

# Diversity in Islam

## Diversity in Islam—A Sunni Perspective

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In Islam, the unity of God is central. The Islamic revelation given to Muhammad affirmed the earlier Abrahamic religions of one God (including Judaism and Christianity), yet also went beyond them to unify the divine truth of God and assert a more complete monotheism. According to Islam, all revelation and prophets are one, stemming from the same source: “You say: ‘We believe in Allah, and the revelation given to us, and to Abraham, Isma’il, Isaac, Jacob, and the Tribes, and that given to Moses and Jesus, and that given to (all) prophets from their lord: We make no difference between one or another of them: and we bow to Allah (in Islam)’” (2/136; 3/84). In the eyes of Muslims, Islam’s radical emphasis on the unity of God, identical nature of revelation, and equality and common destiny of humankind make Islam the final revelation. It is the climax and fulfillment of all previous approximations of unity on earth.

According to the Qur’anic narrative, God’s will has always been for a single, united humanity. God reveals this will through His chosen messengers and the revelations embedded in scriptures. Every kind of discrimination, separation, exclusion, or division is negated by God. Domination of some portion of humanity over others is forbidden. Unjust exploitation of humanity or creation is rejected. Before the Islamic revelation, God entered into covenantal relationship with earlier faith communities to stop distraction, disorder, killing, and discrimination, evils that Muslims believe stemmed from the perceived division in God and humanity. The Qur’an has strictly forbidden such division and commended unity: “And hold fast, all together, by the Rope which Allah (stretches out for you), and be not divided among yourselves...” (3/103); “as for those who divide their religion and break up into partisans, you have no part in them in the least” (6/159).

Islam recognizes the difficulty of achieving such unity, and asserts that real unity can only be achieved through recognition of human diversity. Islam clearly acknowledges the divine mystery of God that has willed that humanity be diverse in religion, conviction, and persuasion: “To each among you We have prescribed a Law and an Open Way. If Allah so willed, He would have made you a single people, but (His plan is) to test you in what He has given you: so strive as in a race in all virtues. The goal of you all is to Allah” (5/48). Islam’s message of unity, then, conveys the divine desire for all humanity – in its diversity – to share and grow in the consciousness of a single humanity under one God.

Islam’s religious tolerance has allowed theological, political, philosophical, legal, ethical, and mystical orientations to abound in the Muslim community (*umma*). In each of these orientations there has been an implicit desire for the ultimate unity of all, but also an explicit acknowledgement of the ongoing reality of diversity of ideas and programs. The prophet said, “Jews were divided into seventy-one parties (*firqah*), Christians were

divided into seventy-two parties, my community will be divided into seventy-three parties” (Al-Bagdaadi, Al-Farq, and Bayn’al Firaq, p.4, Beirut).

Any attempt to impose unity or force one’s own beliefs onto others is declared in the Qur’an to be opposed to the divine will and plan in the universe. The Qur’an says, “There is no compulsion in religion. The truth is now distinct from error...” (2/256). For Muslims, this tolerance of diversity provides the solution to human suffering inflicted on one another. Guided by the cosmic truth unfolded in the Qur’an, the newly formed Muslim community sought harmony, peace and toleration on Earth. Judaism, Christianity, Zoroastrianism and even idolatry were ultimately acknowledged as manifestations of divinely-established diversity: “Lo! Those who believe this revelation and those who are Jews and the Sabaeans and the Christians and the Megians and the idolaters- Lo! Allah will decide between them on the day of resurrection. Allah is witness over all things” (22/17).

Islam asserts that the right to decide who is saved and who is unsaved rests completely with God, and rejects a hierarchical monopoly over human souls. It is forbidden for Muslims to call each other non-Muslims: “O ye who believe! When ye go forth to fight in the way of Allah, be careful to discriminate, and say not unto one who offers you peace: ‘Thou are not a believer, seeking the chance profits of this life’” (4/94). The Messenger (prophet) of God said, “When any Muslim says to his brother, ‘You infidel!’ one of the two surely deserves the name” (al-Buhari, Sahih, 4:139). Muslims also must not fight other Muslims, and are instructed to make peace: “The believers are naught else than brothers. Therefore make peace between brethren and observe your duty to Allah that haply ye may obtain mercy” (49:10).

