



THE STATUS OF *IKHTILAF* (DIFFERENCE), *TA'ARUF* (MUTUAL ACQUAINTANCESHIP) AND *I'TIRAF* (RECOGNITION) IN THE QUR'ANIC VALUE SYSTEM

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But they will not cease to differ...

When discussing the question of *ikhtilaf* (difference) between religious affiliations, which the Qur'an affirms is an inevitable feature of human life, exegetes – ancient as well as modern – are agreed that differences are an integral part of the system under which the world operates and reflect the Divine wisdom behind it. However, this is where their agreement stops. When it comes to considering the nature of this wisdom and what it actually means from a religious, doctrinal and cultural point of view, they diverge into numerous different schools of thought.

We see this clearly when we compare their interpretations of these two verses from *Surat Hud* in the Qur'an: "If thy Lord had so willed, He could have made mankind one people; but they will not cease to differ. Except those on whom thy Lord hath bestowed His

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Mercy: and for this did He create them: and the Word of thy Lord shall be fulfilled: 'I will fill Hell with jinns and men all together.'"¹

The best exposition of the different opinions on these two verses is provided by Imam al Tabari,² who supports his observations with a wide range of Traditions, narrations and statements about this *mas'alah* (doctrinal question), along with comments on *tarjih* (preponderance of evidence in favour) and *tadh'if* (preponderance of evidence against) when they are applied to the different doctrinal positions.

Generally speaking, al Tabari's comments on *ikhtilaf* in the above verses are concerned with the following questions:

1 – What exactly is the meaning of the word “differ” (Arabic “*mukhtalifin*” – a word derived from the same root as “*ikhtilaf*”) as it occurs in this text?

2 – What is the ruling on it?

3 – What is the *hikmah* (wisdom or rationale) behind it?

Al Tabari offers a number of answers to these questions. Some see the word “differ” here as referring to the different religions such as Judaism, Christianity, Magianism etc. while an alternative interpretation is that it means different standards of living – i.e. rich and poor – whereby some people are subjugated to, or exploited by, others.

Al Tabari also cites an opinion that *ikhtilaf* is an inevitable characteristic of the “people of falsehood” (*ahl al batil*), while the “people of truth” (*ahl al haqq*) are generally strangers to it, though if at any time they do become familiar with it, it will be of the harmless variety. According to this view, the exception – i.e. the “harmless variety” – is expressed in the statement in the second of the two verses: “Except those on whom thy Lord hath bestowed His Mercy”. According to al Tabari's report, the people

¹ Surat Hud (11), verses 118 and 119.

² Muhammad bin Jarir bin Kathir bin Ghalib, known as Imam al Tabari (224-310 AH/838-923 CE) was one of the most prolific Muslim scholars whose works include *Jami' al Bayan fi Ta'wili Aayi'l Qur'an* (exegesis) and *Tarikh al Umam wa'l Muluk* (history).

covered by this pronouncement include the “people of faith” (*ahl al iman*), the “people of the Muslim community” (*ahl al jama'ah*) and those whose religion is Islam.

As far as the ruling is concerned, according to the sources cited by al Tabari *ikhtilaf* is a negative phenomenon, and the *ikhtilaf* between a Believer and a Non-Believer is that Non-Believers are doomed to enter the Fire, while those whose religion is Islam will go to the Garden of Paradise.

With regard to the *hikmah*, or wisdom (or rationale), behind it, the words in the above verses: “and for this did He create them” indicate that every category of creation is destined to fulfil the role for which it was created, so that Believers will enter Allah’s Paradise and the shade of His Mercy, while Non-Believers will suffer His Fire and His Punishment. Hence the wisdom (or rationale) is that the *ikhtilaf* between the two categories is an inevitable necessity, in order to make it possible for the “people of faith” to earn Bliss and the “people of falsehood” to suffer Punishment – and thus as a practical application of Allah’s Mercy and Justice in requitement for each group’s actions.

Al Tabari makes the following observation on this argument: “If the interpretation is such as I have mentioned, those subject to the *ikhtilaf* ruling should not be blamed for their *ikhtilaf* (since their Lord created them for that purpose), any more than those who ‘enjoy’ should be blamed”. The author of *Jami’ al Bayan* (i.e. al Tabari) also comments: “A close scrutiny of the meaning of the words which determine the *hikmah* of *ikhtilaf* [will show] that people will still differ in [espousing] their false religions and sects, the exception being those followers of truth ‘upon whom they Lord hath bestowed His Mercy’; this is because He knew before He created them that they would include Believers and Non-Believers, the Good and the Wicked. This close scrutiny would be based on the definition of the meaning of ‘li’ in Allah’s pronouncement ‘*wa lidhalika khalaqahum*’ (‘And for this did He create them’), which would be causal – in the sense of ‘‘ala’, as [we find when] we address a man as follows: ‘*akramtuka ‘ala birrik bi*’/‘*akramtuka ‘libirrik bi*’ (‘I treated you respectfully for your kindness to me’) [where ‘li’ and ‘‘ala’ both mean ‘for’].”



