

# QURANIC CONCEPT OF PLURALISM WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO HUMAN DIVERSITY

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**Abstract:** The opening statement of the Qur'an is "Praise be to God, the Lord of the all the worlds". It also ends with the chapter namely 'Humanity' which opens with the words, "Say, I take refuge in the Lord of Humanity". It clearly depicts that Qur'an does not promote a confined definition of God. God as per Islam is not a God of any particular nation or race, but of all that exists, all of humanity. The Qur'an has addressed human beings on various occasions as 'Children of Adam' and no human has been excluded from this universal fraternity. Qur'an clearly mentions the special status of human beings irrespective of religion, race or country, it says, "We have honored the children of Adam" (17:70).

Qur'an instigates us to accept the plurality of human beings as it was never the intention of God that all humans should look or think alike. God says in Qur'an; "Do not the Believers know, that, had Allah (so) willed, He could have guided all mankind (to the right)?" It shows that in the sight of God, human free will to choose between right and wrong, good and evil, is far more important than creating a monolithic humanity akin to pre-programmed robots. Qur'an also declares emphatically that there's no compulsion in religion and let him who wants to believe, believe and let him who wants to disbelieve, disbelieve. God in the Qur'an discourages the believers and humanity at large to pass absolute judgments on the people and reserves the right of Absolute Judgment unto Himself in the Day of Judgment.

Recognizing the religious plurality in the time of Prophet (saw), God propounds the recognition of righteousness in other faiths as well by saying, "Surely those who believe, and those who are Jews or Christians or Sabians; anyone who believes in God and the Last Day, and work righteously, shall have their reward with their Lord; on them shall be no fear, nor shall they grieve" (2:62). Prophet (saw) also manifested the acceptance of pluralism when he drafted the charter of Madinah recognizing the rights of other faiths to practice their religion and including them in a single community with Muslims. The Qur'an also commands us to agree with other faiths on the common terms and beliefs making it a point of being close rather than apart from ideologies other than Islam. It also instigates others to bring their evidence if they are truthful providing a way for interfaith dialogue.

Lastly, the need of the hour is to implement and restore the verses of the Qur'an which promote tolerance and acceptance of other religions and ideologies so as to create harmony and peace in today's war trodden world of hatred and strife.

**Index Terms - Quran, Pluralism, Tolerance, Peace**

## Introduction

Today's world has become a global village due to modern technologies of transportation and communication which has led humans to get closer and closer than ever before. As we know there are different races, nationalities and religions, there is bound to emerge feelings of diversity among men. Qur'an accepts this diversity as a fact of life and teaches us to deal with it meticulously. This pluralistic dimension of Islam attracts less attention and needs to be highlighted for the peaceful coexistence and harmony between different sections of the world. There are many examples in the Qur'an and other sources of Islam which stress upon this particular aspect so as to create peace and eliminate racism and hatred based on religious differences. This paper gives a glimpse of those aspects of Islam as inferred from Qur'an and its interpretation in the Prophetic conduct and teachings.

## Human plurality in the Qur'an

The following verse explicitly states the oneness of humankind despite many apparent and superficial racial differences; "O Humankind, We have created you from male and female, and made you into communities and tribes, so that you may know one another. Indeed the noblest amongst you in the sight of God is the most righteous of you. God is All-Knowing and All-Wise".<sup>1</sup>

Qur'an accepts the diversity as a natural part of the humankind and does not endorse a monolithic commune of humanity. This should be accepted by every human being, especially by the one who recognizes the Noble Qur'an as the inerrant and infallible word of the Almighty. No race is superior or inferior and only that individual is on the high pedestal who is the most righteous which necessarily includes harmlessness, kindness, patience and other moral virtues. It mentions the purposeful intention of God to create a diverse form of humanity and there is no reason to fight or hate other communities based on this difference. It's like the different flowers in a beautiful garden which magnify the beauty of the garden by being different aesthetical flavours of rose, lily and sunflower. A garden with a monotonous set of plants and flowers creates a sense of boredom and dullness, similarly the beauty of our world is apparent by differences in the racial and other differences in humankind.