Similarly, Islam leaves room for idolaters to coexist with Muslims, as long as the idolaters keep their covenant with the Muslim community: “(But the treaties are) not dissolved with those Pagans with whom you have entered into alliance and who have not subsequently failed you in anything, nor aided any one against you. So fulfill your engagements with them to the end of their term; for Allah loves the righteous” (9/4). The Qur’an also says about polytheists, “If it had been Allah’s Will, they would not have been Polytheists, nor did we make you a guardian over them, nor are you their advocate” (6/107). (For more information on the Islamic position on polytheism, see 50/45; 88/22; 10/99; 3/20; 5/99; 16/82; 42/48; 2/193).

Despite its universal ideal, the new community of Muslims was able to introduce the idea and practice of religious tolerance without falling into the pit of relativization. Compared to other faiths, Islam developed a moderate position between two extremes: electionism, favoritism, and fanaticism as manifestations of an exclusive mentality, at one extreme, and a sort of pluralism that contradicts the transcendental unity of God, truth and human destiny by relativizing the divine to concrete, limited and anthropomorphic manifestations, at the other extreme. Thus the Islamic plan for a transcendental unity of humanity within its diversity and under one God is a model of unity that also preserves enormous variety within Islam.

The term used for diversity or difference in the Qur'an is *ikhtilaf*. Overall, the concept is seen positively in Islam. Differences of language and race between human beings are seen in the Qur'an as a sign of God (*Ayat Allah*), just as differences between the heavens and the earth and between night and day are also signs of God. The implication is that such differences are signs of God's overwhelming powers of creation. Verse 49:13 in the Qur'an also indicates that human beings are created in different tribes and nations so that they may know and understand each other. Thus, human beings are not to fight or quarrel based on their differences.

As Islam spread in different parts of the world in the eighth and ninth centuries, differences appeared in various spheres of Muslim life, especially in Islamic law and theology. In particular, Muslim jurists, who were located in different parts of the Islamic world, formed many law schools (currently there are four within Sunnism). The Shi'is, too, had their own schools of law. Faced with escalating differences in the legal field, the Umayyad caliph 'Umar b. 'Abd al-'Aziz (d. 717-720) gave legitimacy to the diverse views of the religious scholars (*'ulama*) in various areas of the Islamic state by refusing to impose a universal code of law on all people.

The idea of diversity was gradually accepted in juridical literature, where differences of opinion between schools of law and individual jurists became a permanent fact of life. At the same time, differences also surfaced in other fields. For example, the Mu'tazilis, a theological group, differed with the Ash'aris on many points, such as the creation of the Qur'an, free will and pre-destination, the attributes of God, anthropomorphism, etc. Muslim philosophers also articulated distinct points of view, creating a multiplicity of voices on various issues. A tradition that would justify such widespread differences was circulated and imputed to the Prophet: "Differences within my community are a source of [God's] mercy."

The companions of the Prophet also differed among themselves on many issues. In fact, they fought against and even killed each other in battles after the Prophet's death. In order for later Muslims not to judge the companions or reduce the ramifications of their differences, another Prophetic tradition was circulated, stating: "My Companions are like the stars; whichever one [of them] you follow you will find the straight path."

It is important to differentiate between diversity and dissension. The latter is seen as capable of fracturing a community and is prohibited because it can lead to deviation and loss of faith. To reduce dissension and the damage it can cause, a famous tradition from the Prophet predicts the division of the Muslim community into seventy three sects, only one of which will enter paradise. This had the effect of reducing polarization and dissension within the community.

Differences within the community appeared in the political sphere, too. Because these differences could escalate to conflicts, they were potentially very damaging. Political dissension in the Muslim community is referred to as “strife” (*fitna*), and sometimes equated with *ikhtilaf*. To reduce such strife, traditions were circulated prohibiting rebellion against rulers (even if they were evil) and encouraging people to unite under the caliph. It was popularly believed that an evil ruler was better than anarchy, which would fracture the community.