If we now look at some other exegetes – modern ones this time, the first being Muhammad Abduh and the second Sheikh Muhammad al Tahir Ibn 'Ashur – we will find that they approach the question of *ikhtilaf* in a very different way.

In *Tafsir al Manar*¹ Muhammad Abduh wrote that *ikhtilaf* can be attributed to two factors. The first of these is the unique human quality of being able to have opinions and make choices, which means that people “gain knowledge through acquisition, not inspiration, act through choice and give preponderance to some mutually incompatible but possible options over others, being neither coerced into doing so nor compelled to do so by necessity.” The second factor, on the other hand, is inseparable from the level of civilization attained by human societies. In this case the degree of *ikhtilaf* varies depending on the degree of individual and collective development, or “progress”, in those societies. According to Abduh, this *ikhtilaf* encompasses everything, even religion, “which Allah has prescribed to make [man’s] natural disposition complete and eliminate the differences (*‘ikhtilaf*) between people.” The *hikmah*, or rationale, behind these differences – differences in the degrees and nature of man’s knowledge, science, opinions, feelings, religion, beliefs, obedience and – is embodied in the Divine Laws of Creation on which the disparities in man’s efforts to fulfil his proper roles are based; and it is through them that his latent physical and moral potential is revealed, along with the consequences of his actions.

So according to Muhammad Abduh, *ikhtilaf* is an expression of the Divine Will which creates all the possible options that enable man to be Allah’s vicegerent upon earth.

On the rationale for the instance of *ikhtilaf* cited in *Surat Hud*, Muhammad al Tahir Ibn 'Ashur² explains it by linking it to the Qur’anic theme of the nations destroyed for their wickedness; he does this by pointing out that their destruction was not an act of injustice on Allah’s

1 See *Tafsir al Manar*.

2 See *Al Tahrir wa'l Tanwir*: http://www.islamweb.net/newlibrary/display_book.php?flag=1&bk_no=61&surano=11&ayano=116.

part, and that if they had been virtuous they would not have been destroyed. From this he goes on to say that, when those nations strayed from the path chosen for them by Allah, this could hardly be understood to mean that they were no longer in Allah's power; if that were the case, it would mean that Allah's power to make them a single nation steadfastly following the path of truth as He had commanded was an illusion. Consequently Ibn Ashur sees the rationale of *ikhtilaf* as providing the basis of the system on which this world necessarily operates, including those values such as freedom, which allows the human intellect to "expose people to right or wrong guidance depending on the correctness, or otherwise, of their thinking and feeling and the degree of their ability to avoid error."

In Ibn Ashur's view the rationale for *ikhtilaf* comes from the Divine Justice which imbues man with the values of freedom and knowledge so that he can fulfil the conditions of his role of vicegerent, and this consequently determines his status in the Hereafter. In support of this view he wrote: "If [Allah] had so willed, He would have created human minds [in such a way that] they would have been [identical, receiving their knowledge through] inspiration from a single [source,] not a multiplicity [of sources]... There can be no doubt that the human mind is necessarily the way it is through Allah's Wisdom, since as such it is more conducive to the implementation of the Will of Allah – the Most High – with regard to man's endeavours in this ephemeral, impure worldly life, from which he will proceed to the pure eternal life – if good, then good, and if evil, then evil."

This means that *ikhtilaf* implies disparity and diversity – qualities which promote competition for the betterment of mankind.

We can conclude from this that the views and comments of the above three exegetes on the issue of *ikhtilaf* may be summed up as endorsing one or other of two positions. Those (whether ancient or modern) who opt for the first believe that Allah the Most High deliberately created mankind so that there could be differences between them. This was the view of al Hasan



al Basri¹ and 'Ata'². Others³ maintain that He – Glory be to Him – created man for the purpose of Mercy. This was the view of Mujahid and 'Ikrimah. Some of those who support this position⁴ add that He – may His Power be Exalted – created mankind in two groups: one of which receives Mercy and eschews *ikhtilaf*, while the other does not receive Mercy and falls into *ikhtilaf*.

This would indicate that, as far as proponents of the first position on *ikhtilaf* are concerned, the Qur'an's discourse⁵ is a “knowledge-targeted discourse” – that is, it makes the acquisition of knowledge a binding obligation upon mankind and sees man as being responsible for acquiring that knowledge. On the other hand, proponents of the second view of *ikhtilaf* see the Qur'an's discourse as being a “discipline-targeted discourse” which obliges man to obey a certain set of rulings and directives.

