



UNIFORMITY AND DIVERSITY WITHIN THE CONTEXT OF QUR'ANIC "TAFAHOM" (MUTUAL UNDERSTANDING)

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“Muslims can never enter the modern world without a new interpretation of the Holy Qur’an. This is because the Qur’an holds the secret of the Muslim *Ummah* (Nation)’s existence and the key to the way in which it created history.”

Taha ‘Abdulrahman:

*Ruh al Hadathah (The Spirit of Modernism)*¹

“The hideous schizophrenia”

The revivalist movement in the Muslim world today is commonly known as “*al Sahwah*” (the Awakening) – a name which suggests that the Islamic heritage is fully capable of confronting the modern cultural hegemony being exercised by the Centre (i.e. the West) against the culturally backward

¹ See *Ruh al Hadathah: al Madkhal ila Ta’sis al Hadathah al Islamiyyah*, Dar al Markaz al Thaqafi al ‘Arabi, Casablanca, 1st impression, 2006.



“fringes”. However, while the heritage is indeed significant, those who see it as the only relevant factor are victims of a “historic schizophrenia”.

On the one hand they have failed to take note of the enormous social, economic and cognitive changes that have taken place across the world since the Industrial Revolution; these have accelerated to an unprecedented degree with the arrival of the Knowledge Revolution. The Islamic Revival’s refusal to acknowledge the intellectual background and principal factors behind those changes has rendered it incapable of adopting, adapting or developing them, despite its insistence that it has no alternative to interacting with them - particularly where technology is concerned.

On the other hand, the “Awakening Movement” has been able to benefit from the religiously-orientated cultural climate that prevails in most Muslim countries – a climate which ensures that a person who lives in one of those societies is basically a religious being, even if he does not appear to be so. Whatever the case, however, the nature of this religious element in his make-up prevents him from making a serious contribution to the cultural life of the contemporary world, since – in most cases – it is ineffectual, superficial and emotional rather than firm and deep-rooted. Indeed, not only does he seem to be almost unaware of his own behavioural contradictions and shortcomings; he also shows a remarkable lack of sensitivity to the social and intellectual demands and values required by his faith in the world of today (which are just as important now as they would be in any other time or place).

What we find instead is a sort of schizophrenia in which each side of the split personality feeds upon the other. This creates a complex for the Muslim psyche and leads some Muslims to conclude that Islam and modern life are mutually incompatible.

This is the reality of the “hideous schizophrenia” – a schizophrenia produced by a critical reaction that has failed to comprehend the intellectual and objective basis that gave rise to it. To resolve it we need to ask the following questions:

- How can one escape from the sense of discontent with the modern age? and
- How can “primitive religiosity” be transformed into something positive and up-to-date?

To answer these questions we need to adopt more than one line of approach. However, whatever approach we choose, we find that all the lines converge to meet at one point – that is, “*al Insan*” (“Man”). What is the nature of Man? What is his status in the universe? And how should he express that status?

We have several options here. We may seek to express that status by promoting a higher level of civic awareness and a better understanding of the “social contract”; or by taking a critical look at ourselves and showing a greater readiness to understand other points of view; or by focusing on our religious faith and its impact on our view of the world and our attitude to cultural and religious pluralism. However, whatever approach we choose, we will find ourselves having to recognize that it is ultimately “*al Insan*” – or “Man” – who needs to tackle the Muslims’ “cultural conundrum”.

Qur’anic Man and the modern age

When we look at the basis of Muslim culture and civilization as it is set out in the Qur’an, we find that “*al Insan*” is central to it. In the Qur’anic context “*al Insan*” is the key term linking all the concepts and dichotomies that combine the different elements into a single integrated whole: Allah and man, the Prophet and history, *Shariah* (law, way and system) and the *Ummah* (Muslim Nation), the world and the *ayat* (Signs), Adam and Man as Vicegerent.... All these terms are parts of a single conceptual system that comprises the essence of the Qur’an’s discourse. However, the significance of this system lies in the fact that it is greater than the sum of its parts, and it is the modern Muslim’s preoccupation with the “individual parts” that prevents him from confronting the major issues that concern him and the rest of mankind in the world of today.