Qur'an informs us that humanity with a single ideological set-up is not the Will of God, The All Wise. He Says in the Holy Qur'an, "And We have sent down to you (O Muhammad SAW) the Book (this Quran) in truth, confirming the Scripture that came before it and Mohayminan (trustworthy in highness and a witness) over it (old Scriptures). So judge between them by what Allah has revealed, and follow not their vain desires, diverging away from the truth that has come to you. To each among you, We have prescribed a law and a clear way. If Allah willed, He would have made you one nation, but that (He) may test you in what He has given you; so strive as in a race in good deeds. The return of you (all) is to Allah; then He will inform you about that in which you used to differ".<sup>2</sup> Muhammad Asad has remarkably put this interpretation regarding this verse, He concludes by saying that Qur'an informs you of that wherein you used to differ, thus, the Qur'an impresses upon all who believe in God - Muslims and non-Muslims alike - that the differences in their religious practices should make them cooperative with one another in doing good work rather than lose themselves in mutual hostility.<sup>3</sup>

Another important verse pertaining to our topic depicts clearly that it was not the intention of God to create a single religion or race on earth as this life is a test where people have to choose between good and evil, truth and falsehood. God guides the one who is sincere and righteous, this is evident from several verses of the Noble Qur'an. God declares in the Qur'an, "Had Allah so willed, He would have made you all one single community".<sup>4</sup>

This further supports the previous warning. It means that it would be wrong for any champion of Allah's religion to arrogate to himself the use of every sort of method and means irrespective of whether they are right or wrong to propagate his own religion (considering it to be Allah's religion) and try to destroy opposite religions. For this would be utterly against the will of Allah. If Allah had willed that there should be no religious differences, He could have deprived mankind of the freedom of choice. In that case, there would have been no need for Allah to get help of any such upholder of His religion, who uses disgraceful means for this purpose. Allah could have created all mankind to be inherent believers and obedient servants by depriving them of the power and option of disbelief and sin. Then there would have been none who could have dared to deviate from belief and obedience. The last part of the verse is to show that Allah Himself has given man the power and freedom to follow any out of the many ways. That is why Allah makes arrangements for the guidance of the one who intends to follow the right way, and let go astray the one who desires to deviate.

There have been many systems throughout the cultural history of humankind where class system has exploited the so-called lower strata of the society and Islam vigorously criticised the discrimination on the basis of any kind of class system including the religious hierarchy of priesthood. According to Muhammad Qutb, there are no laws in Islam which aim at keeping the property in the hands of particular persons. The Holy Qur'an plainly says: "In order that it may not merely make a circuit between the wealthy among you". Therefore, Islam made laws that ensured continual fragmentation and redistribution of wealth. According to the Islamic law of inheritance, inherited property should be distributed among a large number of persons.

An inheritance is never passed on to a single person except in the very rare case where such a person has no brothers, sisters or any other kindred. Even in such rare cases, Islam took the necessary precautions by prescribing that a portion of the inheritance should go to the deprived people who are not related to the dead man. This provision may be regarded as a predecessor of modern inheritance tax. The Holy Qur'an prescribed that "if at the time of division (of inheritance) other relatives or orphans or poor are present, feed them out of the (property) and speak to them words of kindness and justice" It was in this way that Islam solved the problem resulting from the accumulation of property. Property goes to individuals as such and not as members of a particular class, because when they die the property will be redistributed according to new proportions. History bears witness that property in the Islamic society was constantly changing hands without being confined to a particular faction of the nation.