The first position recognizes that the issue is problematic, that it always has been so since ancient times and that it is destined to remain so, because it cannot be separated from the nature of the relationship with the “different other” – a question to which there can be no conclusive, clear-cut answer since it is subject to constant change. This is confirmed by the exegetic models we have chosen, which show that in this respect

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- 1 Al Hasan al Basri (21-110 AH/642-728 CE) was born and raised in al Madinah and settled in Basra from an early age, where he became the most famous scholar of his time and the Mufti of Basra. His pupil Wasil bin 'Ata' split from him to set up the first Mu'tazilite group.
 - 2 Abu Muhammad 'Ata' bin Abi Rabah (27-114 AH/648-732 CE) was a *mawla* of the family of Abu Khaitham al Fihri al Qurashi. Of Nubian origin, he was a *faqih*, scholar and *muhaddith* and one of the most distinguished legists and *Tabi'in* (Followers) of the 1st and 2nd centuries AH. He collected Hadiths from 'Aisha, Abu Hurairah Umm Salamah, Umm Hani', Ibn 'Abbas and several Companions and Followers. He was a source of Hadiths for al Awza'i, as well as Abu Hanifa, and Mujahid bin Jabr attributed Hadiths to him.
 - 3 This was the position of Mujahid bin Jabr (21-104 AH/642-722CE) – full name Abu'l Hajjaj Mujahid bin Jabr al Makki al Makhzumi. An imam, *faqih* and prolific Hadith scholar, his view was supported by 'Ikrimah bin 'Abdullah, *mawla* of Ibn 'Abbas.
 - 4 'Abdullah bin 'Abbas bin 'Abdul Muttalib bin Hashim, cousin of the Messenger (PBUH) (3 years before the Hijrah-68 AH/618-687 CE). Known as “*Hibr al Ummah*” (“Scribe of the Community”) and regarded as the Muslim Community's *faqih* and Imam of Exegesis.
 - 5 “Discourse” here means the general idea conveyed by the text in its entirety, including the specific vocabulary and concepts chosen to express its point of view, the way they are used and the part they play in the structure of the text.

the contemporary approach and the old, traditional views coincide in their understanding of *ikhtilaf*, including its significance for man's status and the degree to which it reflects the Qur'anic discourse on this issue.

However, one of the major differences between the “humanistic moderns” and the exegetes of the past is the difference in the degree of “centrality” they attach to this question; this is mainly due to the fact that the moderns of today have access to science and other fields of knowledge that were not available to earlier generations. However, there is still significant common ground between the modern “humanistic exegetes” and those of their predecessors whose stance they share, because in both cases their rulings are based on the same approach to the text of the Qur'an – an approach which represents a complete reinterpretation of the concept of *ikhtilaf* and the picture it conveys of the relationship between the “self” and the “other” in the Qur'an's discourse.

Historical evidence

When dealing with Qur'anic text the late Sudanese writer and thinker Mohammed Abu'Qasim Haj Hamad¹ always tried to avoid “fragmented exegesis”. He based his analysis on an approach to the Qur'an in which the part was seen in the context of the whole, rather than on the more usual method of interpreting its verses and chapters as separate and unrelated units. Consequently, his interpretations of the text were based first and foremost on the Qur'an's overall discourse, so that individual items or pieces of evidence were seen in relation to the text as a whole and its general view of the world, existence and – in particular – man. In doing so, Haj Hamad gives a new meaning to *'ilm al tafsir* (the science of exegesis) by linking it intimately to the philosophical term “*Weltanschauung*”² – a German word used to describe a comprehensive conception of the

¹ Died 1425 AH/2004 CE. His main works include *Al 'Alamiyyah al Islamiyyah al Thaniyah: Jadaliyyat al Ghaib wa'l Insan wa'l Tabi'ah*.

² *Weltanschauung* is a term that first appeared in the works of the German philosopher and social historian Wilhelm Dilthey (1833-1911). Around the end of the 19th century it was adopted by anthropologists and historians and today it is widely used to describe an overall view of the universe and man's relationship to it.



universe and man's relationship to it. It is essentially this feature that is responsible for the difference between those who see the Holy Qur'an as a set of rules and procedures for acts of worship and day-to-day conduct, and those who regard it as mainly a Divine Record that recognizes and accepts the realities of existence and the cosmos as they actually are.