When we consider the concept of “*al Insan*” in the language of the



Qur'an, we find that it includes a range of new connotations in addition to the usual meaning of "Man". The concept of "Man" in the Qur'anic lexicon is qualitatively different from the meaning conveyed in either its traditional or modern usage. While there is no conflict between the notion of "Qur'anic Man" and other definitions of "Man," "Man" in the sense that he is understood in the Qur'an is not a derivation of the original definition. According to the Qur'an, he is a being who receives Divine Inspiration. Indeed, he is Allah's Vicegerent on earth and imbued with the following qualities:

- He is a being with a distinctive status on the scale of creation. With his will and the potential to understand the nature of his responsibility on this earth, he is both a subject of knowledge and its source.
- By "unveiling" the Self, he can raise it to a higher plane than the mind and soul of an ordinary individual. In doing so, he takes it beyond its own earthly limits to the level of the Divine.
- "Qur'anic Man" has creative qualities that enable him to interact with the world around him in the deepest possible way.

Or, to put it briefly, "Qur'anic Man" is a being who is constantly renewing the way he looks at himself, others and the Infinite Cosmos.

So how can "Qur'anic Man" "lower himself" to adjust to the present-day situation? What are the main creedal and practical challenges he would have to face?

How can he embody the principle of "Vicegerency" – as set out for him in the Qur'an – in a modern social order based on equal rights and duties, and with institutions and freedoms guaranteed under the rule of law?

How can "Qur'anic Man" resolve the questions and enigmas of the modern age? How can we live together while accepting our differences?

Does Qur'anic discourse allow scope for a modern version of Islam in which pluralism is an established fact of life that enables the *Ummah* to flourish through the enriching experience of cultural, religious and intellectual co-existence?

Cultural disparity and compatibility

In answering the question "How can we live together while accepting our differences?" the first thing we need to do is recognize the need for a belief and thought structure which can accommodate concepts such as compatibility and difference and counter the view which sees pluralism as a "passing phase" that can be accepted temporarily as part of a short-term political and social reality. Such a structure would see "*al Insan*" in the contemporary sense as being organically linked to the issue of relations with "the different other".

Before we can achieve this the first thing we need to do is tackle the phenomenon of "Arab-Islamic cultural narrow-mindedness". This is the product of a socio-cultural complex that must be understood before we can consider the prevailing "revivalist" thought and the pivotal role of "*al Insan*" in relation to the intellectual and creedal trends that are current in the Arab Islamic world. Cultural narrow-mindedness is a huge obstacle to mutual understanding between peoples. While it is not limited to our part of the world, it is something that colours our cultural attitudes, our way of thinking and our view of ourselves and others in a way that leads to stereotyping and prejudice.

We need to recognize this fact before we can start to look at questions of belief and the principle of "Vicegerency" within the context of the profound cultural changes that are taking place in today's world.

In order to understand the meaning of pluralism within the Qur'anic context, a close examination is needed of the Qur'an's cultural and creedal principles and scriptural injunctions. This should enable us to demonstrate how diversity in modern thought and modern social and political values shares the same roots as those that are to be found in Qur'anic discourse.

This in turn should enable us to ask the following questions:

- In the light of Scriptural Revelation, and in the cultural context we have indicated above, how should we respond to the question of adaptation to the modern age? How do the Qur'an's *ayats* (verses) express the concept of diversity? And do the Qur'an's *ayats* offer us an actual methodology for tackling this question?



If we begin by looking at the substance, we will find that the concept of pluralism occurs in a wide range of contexts in the Qur'an, all of them linked to the Creator's intention and the issues of belief and rejection of faith. It is referred to by implication in such terms as "ta'aruf" ("getting to know one another"), "afuw" ("forgiveness"), "ikrah" ("coercion") and "tadhkir" ("reminding"), as well as expressions associated with the laws of history and the movements of societies. Cutting across this extensive field are a number of concepts which introduce a new set of values to the old traditional societies that made no distinction between religious affiliation and social, family and tribal ties.

