qur'an* (explaining the Qur'an with the Qur'an) and the jurisprudential principle *al-aṣl fil-kalām al-ḥaqīqā* (the fundamental rule of speech is literalness) shows that there is, in reality, no conflict between Qur'an 3:85, and 5:69. Indeed, applying these two principles reveals the harmony that exists between these verses. The issue hinges on the Qur'anic usage of the terms *islām* (lit. "submission" or "surrender") and *dīn* (usually translated as "religion"). Solomon, Abraham, Moses, and Jesus, together with those who followed them are defined as *muslim* in the Qur'an.⁸ The Qur'an also orders Muḥammad to declare: *mā kuntu bid'ān min al-rusul* (I am nothing new

⁵ John Burton, *The Sources of Islamic Law: Islamic Theories of Abrogation*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1990; Abu Yousuf al-Corentine, "The Concept of Abrogation in the Qur'an." *Journal of Religion and Culture* (10) 1996, Concordia University: 63-76.

⁶ Burton, 20.

⁷ Richard Bell and W. Montgomery Watt, *Introduction to the Quran*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1977, 207. Ahmed von Denffer, *Ulūm al-Qur'an: An Introduction to the Sciences of the Qur'an*. Leicestershire, UK: The Islamic Foundation, 2000, 87.

⁸ Qur'an 2:128-133; 3:52; 10:84; 27:44; 38:34

among the messengers).⁹ Additionally, the Qur'an asserts: *mā yuqālu laka illā mā qad qīla li-rusul min qablaka* (nothing is said to you that has not already been said to the messengers before you).¹⁰ The Qur'an also connects "those who have been given the book" (*al-ladhīna 'ūtū a-l-kitāb*) with "right religion" (*dīn a-l-qayyima*) in Chapter 98 (Surat al-Bayyina):

wa mā tafarraqa al-ladhīna 'ūtū a-l-kitāb illā min ba'd mā jā'athum al-bayyīnahu wa mā umirū 'illā liya 'budū allāh mukhlīshīn lahu a-l-dīn ḥunafā' wa yuqīmū a-l-ṣalāt wa yu 'ūtū a-l-zakāt wa dhalika dīn a-l-qayyimahi

Which means:

Those who have been given the book did not become divided except after clear evidence had come to them. They were only commanded to serve God, being sincere to Him in religion, and to establish prayer, and give alms--that is right religion. (Surat al-Bayyina, verses:4-5)

Chapter 3 (Surat Āl Imrān) verses 113-4 offer further elucidation:

la ysū sa wā'an min ahl a-l-kitāb ummatun qā'imatun yatlūna āyāt allāh ānā' a-l-layl wa hum yasjudūn yu'uminūna bi-llāhi wa a-l-yawm il-ākhir wa ya 'murūna bi-l-ma 'rūf wa yanhawna 'an al-munkar wa yusārī'ūna fī a-l-khayrāt wa 'ulā'ika min a-l-ṣāliḥīn

⁹ Qur'an 46:9

¹⁰ Qur'an 41:43

Which means:

They are not the same. Among the people of the book there is an upright community. They recite the signs of God during the night while prostrating.

They believe in God and the Last Day. They enjoin good conduct and forbid wrongdoing, and they hasten to do good works. These are among the righteous. (Surat Āl Imrān 113-114)

"The book" that previous communities received is also clearly identified in the Qur'an. In chapter 5, there is an extended discussion of God's scripture, in verses 44-48. Verse 44, tells us that God sent down the Torah (*innā anzalnā al-tawrah fihā hudan wa nūr*) [Certainly, we sent down the Torah, in which there is guidance and light] (Sūrat al-Mā'ida, verse 44). In verse 45, it says of Jesus (*ataynāhu al-injil fihī hudan wa nūr*) [We gave him the Gospel, in which there is guidance and light] (Sūrat al-Mā'ida, verse 45). Those who received the scripture are not commanded to abandon what they received in favor of the Qur'an; rather, they are urged to rule according to what God has sent down in it (*yaḥkum bi-mā anzala allah*) in verses 44 and 47. Verse 48 declares that the Qur'an has been sent down, not to replace previous scripture, but as a confirmation and validation of it:

wa anzalnā ilayka al-kitāba biḥ-ḥaqqi muṣaddiqan li-mā bayna yadayhi mina al-kitābi wa muhayminan 'alayhi

Which means,

We have sent down the scripture to you in truth, as a confirmation and validation of what came before it. (Sūrat al-Ma'ida, verse 48)

The Qur'an directs Jews, Christians, and Muslims to follow the guidance that God has sent down to them and promises that those who do so will have nothing to fear, nor will they grieve. After declaring that God has sent down the Torah and the Gospel containing guidance and that the Qur'an confirms and validates them and urging people to follow what God has sent down, the Qur'an goes on to say:

*li-kullin ja 'alnā minkum shir'atan wa minhājan wa law shā'a allāh la-
ja 'alakum ummatan wāhidatan wa lākin li-yabluwakum fī mā
ātākum fa-astabiqū al-khayrāt ilā allāhi marji'ukum jamī'an fa-
yunabbi'ukum bi-mā kuntum fīhi takhtalifūn*

Which means:

For each among you we have ordained a law and a way of doing things. If God had willed, He would have made you a single community. But he wishes to test you with that which he has given you. So compete with one another in good things. It is to God that all of you will return, and then He will inform you of that about which you used to differ.