The first view reflects the essentialist legalistic approach,¹ which stresses cultural and social conformity and pays little attention to the Qur'an as a source of eternal truths and wisdom. The second attaches greater importance to the development of man's spiritual and psychic awareness with the aim of expanding his knowledge and understanding and enabling him to grasp the limitless possibilities that the Qur'anic text has to offer. It offers an alternative vision of the Revealed Scripture and its relationship to man as the receptacle of that Revelation; that is to say, it sees the former (i.e. the Qur'an) as a living text whose meanings are constantly being renewed in order to meet the needs of the latter (i.e. man) and enable him to understand it in a holistic way. (This would include understanding its role as an embodiment of the truth of Muhammad's Prophetic Mission at a specific historical point in time.)

Earlier proponents of Haj Hamad's position include Jamal al Din al Afghani and Muhammad Abduh,² who defined the Holy Qur'an as a "Book of Guidance". In doing so they prepared the way for the "humanistic trend" – an approach based on a dynamic relationship between the exegete and the Qur'anic text which is fundamentally different from the approach of the traditionalist exegetes, whether ancient or modern.

If the Holy Qur'an is regarded as a "Book of Guidance", this implies an interactive relationship between the "transmitter" and the "receiver"; the latter being constantly prepared to evoke what Muhammad Iqbal³

1 Essentialism is the view that for any specific entity there is a set of attributes which are necessary to its identity and function.

2 See Mohammed al Makhzumi: *Khatirat Jamal al Din al Afghani*, printed in Beirut in 1931, p 99, and Muhammad Abduh: *Tafsir al Manar*, Part 1, pp 18 and 24.

3 See our study: *Al Insan wa'l Zaman fi Mandhumat Muhammad Iqbal al Tajdidiyyah, al Nass al Dini wa'l Turath al Islami; Qira'ah Naqdiyyah*, Dar al Hadi, Beirut, 1st impression, 2004.

describes as “prophetic awareness” – a state which simultaneously combines the spiritual with the “positivist”, while linking religious awareness to historical awareness. In practice this means that wherever there is history there must also be change, and that consequently all concepts, institutions and relationships must inevitably “mutate” and progress from one phase to another. More important than this, however, is that these changes must take place against a background that remains for ever unchanging and unchangeable. This is the main significance of the historical evidence that early and present-day students of Qur’anic discourse have relied upon when considering the question of *ikhtilaf* and pluralism in the light of this verse from the Qur’an: “[This is] the established way of Allah with those who passed on before; and you will not find in the way of Allah any change”¹, when it is seen in conjunction with the “law of evolution and transition”.

As we delve deeper into the questions of *ikhtilaf*, *ta’aruf* (“mutual acquaintanceship”) and *i’tiraf* (recognition) within the context of historical reality, it might be appropriate to consider a historical example cited by the author of *Jadhwat al Muqtabis (A Firebrand for the Seeker of Illumination)*² in which he shows us a different way of approaching the subject at a significant historical moment. In this book we read that one day Abu Muhammad bin ‘Abdullah bin Abi Zaid³ al Qairawani al Maliki asked Abu ‘Umar Ahmed bin Muhammad bin Sa’di al Maliki – after Abu ‘Umar had arrived in Qairawan from the lands of the Mashreq (he had been in Baghdad during the lifetime of Abu Bakr Muhammad bin ‘Abdullah bin Saleh al Abhari)⁴ – “Did you attend the gatherings of the *ahl al kalam* (theologians)?” He replied: “Yes. I attended them twice. Then I stopped

1 Surat al Ahzab (32), verse 62.

2 Abu ‘Abdullah al Humaidi (420-488 AH): *Jadhwat al Muqtabis fi Tarikh ‘Ulama’ al Andalus*, Beirut, 2nd impression, 1983, Part 1, pp 175-176.

3 Abu Muhammad bin ‘Abdullah bin Abi Zaid al Qairawani al Maliki (310-386 AH/922-996 CE) was the “*Alim* of the People of the Maghreb” and known as “the Little Malik”. He was the author of *Al Risalah*.

4 Abu Bakr Muhammad bin ‘Abdullah bin Muhammad bin Saleh al Tamimi al Abhari (290-375 AH/902-986 CE) was a *qadi* (judge) and Hadith scholar and the leading Maliki Sheikh and scholar in Baghdad. See al Zarkali: *Al A’lam*, Part 7, p 98.



going to them.” “Why?” Abu Muhammad asked him. He replied: “At the first gathering I attended I saw that all the different groups were there: Sunni Muslims as well as *ahl al bid'ah* (heretics), and Non-Believers including Magians, atheists, freethinkers, Jews, Christians and all types of Infidels. Each group had a leader who spoke on behalf of his sect and argued in favour of it...And when the session was full and they saw that they were not waiting for anyone else [to join them], one of the Non-Believers said: ‘You have gathered here for a debate, so let not the Muslims argue against us by quoting from their Book or the sayings of their Prophet, because we do not believe in them or accept them. Instead, we shall debate using rational arguments as well as tenable opinions and analogies.’ They replied: ‘[We] agree to that.’” Abu ‘Umar continued: “After I had heard that I did not return to that gathering. Then I was told there was another *ahl al kalam* gathering, so I went to it but I found them to be just like the first, so I stopped attending the gatherings of the *ahl al kalam* and did not attend any more.”