Similarly there is no caste system in Islam, the superiority on the basis of mere birth. Caste system has been the source of extreme exploitation in many parts of the world, especially India where people still have deep feelings of casteism embedded in the recesses of their psyches. Allama Iqbal has thrown ample light on the Islamic State where there is no priesthood and is devoid of exploitative class and caste system. He writes, "That the Muslim common wealth is based on absolute equality of all Muslims in the eye of law; there is no privileged class no priesthood, no caste system. The political ideal of Islam consists in the creation of a people born of a free fusion of all races and nationalities. Nationality with Islam is not the highest limit of political development; for the general principles of the law of Islam rest on human nature not on regularities of a particular people. The inner cohesion of such a nation would consist not in ethnic or geographic unity, not in the unity of language or social tradition but in the unity of religious and political ideal or in the psychological fact of like-mindedness.

That according to the law of Islam, there is no distinction between the church and the state. The state with us is not a combination of religious and secular authority, but it is a unity in which no such distinction exists. The caliph is not necessarily the high priest of Islam; he is not representative of God on earth. He is fallible like other man and is subject, like every Muslim, to the impersonal authority of the same law".<sup>5</sup>

#### **Qur'anic view of other religions**

Islam requires Muslims to have faith in all the prior scriptures including Taurat (Torah) and Injeel (Gospel! Bible) that they were the true revelations from God. Because of not preserving in original languages in written form and translating them in various languages from oral narrations through centuries, human words were mingled with Divine Words, therefore, they lost their pure forms. Relating to this fact the Holy Quran states,

*Say: "O followers of earlier revelation! Come unto that tenet which we and you hold in common: that we shall worship none but God, and that we shall not ascribe divinity to aught beside Him, and that we shall not take human beings for our lords beside God." And if they turn away, then say: "Bear witness that it is we who have surrendered ourselves unto Him.*

*O FOLLOWERS of earlier revelation! Why do you argue about Abraham, seeing that the Torah and the Gospel were not*

revealed till [long] after him? Will you not, then, use your reason?

Lo! You are the ones who would argue about that which is known to you; but why do you argue about something which is unknown to you? Yet God knows [it], whereas you do not know:

Abraham was neither a "Jew" nor a "Christian", but was one who turned away from all that is false, having surrendered himself unto God; and he was not of those who ascribe divinity to aught beside Him.<sup>6</sup>

Muslims are required to believe in all the Holy Scriptures revealed to various Prophets in the following words:

*Say: "We believe in God, and in that which has been bestowed from on high upon us, and that which has been bestowed upon Abraham and Ishmael and Isaac and Jacob and their descendants, and that which has been vouchsafed to Moses and Jesus, and that which has been vouchsafed to all the [other] prophets by their Sustainer: we make no distinction between any of them. And it is unto Him that we surrender ourselves."*<sup>7</sup>

Muslims are also allowed to eat and marry with the people of the book as per the injunctions of the Qur'an; *"Today, all the good things of life have been made lawful to you. And the food of those who have been vouchsafed revelation aforetime is lawful to you, and your food is lawful to them. And [lawful to you are], in wedlock, women from among those who believe [in this divine writ], and, in wedlock, women from among those who have been vouchsafed revelation before your time - provided that you give them their dowers, taking them in honest wedlock, not in fornication, nor as secret love-companions."*<sup>8</sup>

Another important verse of the Noble Qur'an provides a Universalist approach to be followed by people of different faiths. It vouchsafes salvation not only to Muslims, but grants it to the souls of people of other religions as well by clearly making a sense of the Divine and righteousness the criteria to enter the Kingdom of God. It says, *"VERILY, those who have attained to faith [in this divine writ], as well as those who follow the Jewish faith, and the Christians, and the Sabians - all who believe in God and the Last Day and do righteous deeds - shall have their reward with their Sustainer; and no fear need they have, and neither shall they grieve."*<sup>9</sup>

### **Befriending the religious other**

There are some verses in the Qur'an which apparently forbid Muslims to befriend non Muslims but in the context one will come to know that those were the crucial times of war, strife and conspiracies. It was that faction of non Muslim population which was directly or indirectly at war with the Muslims with whom affinity and friendship was forbidden. To fully comprehend the issue we have to look at the context of those Qur'anic verses and study other verses as well where fighting with non Muslims was forbidden if they were harmless towards the Muslims.