Here too, the Qur'an indicates that differences are God-given, for if God had willed, humanity would be a single community. However, each community has been given a law and a way of doing things and what they have been given is part of a test from God. So, how is it that God-given differences have become a matter of dispute? The Qur'an provides this answer: *wa mā tafarraqu illā min ba'di mā jā'humu a-l'ilmu baghyan baynahum* [they only broke into factions after knowledge came to them, out of rivalry between them] (Sūrat al-Shūrā, verse 14). It is human rivalry that turns God-given differences into sources of conflict and discrimination, according to the Qur'an.

It is important not to overlook the fact that the Qur'an says that communities are being tested with what they have been given. The Qur'an further clarifies the purpose for which God tests humanity in chapter 67 (Sūrat al-Mulk) verse 2: *li-yablwakum ayyukum aḥsanu 'amalan* [so that he may test which of you is best in action] (Sūrat al-Mulk verse 2)-- which is best in action, not which is the best gender, or a member of the best nation, or the best ethnic group, or the best religious denomination; not which has the best color, or the best language, but which is the best in action. Gender, ethnic and national background, language, color, geographic region, and religion are all-to-often used by both individuals and nations as sources of conflict and reasons to discriminate against each other. However, from

a Qur'anic perspective, it is not such differences that determine our nobility in the sight of God.

Now, let's return to the quality that according to the Qur'an, does determine who is most noble in the sight of God: *taqwa*. The concept of *taqwa* is variously translated as "piety," "righteousness," "good conduct," "fear of God," or "God-consciousness," and it carries all of these meanings. *Taqwa* refers to a sense of awareness of one's actions and concern for the consequences of those actions. As indicated in chapter 67, verse 2, God tests humanity to determine who is best in action. So, what are the actions that demonstrate our *taqwa*? The Qur'an clarifies this and describes those who have *taqwa* in chapter 2 (Sūrat al-Baqara) verse 177:

laysa al-birra an tuwallū wujūhakum qibal al-mashriqi wa al-
maghrib wa lākinna al-birra man āmana billāhi wa al-yawm il-ākhirī
wa al-malā'ikati wa al-kitābi wa al-nabīyīna wa ātā al-māl 'alā
ḥubbihi dha wī al-qurbā wa al-yatāmā wa al-masākīna wa abra al-
sabīli wa al-sā'ilīna wa fil-riqābi wa aqāma al-ṣalāta wa ātā al-zakāt
wa al-mūfūna bi 'ahdihim idhā 'āhadū wa al-ṣābirīna fil-ba'sā'i wa
al-ḍarrā'i wa ḥīn al-ba'si ūlā'ika al-ladhīna ṣadaqū wa ūlā'ika hum
ul-muttaqūn

Which means:

Righteousness is not turning your faces in the direct of the East or the West, but the righteous are whoever acknowledges God and the Last Day, the angels, the book, and the prophets, and spends wealth out of his love for relatives, orphans, the poor, the wayfarer, those who ask, and for those in bondage. They establish prayer and pay alms; honoring the covenants they have made, persevering in adversity and bad times, these are the trustworthy, and these are the ones who have *taqwa*. (Surat al-Baqara, verse 177 emphasis added).

It is clear from the Qur'an that it is peoples' behavior, their actions, especially toward other human beings that determine who is most noble in the sight of God. It is not gender, nation, tribe, language, color, geographic region, or even particular religious denomination or sect. It is actions that demonstrate *taqwa*, or awareness, actions such as spending wealth to improve the conditions of those who are weak and in need, honoring covenants, and persevering in adversity.

The Qur'an indicates that differences in gender, ethnicity, nationality, language, color, and religion are God-given and among the wonders of creation, and it calls on people to recognize and appreciate each other. It informs humanity that God encompass both the East and the West, so that wherever they turn, they will find the face of God. It also tells people that they face an important test. The test of who is best in action. In keeping with its self-declared nature as a book of

guidance, the Qur'an also tells people how they can pass that test. In spite of the Qur'an's notoriety in popular consciousness, it seems few people are aware of the clear teachings of the Qur'an outline here. Yet they are obvious from a literal and holistic reading of the text. In conclusion, it is fitting to return to chapter 5, verse 48, which sums up the Qur'an's advice to the various communities:

*li-kullin ja 'alnā minkum shir'atan wa minhājan wa law shā'a allāh la-
ja 'alakum ummatan wāḥidatan wa lākin li-yabluwakum fī mā
ātākum fa-astabiqū al-khayrāt*

For each among you we have ordained a law and a way of doing things. If God had willed, He would have made you a single community. But he wishes to test you with that which he has given you. So compete with one another in good things....

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