Abu Muhammad bin Abi Zaid asked: “And were the Muslims happy with that behaviour and speech?” Abu ‘Umar replied: “That is the impression I got from them.” Abu Muhammad was amazed at this and said: “The ‘*ulama*’ are no more. And Islam’s inviolable sanctity and rights are no more. How can Muslims allow a debate between Muslims and Non-Believers? This is not even permissible with heretics, and they acknowledge the truth of Islam and Muhammad (PBUH). A person who is a Muslim but a heretic should be called upon to return to the path of the *Sunnah wa’l Jama’ah* (Sunni Islam); if he returns it will be accepted of him and if he refuses his neck should be struck. However, as far as the Unbelievers are concerned, they should be called to Islam; if they accept it, they should be left alone, and if they refuse but pay the *jizya* (tax on non-Muslims) in the proper circumstances, they should be left alone and it will be accepted of them. However, if they debate on condition that they should not be asked to listen to arguments on the basis of quotations from our Book or our Prophet, that is not permissible. Surely we belong to Allah and to Him shall we return.”

This report is a graphic illustration of the relationship between the “self” and the “different other” at a certain stage of Islam’s history and

raises the question of how a Muslim was able to ignore the Qur'an's position on dealing with *ikhtilaf* in the context of its universal human discourse. It leads us to wonder how a respected Islamic scholar could have forgotten one of the main elements of the Qur'an's discourse – a discourse which does not contain the slightest hint of negativity about the concept of *ikhtilaf*.

To find the answer to this conundrum we should remember that the report about 'Abdullah bin Abi Zaid in *Jadhwat al Muqtabis* did not represent an isolated case. We find several similar examples of other Maghrebi religious scholars who had the same attitudes to *ikhtilaf* and *ta'aruf*. Al Bahlul bin Rashid – a scholar from Ifriqiyah (i.e. Tunisia and Tripolitania) – asked one of his friends to buy him some oil. The friend bought some from a Christian, who gave him an extra measure as a gesture of respect to al Bahlul. Al Bahlul then refused to accept any of it, “out of fear that he might feel goodwill in his heart towards that *dhimmi* (non-Muslim subject).”¹

From a later era, Abu'l 'Abbas Ahmed al Wansharisi² – who lived in the 9th century AH/15th century CE – castigated the Andalusian Muslims in no uncertain terms for accepting – or agreeing to remain subjects of – the Christian ruler of Castile, since Islam gave them the right to exercise authority and made them the masters, while relegating the “other” to the status of humble submission under Muslim rule.³

Two important policial factors can explain these attitudes to *dhimmis* and the “other” in general, which were shared by most Muslim *fuqaha'* (scholars of jurisprudence) – and Maghrebi scholars in particular. The first of these is the principle of establishing a civil authority to protect the borders of *Dar al Islam* (the territories under Islamic rule), while making

1 Al Bahlul bin Rashid (died 183 AH/799 CE). See Abu'l 'Arab: *Tabaqat 'Ulama Ifriqiyah wa Tunis*, edited by 'Ali al Shabbi and Na'im Hasan al Yafi, Al Dar al Tunisiyyah li'l Nashr, 1968.

2 Abu'l 'Abbas Ahmed bin Yahya al Wansharisi (834-874 AH/1430-1469 CE) was a leading religious scholar of the Islamic Maghreb. He lived in the 9th century AH/15th century CE.

3 See our study: *Al Insan wa'l Zaman fi Mandhumat Muhammad Iqbal al Tajdidiyyah, al Nass al Dini wa'l Turath al Islami; Qira'ah Naqdiyyah*, Dar al Hadi, Beirut, 1st impression, 2004.



every effort to establish the message of Islam across the globe, while the second concerns the principle of Islamic legislation and its sovereign authority to regulate relations between individuals and impose its control over Muslim society, in order to prevent any aberrant behaviour in the community, particularly from its emirs.

Although they were frequently regarded as contentious, in most cases it was these two factors that had the greatest influence on attitudes to those aspects of the Qur'an's discourse that govern relations with non-Muslims. Politically, they gave the state a central role – within the limits of the Shariah – as the protector of Islam against the schemings of enemies beyond its borders.