The principle of "there is no coercion in religion" (*Qur'an, Al Baqarah verse 256*) marked a decisive step in which the Qur'an laid down a challenge to the prevailing cultural and religious order, whether it was pagan, Christian, Jewish or some other belief system. This new principle (new at the time it was revealed and then established for ever after) was based upon the concept of "Man" in the role of Vicegerent, as well as the human qualities of his Vicegerency which we referred to above. The principle of "no coercion in religion" is linked to a set of new – or revived – values that apply to both individuals and societies and reflect the basic core concept of "haqq" ("truth"/ "right"/ "justice"). We find that "haqq" is a fundamental element of Qur'anic discourse in: "And say: 'Haqq (Truth) is from your Lord.' So let him who will, believe, and let him who will, reject." (*Al Kahf verse 29*). Other instances in which support is given to the principles of pluralism and respect for different points of view include: "...and they ward off Evil with Good; for such is the attainment of the Final Home" (*Al Ra'd verse 22*) and "And the servants of [Allah] the Most Merciful who walk upon the earth in humility, and when the ignorant address them they say 'Peace'" (*Al Furqan, verse 63*). With regard to relations between groups, the following *ayats* demonstrate that people are equal whatever their beliefs, and thus support the principle of pluralism: "...and there never was a people without a warner having lived among them [in the past]" (*Fatir verse 24*) and "If it had been the Lord's Will, all those on earth would have believed. Wilt thou then compel mankind, against their will, to believe?" (*Yunus verse 99*).

The legitimacy of others' beliefs and respect for them

The most important point established by the concept of “*haqq*” is the idea that belief and adherence to the truth cannot be seen in isolation from their historical context. The Qur’an explains this by referring to the numerous Divine Messages that have been sent to mankind and their organic link to the eras in which they were revealed. The following *ayat* is a call to eschew “exclusivism” and sectarianism – “...and follow not their vain desires, diverging from the Truth that hath come to thee. To each among you We have prescribed a Law and an Open Way” (*Al Ma’idah* verse 48). This is further confirmed in two Madinan *ayats*: “Those who believe [in the Qur’an], and those who follow the Jewish [scriptures], and the Christians and the Sabians – and those who believe in Allah and the Last Day and work righteousness – shall have their reward with their Lord. On them shall be no fear, nor shall they grieve” (*Al Baqarah* verse 62) and “Those who believe [in the Qur’an], and those who follow the Jewish [scriptures], and the Sabians and the Christians – any who believe in Allah and the Last Day and work righteousness – on them shall be no fear, nor shall they grieve” (*Al Ma’idah* verse 69).

So the Qur’an’s yardstick for endorsing the “plurality of the Divine Messages” – ending with Muhammad’s Mission – is belief in One God and the Last Day, accompanied by righteous deeds.

Two other Madinan *ayats* reinforce this position: “Not your desires, nor those of the People of the Book [can prevail]. Whoever works evil will be requited accordingly; nor will he find any protector or helper besides Allah.” And “If any do deeds of righteousness – be they male or female – and have faith, they will enter Heaven, and not the least injustice will be done to them” (*Al Nisa’* verses 123 and 124).

The Qur’an’s approach to the question of different religious affiliations – particularly during the Madinan period – is determined by their religious and social context. When considering the question of “*haqq*” at a time when the Muslims had the upper hand, it recognized that “exclusivism” (a disease nurtured by cultural narrow-mindedness which squeezed “Divine Mercy” into a very narrow space) was a danger that could infect followers



of all Divine religions without exception. The Qur'an saw that exclusivism – with its associated excessive literalism and intolerance – was not a sound way to tackle the question of “*haqq*,” because it excluded the possibility of any interaction between “homogeneity” and “diversity”. By seeing salvation and deliverance as the sole preserve of one particular faith group, it ensured that the institution of Vicegerency could only look forward to a future in a total vacuum – outside the pale of history and incapable of playing an effective role in new historical eras.

Questions such as “homogeneity” and “diversity” in relation to the concept of “*haqq*” – and the principle of Vicegerency as a pivotal role of Man – did not only arise during the Madinan period. The Qur'an also referred to these issues during its Makkan period when it spoke of “*ta'aruf*” and showed respect for different creedal positions. In doing so it adapted its approach to reflect the historical context and lives of the early Believers and the situations they had to face; however, it was not anchored in a particular time, since it also offered lessons to the *Ummah* on how to confront the challenges it would have to face in future.

By demonstrating that “*haqq*” is not limited to a particular faith group or sect, the Qur'an teaches Man the ability to continually reinvent himself. In order to do so, he needs to develop a broad vision of himself and his wider community – and of the human race in all its diversity – so that mankind as a whole can work together to build an open, creative civilization. This is the lesson we learn from the two stories of Adam and his sons as they are told in the Qur'an. In the Qur'anic version, these stories convey a distinctly different message from the one found in the versions current among followers of the other Divine Missions. They tell us about the creation of a New Man – a “responsible being” – endowed with a system of values that enables him to comprehend the concepts of freedom, equality and the human will.

