

Muslim Diversity

Diversity in Islam – Sunni Perspective

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Islamic revelation given to and through Muhammad is known among world religions as the faith of radical monotheism. This revelation has affirmed and confirmed the Abrahamic religion of one God in a way that closed the door to all shades of idolatry. Qur'anic revelation has unified the divine truth ones for all times. It unified revelations and prophethood stating clearly that all the revelations and the prophets stem 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). "To every people we appointed rites 'of sacrifice,' that they might celebrate the name of Allah over the sustenance He gave them from animals (fit for food). But your God is One God (Allah): submit then your wills to Him (in Islam): and you give the good news to those who humble themselves" (22/34). This radical emphasis on the unity of God, the equality of humanity, the identicality of the revelation and the common destiny of human kind have made Islam in the eyes of Muslims as the final revelation, climaxing and fulfilling all previous approximations of unity on earth.

According to the Qur'anic narrative God has from the beginning has targeted a single humanity revealing His will over time through chosen messengers and revealing them this message imbedded in scriptures. All kinds of discrimination, separation, exclusion, or division were negated by God. Domination of some portion of humanity over the others was forbidden. Exploitation of humanity and the rest of the creation unjustly were rejected. God has entered into covenantal relationship with the earlier faith communities to stop distraction and disorder by killing or discriminating of some people by others. All this evil was based on the division in God and consequently among humanity. The Qur'an has strictly forbidden the division and separation, and it has 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). "Those who split up their Religion, and become (mere) sects, - each part rejoicing in that which is with itself!" (30/32). This unity which is the hardest challenge ever to achieve was seen possible only through the recognition of human diversity. It was clearly acknowledged that it has been the divine mystery that God has willed that humanity was diverse in their religions, convictions and persuasions. "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 a in a race in all virtues. The goal of you all is to Allah" (5/48). Any inclination to attempt to force this nature of humanity was declared in the Qur'an as antagonism to the divine will and plan in the universe. This new exposure of the larger human society has been the solution to the human suffering in the hands of

other fellow human beings. Unfolding this cosmic truth in abiding verses of the Qur'an has led the newly formed Muslim community to struggle for a possible unified human society without forcing them to accept Islam or without imposing the new religion on them against their will. "There is no compulsion in religion. The truth is now distinct from error... " (2/256). This was an unprecedented campaign toward a harmony and peace and toleration on earth. Judaism, Christianity, Zoroastrianism and even idolatry were ultimately acknowledged as the 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). Yet it was still the divine desire that all humanity in their diversity come and share and grow in the consciousness of a single humanity under one God.

This universal program embarked by this new community of Muslims who put their faith in such a universal ideal were able to introduce the idea and practice of religious tolerance without falling into the pit of relativization. This new message has developed a moderate position in terms of the universe of faiths between electionism, favoritism, fanaticism as manifestations of an exclusive mentality and between a sort of pluralism which contradicts with the transcendental unity of God, truth and human destiny by relativizing the divine to the concrete, the limited and the anthropomorphic manifestations. Islamic plan for a transcendental unity of humanity under one God within its diversity was cemented within the Islamic community as a model to follow. Islamic community has achieved a respectively good model of unity while preserving its enormous variety. It has been a universal Muslim consciousness that no Muslim individual or a body of Muslims have been given the right to judge and determine the final abode of Muslims. The right to decide who is saved and who is unsaved was relegated completely to God and a hierarchical monopoly over the human souls was rejected. The Qur'an declared this universal truth with "Let there be no compulsion in religion!" (2/256). This negation of forcing a certain faith or persuasion has allowed the room not only for the existence of the diversity of faiths, but it also allowed idolaters to exist as long as they keep their covenant with the Muslim community. "Those who believe (in the Qur'an), and the Jews and the Sabaeans, and Christians and Mageans and the Polytheists, - Allah will judge between them on the Day of Judgment-" (22/17). "(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). "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 to Polytheism see 50/45; 88/22; 10/99; 3/20; 5/99; 16/82; 42/48; 2/193). Historians of Muslim schools have found out that diversity within Islam is based on the Hadith: "Jews were divided into seventy-one parties (*firqah*), Christians were divided into seventy-two parties, my community will be divided into seventy –three parties" (AlBagdaadi, Al-Farq Bayn'al Firqah, p.4, Beirut). Muslim jurists have based the multiplicity of law schools within Islam on a Hadith which reads: "The disagreement of my community is a mercy" (...). Due to this religious tolerance theological, political, philosophical, legal, ethical, and mystical orientations abounded. In each of such orientations there was an implicit desire for the

ultimate unity of all. But at the same time there was an explicit acknowledgement of the ongoing reality of diversity of ideas and programs. There was a mutual agreement based on the revelatory teaching that diversity is the will of God and unity is to be delegated to God without any forcing or pushing. Historically speaking there were Sunni, Shi'i and Khariji schools which developed diverse competing political theories. The Shi'is were known for their political theory of imamate as central to faith. They declared the innocence of the *imams* who they thought were divinely appointed. They had secret knowledge and had full authority to interpret the revelation and the law. As opposed to this hierarchical appointment and successions of imams in the Shi'i school, the Khariji school stressed that a leader is not necessary for the *ummah*. The Sunni majority followed the middle path preaching that a leader is necessary as a public duty but it is not essential to faith. Such diversity has been mutually approved without any anathema or excommunication 'takfir'. It is forbidden that Muslims 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 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 must not fight other Muslims, but if they fall to fighting then they should make peace between them. "And if the two parties of believers fall to fighting then make peace between them. And if one party of them does wrong to the other, fight ye that which does wrong till it return unto the ordinance of Allah; then, if it returns, make peace between them justly, and act equitably. Lo! Allah loves the equitable" (4/9). "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). Theological diversity is far from recounting here. Suffice it to mention that the liberal school of Mutazila has rejected God's attributes and the role of God in human actions as opposed the predestinarian school of Jabriis who have preached the denial of human responsibility in actions relegating the whole authority to God. The Sunni schools of Maturidiis and Ashariis followed a middle path which recognized God's role as the ultimate creator, provider, revealer, and judge while defending the responsibility freedom, dignity, and integrity of the human individual. Such a variety of extremely opposed theological positions were able to acknowledge each other as legitimately Islamic. The mystical, ethical, and philosophical diversity has always been a fact and a living phenomenon. The tension between the Sufi schools stressing the centrality of law *sharia* and those schools which emphasize the centrality of the individuality has been common place. In modern times the diversity within the Islamic household has encompassed even the secular orientations side by side the traditional persuasions.

Diversity in Islam—Shia Perspective

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The term used for diversity or difference in the Qur'an is *ikhtilaf*. Overall, the concept is seen positively in Islam. Differences of languages and race between human beings is

seen in the Qur'an as a sign of God (*Ayat Allah*); just as differences between the heavens and the earth, night and day are also the signs of God. The implication is that such differences are a sign 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 different 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. Differences surfaced in other fields too. The Mu'tazilis, a theological group, differed with the Ash'aris on many points like the creation of the Qur'an, free will and pre-destination, the attributes of God, anthropomorphism, etc. Muslim philosophers articulated distinct points of view too. Such differences created a multiplicity of voices on various issues. A tradition that would justify such widespread differences was circulated and imputed to the Prophet. The tradition states, "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 some battles after the Prophet's death. In order for later Muslims not to judge the companions and to reduce the ramifications of their differences, another Prophetic tradition was circulated. It states: "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. These differences were potentially very damaging as they could escalate to conflicts. 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.