On the other hand, those who support the view that the Qur'an is a "Book of Guidance" see its discourse as sanctioning *ikhtilaf*, firstly because it recognizes a cultural reality that exists in society and cannot be eradicated, and secondly, because the existence of the "other" is a necessary prerequisite for a positive and constructive understanding of the "self". It is on the basis of these two elements – the "other" and the "self" – that the Qur'an's discourse interprets the complex and ever-changing world in which we live. In doing so, it sees religious identity as a reflection of the reality of life in all its aspects. It affirms the inclusive nature of human societies which, like the human psyche, contain a vast range of different features that are the product of their histories and experiences over the ages.

We can see the most emphatic confirmation of this in the Qur'anic text's appraisal of cultural diversity and attitudes towards one's own culture when it speaks of the other Divine missions. It gives exalted status to Moses and Aaron (peace be upon them) when it says: "And We guided them to the Straight Way"¹, and it describes how the Children of Israel were made "leaders in faith" and "heirs".² It also describes the Gospel

1 Surat al Saffat (37), verse 118.

2 Surat al Qasas (28), verse 4.

which was given to Jesus (PBUH) as containing Guidance and Light¹ and his sincere followers as people who “when they listen to the revelation received by the Messenger, thou wilt see their eyes overflowing with tears, for they recognize the truth”.²

An examination of the Qur'an's discourse on the basis of these historical examples will lead us to conclude that the Qur'anic text extends positive recognition to the “other”. In seeking to promote the conditions for interaction as well as the protection of distinct identities, it rejects any sense in which one culture should impose itself upon another. It recognizes that cultures need each other and that renewal and revitalisation cannot take place in cultures that exist in a state of isolation; hence the need for interaction. On the other hand, the protection of distinct identities is necessary from a religious and faith point of view, and interaction with the “other” at a human level will not detract from this in any way.

Diversity and the Qur'an's “conceptual structure”

How should we interpret the importance attached by the Holy Qur'an to previous Divine missions? What should we understand from the deep respect in which it holds the prophets who were sent to fulfil them, and the fact that it regards belief in them as a pillar of the Muslim Faith?³ And how does the Holy Qur'an encourage its followers to endorse this position?

The first thing we should note here is that the Qur'an's monotheistic position is based upon a viewpoint which sees unity – or “oneness” – through diversity. It regards the acquisition of knowledge as an obligation upon all mankind, since knowledge is the key to sound values and

1 Surat al Ma'idah (5), verse 48.

2 Surat al Ma'idah (5), verse 83.

3 Surat al Baqarah (2), verse 285: “The Messenger has believed in what was revealed to him from his Lord, and [so have] the believers. All of them have believed in Allah and His angels and His books and His messengers, [saying], ‘We make no distinction between any of His messengers.’ And they say, ‘We hear and we obey. [We seek] Your forgiveness, our Lord, and to You is the [final] destination.’” Moreover, speaking of faith the Messenger (PBUH) said: “**That we should believe in Allah, His angels, His books, His messengers and the Last Day, and believe in destiny – good as well as bad.**” Narrated by Muslim and al Bukhari.



enables the human mind – despite its limitations – to play a pivotal role in achieving unity out of diversity. However, in order to do so it needs the support of Allah’s revelation so that it can distinguish truth from the myths and legends of earlier generations. Through the Divine revelation it has conveyed to mankind, the Qur’an has been able to liberate the human spirit by “asserting the power of the senses” (hearing, sight and the heart) – that is to say, by affirming the validity of human perception.¹

Hence the main focus of the Qur’an’s discourse is on the importance of knowledge – in particular, the fact that by combining religious with historical awareness, knowledge has a vital role to play in the progress of human civilization. By intervening in the normal course of history and liberating man – specifically Arab man – from superstition and the blind imitation of earlier generations, Qur’anic revelation aimed to restore him to his true, primordial nature – that is, to revive his natural urge to strive at all times in search of the truth.

Through this combination of religious and historical awareness, man’s true nature (as represented by his human and cultural heritage as well as his innate values and knowledge) was able to blossom and thrive by adding to and “revitalising” the achievements of the past. (Even the greatest of civilizations will only survive if they are able to reinvent themselves, keep pace with human and scientific progress and take a creatively critical look at themselves.)