From this we can see that the Qur'an regards the relationship between “homogeneity” and “diversity” as being linked to the question of “*haqq*,” insofar as it sees people as being equal and honours them all equally. When it says “**We have honoured the sons of Adam**” (*Al Israa' verse 70*), it is

referring to the whole of mankind while rejecting "exclusivism," which refuses to accept that "diversity" can be acceptable as well as "uniformity," or that the principle of Vicegerency can be linked to Man's cultural, religious and intellectual needs.

From a creedal point of view, this means that the problem of "*haqq*" can only be resolved by respecting another person's right to choose his own path to the Truth, by recognizing that this respect arises from Allah's "honouring of Man," and by understanding that respect for differences is in fact an expression of respect for the Will of Allah: "**Thou wilt not [be able to] guide every one whom thou lovest; but Allah guides whom He will and He knows best those who receive guidance**" (*Al Qasas* verse 56). From this we can conclude that recognition of the legitimacy of others' beliefs is the key to "*ta'aruf*," coexistence and mutual enrichment and is in accord with the ethical, social and political standards of every time and place.

Belief in its cultural sense

We have already mentioned that the *ayat* "there is no coercion in religion" is a fundamental Qur'anic principle. For the 7th century CE this represented a drastic change in direction which posed a challenge not only to the prevailing cultural and religious assumptions of that time, but also to future generations since it saw "Qur'anic Man" as a mainstay of *Tawhid* (monotheism) in its broadest sense – a sense that was equally valid for every time and place. The principle of "no coercion in religion" affirms that Man's "inner world" is a world of freedom; that is, that although a powerful man may be able to impose "physical coercion" upon someone who is weaker than himself, he cannot control his will or force him to actually believe in something.

So where the question of uniformity and diversity is concerned, the Qur'an tells us that there can be no genuine spiritual life unless there is freedom of choice, and that there can be no freedom of choice if religious freedom is denied.

Nevertheless, some commentators maintain that this *ayat* is abrogated by the *ayat* on *qital* (fighting). Abu Bakr Ibn al 'Arabi, author of *Ahkam*



al Qur'an (The Qur'anic Rulings), refers to this view; however, although he did not endorse it, he was in favour of coercion in Islam and drew a distinction between coercion to accept what is false and coercion to accept the Truth – the former, in his opinion, being inadmissible and the latter being obligatory.¹

The question here, though, is: Can his view be regarded as compatible with the position expressed in numerous *ayats*, including: “Therefore do thou give admonition, for thou art one to admonish. Thou art not one to manage [men’s] affairs” (*Al Ghashiyah* verses 21-2), “Whoever receives guidance, receiveth it for his own benefit; and whoever goes astray doth so to his own loss. No bearer of burdens can bear the burden of another....” (*Al Israa’* verse 15), and “O ye who believe! Guard your own souls. If ye follow right guidance, no hurt can come to you from those who stray. The goal of you all is to Allah; it is He Who will show you the truth of that which ye do” (*Al Ma'idah* verse 105)?

This brings us back to the approach we should adopt in interpreting the Holy Qur'an, particularly with regard to the question of homogeneity and diversity. In this connection, it would be appropriate to ask: How, in general terms, should we understand the *ayats* on the “honouring of Man,” and what do they entail in respect of “*ta'aruf*” and recognition of differences? And how do they relate to the *ayats* condemning the People of the Book for falsifying the Scriptures and describing their conduct as *kufir* (unbelief) and lack of faith? And to what extent does this require us to deny the legitimacy of their beliefs?

The early commentators' views on this subject are significant. However, although they represent a wide range of opinions, their positions may be boiled down to two: “fragmentary” (which includes Abu Bakr Ibn al 'Arabi) or “composite”. The former selects and endorses certain specific *ayats* while ignoring others, with the aim of achieving a certain consistency

¹ Commenting on the *ayat* that states: “There is no coercion in religion,” Ibn al 'Arabi says: “This is a general rejection of coercion to accept what is false. However, coercion to accept the Truth is [a tenet] of the *din* (True Religion). And is a *Kafir* (Unbeliever) to be killed except for the sake of the *din*?” See *Ahkam al Qur'an*, ed. Mohammed Ali al Bajawi, Part 1, P, 233, Dar Ihya' al Turath al 'Arabi, Beirut, undated.

in the Qur'an's semantic content; the latter believes that the Message of the Qur'an should be looked at from a holistic point of view.