Let us now consider man within the context of two scenarios: firstly, man and his primordial nature when it is reinforced and invigorated by the Qur’an’s Divinely-revealed vision of existence, and secondly, man and the concept of a civilization that is constantly changing – in other words, a concept in stark contradiction to the view that today’s civilization owes nothing to the generations that came before it and will owe nothing of significance to any peoples with different cultural or religious affiliations whom it may encounter in the future. If we consider these two scenarios in combination, we will understand the Qur’anic concept of diversity and *ikhtilaf*, as well

¹ See *Surat al Israa'*, verse 36: “...Indeed, the hearing, the sight and the heart – about all those [one] will be questioned.”

as the importance it attaches to previous Divine missions. This in turn will demonstrate how Islamic thought – in the past as well as today – has sought to build bridges in its relationship with the “different other”.

The next question we need to consider is how this can be achieved within the “general Qur’anic system”.

An examination of the Qur’an’s view of the “different other” will enable us to understand two things: firstly, the general principles upon which civilization – any civilization – is based, and secondly, the specific conceptual elements from which those principles are derived.

As far as the principles themselves are concerned, the first of these is the concept – or “value” – of freedom based on the notion that “there shall be no compulsion in [acceptance of] the religion.”¹ This concept is inseparably linked to the question of personal faith, which the Holy Qur’an sees as a gift from Allah, Glory be to Him and – as far as man is concerned – a matter of free choice.

When the first Islamic community was being established, the early Believers recognized that their strength was derived from the two “values” of freedom and faith.²

At a different level, the Qur’an asserts the principle (or “value”) of universal human dignity: “**And We have certainly honoured the children of Adam with dignity and carried them on the land and sea and provided for them of the good things and preferred them over much of what We have created, with [definite] preference.**”³ This opens up prospects for what we

¹ See *Surat al Baqarah* (2), verse 256: “There shall be no compulsion in [acceptance of] the religion.”

² Hence the notion: “You can believe what you like, but you can’t understand what you like,” since what a person understands is definitive and inevitable and cannot be questioned. On this basis we find Qur’anic verses asserting freedom of choice: “The truth is from your Lord. So whoever wills, let him believe and whoever wills, let him disbelieve.” (*Al Kahf* [18], verse 29). Other verses which refer to understanding and contemplation do not see belief as being the inevitable outcome. At the same time, in Qur’anic discourse reason is a necessary precondition of faith, though not the sole factor - i.e. there is no essential contradiction between reason and belief, though the later “occupies a wider area.”

³ *Surat al Israa’* (17), verse 70.



might describe as a “dual transformation” – a transformation within the “self” and a transformation in understanding the “other”. Thus religion plays a positive role in civilization as a creative, harmonising force rather than as an instrument of conflict and mutual exclusion.

Responsibility, or accountability, as endorsed by the verse: “**But there never was a community but there had passed within it a warner**”¹ – is the principle that comes next, alongside the parallel “value” of reason, which takes the concept of responsibility beyond the confines of “applicability to a specific circumstance” and gives it a universal dimension: “**Paradise is not [obtained] by your wishful thinking nor by that of the People of the Scripture. Whoever does a wrong will be recompensed for it, and he will not find besides Allah a protector or a helper. And whoever does righteous deeds, whether male or female, while being a believer – those will enter Paradise and will not be wronged, [even as much as] the speck on a date seed.**”²

The above principles culminate in the “value” of “doing good” (or “*ihsan*”, the highest stage of faith), which is reflected at the human level by Divine Mercy as expressed in the verse: “**And do good. Indeed, Allah loves the doers of good.**”³ “Doing good” – in this context – satisfies one of the conditions of faith in a way that goes way beyond its face value, so that instead of being reciprocated by one reward of equal value in recompense, a single good deed receives ten rewards of equal value.

Let us now return to the question of the Qur’an’s attitude to *ikhtilaf* and diversity in the light of these principles, or “values” – principles inspired by the goal of universal human interdependence that rejects the notion of a specific group or community being singled out to the exclusion of others.

Through a series of discrete statements and commands, the Qur’an constructs a comprehensive system of concepts dealing with the relationship between the “self” and the “other”, and in doing so it offers

1 Surat Fatir (35), verse 24.

2 Surat al Nisa' (4), verses 123-124.

3 Surat al Baqarah (2), verse 195.

a new and universal vision of what constitutes civilization in the true sense of the word.

The most significant of these include various words derived from the verb roots “*jim-dal-lam*” (which has the connotation of discussion or reasoning), such as: “And reason with them (‘*jadiluhum*’) in the best manner possible,”¹ “‘*ain-ra-fa*” (with the connotation of knowledge or that which is right), as in: “No good is there in much of their private conversation, except for those who enjoin charity or that which is right (‘*ma’ruf*’),”² “‘*ain-fa-waw*” (which has the connotation of pardoning): “So pardon (‘*a’fu*’) and overlook until Allah delivers His command,”³ and “*Ha-waw-ra*” (with the connotation of dialogue or conversing): “His companion said to him while he was conversing with him (‘*yuHawiruhu*’), ‘Have you disbelieved in Him Who created you from dust?’”⁴

These verb roots provide the source for many of the key words around which the Qur’an’s discourse is built and they form the basis of the new *Weltanschauung* that it conveys. Two elements may be discerned here. The first – the central theme which includes man’s role as vicegerent in Allah’s creation – is intimated in the verse: “If thy Lord had so willed, He could have made mankind one people; but they will not cease to differ. Except those on whom thy Lord hath bestowed His Mercy: and for this did He create them...”⁵ The second element, which is essentially a “procedural” one, calls for an approach to *ikhtilaf* based on the principle of justice and aimed at promoting *ta’aruf* and cultural interaction, as expressed in the following verse: “Allah does not forbid you from those who do not fight you because of religion and do not expel you from your homes – from being righteous toward them and acting justly toward them. Indeed, Allah loves those who act justly.”⁶ The principle is even more explicitly affirmed in:

1 Surat al Nahl (16), verse 125.

2 Surat al Nisa’ (4), verse 114.

3 Surat al Baqarah (2), verse 109.

4 Surat al Kahf (18), verse 37.

5 Surat Hud (11), verses 118 and 119.

6 Surat al Mumtahanah (60), verse 8.



“O mankind, indeed We have created you from male and female and made you peoples and tribes that you may know one another. Indeed, the most noble of you in the sight of Allah is the most righteous of you.”¹

From the above we can sum up the status of *ikhtilaf*, *ta'aruf* and *i'tiraf* in the Qur'anic value system as follows:

- The Qur'anic *Weltanschauung* – which is based upon the principle of man's role as vicegerent – does not recognize the concept of a “Clash of Civilizations”. Instead, it sees a continuous process of development and interaction (or “mutual jostling”) within a single human civilization in which the forces of universalism and enlightenment struggle to occupy the middle ground against the forces of darkness and barbarism.

- Recognizing the “principle of parity” between the “self” and the “different other”, the Qur'an's discourse calls for a “coming together” of civilizations on a basis of *ta'aruf* – or, as the Holy Qur'an says, “peoples and tribes, that you may know each other (*ta'arafu*)” – not for the purpose of cultural or creedal confrontation, but in order to benefit from the “other's” potential for arriving at the truth, attaining knowledge and contributing its own creative talents.

- In the Qur'anic context, *ikhtilaf* and *ta'aruf* have the goal of recognizing (i.e. *i'tiraf*) the legitimacy of the “other's” individuality, dignity and humanity and its potential to enrich us all.

- A study of mankind's history shows us that the true clashes which have actually taken place – in the past as well as today – are generally a consequence of conflicts between values and methods of approach within each individual culture and belief system. Meanwhile, and in parallel with this, there has been a centuries-old process of cultural cross-fertilisation between peoples and societies.

Towards a new form of religious self-awareness

In conclusion, we can say that whatever the level of a nation's cultural or religious superiority, its continued progress will only be possible if it

¹ Surat al Hujurat (49), verse 13.

remains self-aware and re-evaluates itself through a dialectical exchange with its present and past, and between itself and the “different other”. That is the ultimate aim of the Qur’an’s discourse when it is seen in the context of knowledge and values.

We can therefore say that the elements that comprise the “self” are insufficient in themselves to devise fundamental solutions to new problems encountered by people, institutions and societies. What is needed is an open dialogue with the “other” – not so that one can become identical to it or assimilated by it, but rather in order to benefit from it and reinvigorate the “self”. Hence a relationship with the “other” creates the conditions for a revolution in one’s understanding of the nature of the “self”, which in turn will enable it to recognize its place in history and make a more effective contribution to the world of today.

The above values and principles are particularly important when we consider that human societies around the world are having to confront the challenges of globalisation and one of the major questions of the modern age: “How can we live together while maintaining our distinct identities?”

The Qur’an’s approach is based upon a highly distinctive concept of man and his identity which sees him as a “historic being”; that is to say, as understanding himself not through the traditional philosophical medium of rational contemplation, but rather through a progressive series of objective and interactive experiences with life itself. Consequently, the human identity, will and consciousness cannot be seen as predetermined. Indeed, it would be more accurate to say that man and his identity are constantly reinventing themselves, so that human nature can only understand itself “indirectly”. In effect, the “self” is able to morph itself from a defensive device into a genuinely effective and credible tool for dealing with every aspect of society within a global context.

When this occurs, the “other” ceases to be a sterile challenge and becomes something positive with the ability to help reshape and reinforce the Arab Muslim “self”. In doing so it is also able to acquire those positive qualities from that “self” that it needs in order to restore its own health and independence within a global culture.