Some scholars in the "modernising camp," such as Fazlur Rahman, have opted for the second interpretation. In his book *Islam and Modernity*¹ he observes that the inefficacy of the intellectual tools used to deal with the pitfalls of the present day is due to the "lack of a sound methodology suitable for understanding the Qur'an itself". He maintains that the "composite" approach to interpreting the Qur'an has acquired its legitimacy from the fact that Allah continues to safeguard the Revealed Text. He notes that it is an interpretation with two dimensions: one of these is its continued applicability - from the era and circumstances in which it was revealed right up to the modern age - while the other is the fact that it transcends specific events and situations and establishes eternal values and goals for Believers to aspire towards. Hence the "composite" interpretation approaches the Qur'anic text at more than one level – one "time-related" (linked to the time and circumstances of the Qur'anic Revelation) and the other universal (applicable to every time and place).

So the Qur'an is historical in the way it approaches the circumstances of its time, yet at the same time it is timeless in its applicability.

It is the Qur'an's multiplicity of facets that provides the *Ummah* with the material for the intellectual and social goals it seeks to embrace as it progresses from one stage to the next in its history, thereby enabling scholars in later eras to understand the logic behind the laws and principles laid down at the time of Islam's genesis and apply the Qur'an's teachings to new situations whenever the need arises.

If one approaches the question of homogeneity and diversity without recognizing this, a likely outcome will be a violation of the sacred rights of Man, who has been honoured by Allah the Most High. This can take two forms: firstly, belittlement and disrespect for other people's beliefs, and secondly, Man's abdication of his role as Vicegerent – a role which is

1 Tr. Ibrahim al Aris, Dar al Saqi, London, 1st impression, 1993.



dependent upon dialectical interaction between the Believer and the world around him, and between him and the Sacred Text.¹

The case of al Bahlul bin Rashid – a leading North African scholar in the 2nd century AH – offers a typical example of the first type. When one of his companions bought some oil from a Christian and the Christian gave him more than he was entitled to in the hope of obtaining al Bahlul's blessing, al Bahlul asked him to return the oil to the Christian, saying: "I am afraid of feeling goodwill in my heart towards this *dhimmi* (protected subject of the Islamic *Ummah*)."

A contrasting view can be found in the works of al Wansharisi – a scholar of Maliki jurisprudence from the Maghreb in the 10th century AH – who demonstrated an alternative way of dealing with the "different other" and stressed the importance of a holistic approach to understanding the Qur'an, which he observed had had a positive impact on the cultural and intellectual life of the Islamic West.²

Finally, let us note that, while zealotry and *takfir* (accusing other Muslims of being Unbelievers) are historic symptoms and "treatable," they are invariably the product of concepts and interpretations that generate the ideas upon which certain sets of beliefs are based. This can be seen clearly in the context of pluralism and diversity and its close relationship to the intellectual and creedal systems that comprise what is known as "religious culture" – a phenomenon which is fundamentally different from religion itself.

When it leads to a belief system which takes the believer along a particular "path to Allah", then we must conclude that such a system cannot possibly encompass – let alone transcend – the infinite richness of Allah's Words, Knowledge and Mercy. Rather, it will represent the specific cultural and psychological characteristics and values of the social group

¹ See Sayyid Mohammed Hussain Fadhlallah: *Al Ijtihad bain Asri'l Madhi wa Afaq'i'l Mustaqbal*, chapter on the difference between pluralism and creedal responsibility, Al Markaz al Thaqafi al Arabiy, Beirut, 1st impression, 2009.

² See Ahmadah al Naifar: *Al Nass al Dini wa'l Turath al Islami; Qira'ah Naqdiyyah*, Chapter on the other, identity and mutual understanding, Dar al Hadi, 1st impression, Beirut, 2004.



within which it thrives and, while it may be assumed that that very belief is a gift from Allah, Glory be to Him, it will actually be an expression of Man's own choice and testimony.

In the context referred to here, it is also relevant to the question of freedom – a fundamental value that is inseparable from an individual's right to differ in his or her beliefs, understanding, vision and interpretation.