Let us look at some other verses about this issue. The following two verses regulate relations with any people, regardless of faith:

*As for such [of the unbelievers] as do not fight against you on account of [your] faith, and neither drive you forth from your homelands, God does not forbid you to show them kindness and to behave towards them with full equity: for, verily, God loves those who act equitably. God only forbids you to turn in friendship towards such as fight against you because of [your] faith, and drive you forth from your homelands, or aid [others] in driving you forth: and as for those [from among you] who turn towards them in friendship; it is they, they who are truly wrongdoers!*<sup>10</sup>

It is clear that the above verses have a universal application as we cannot always remain in a state of war with others. It also instigates us to show kindness towards the people of other faiths. We learn that we are only discouraged from befriending those who fight Muslims because of their religion. Now let's go back to the verse immediately after 5:51, to see if it sheds some further light on the issue.

*"You see that those who have the disease of hypocrisy in their hearts move around in their camp saying: "We fear lest a turn of fortune strike us." But soon when Allah gives you victory or a decision according to His will, they will regret for what they are hiding in their hearts."*<sup>11</sup>

During the time of the Prophet when the Jews and Christians were in open conflict with the Muslims, there were some Muslims who were more concerned about maintaining their alliances with the Jews and Christians at the expense of the Muslim community. The above verse is referring to such situations where Muslims with doubts in their hearts will ally themselves with the enemy.

Chapter 5 Verse 57 of the Quran makes it clear again, who are not to be taken as friends;

*"O you who believe! take not for friends and protectors those who take your religion for a mockery or sport, - whether among those who received the Scripture before you, or among those who reject Faith; but remain conscious of God, if you are (truly) believers."*<sup>12</sup>

God teaches us throughout the Quran that there are righteous Jews and Christians. As such there is no prohibition for Muslims to be friends with Jews, Christians or people of any other faith who are of good character. Qur'an also makes it clear that there is a section among Jews and Christians (not Muslims) who are guided by the Light of God.

*"Of the people of Moses there is a section who guide and do justice in the light of truth."*<sup>13</sup>

### **Conclusion**

It is evident from the above study of the luminous verses of the Noble Qur'an that Qur'an accepts and tolerates the diversity among human beings be it racial or religious. At the same time it invites people to the inerrant version of the True Religion without any compulsion, evident in the universal verse 256 of Surah Baqarah:

*There shall be no coercion in matters of faith. Distinct has now become the right way from [the way of] error: hence, he who rejects the powers of evil and believes in God has indeed taken hold of a support most unfailing, which shall never give way: for God is all-hearing, all-knowing.*

Modern nation states are an example of ancient tribes where people make a close relation with one another on the basis of some common themes such as race, culture or language. Qur'an accepts this plurality as a way of different expressions of humanity like different flowers in a garden, not a cause of strife or hatred but the phenomenon which increases the beauty of the garden. It strictly discourages the racial or nationalistic biases where one race or one country thinks it's the centre of the world or superior to others. Accepting racial, tribal or linguistic differences does not mean one should try to prove his race or language as the only best thing in the world demeaning others. It is in the service of identification and beautification that Qur'an accepts this human diversity, not for the creation of hatred among people. The criterion of superiority is the righteousness, more an individual is closer to truth and goodness, more is he superior to others irrespective of his geographical, cultural or racial identity.

Moreover, Qur'an accepts the diversity of religions as well without compromising in its own presentation of the religious truth. It only instigates Muslims to fight those who oppress others in the world through different ways. It does not forbid to show mercy or befriend the people of other religions or faiths. It declares outrightly that there is no compulsion in religion. One can neither be forced to enter Islam forcibly nor can one be forced to remain inside the paradigm of Islam. It is evident from the fact that to accept anything wholeheartedly one has to have the certainty and clarity. One can't outwardly be coerced to believe something because we know that would be a pretense on his part and he won't be able to reap the fruits of the Truth.

Lastly an important thing to be noticed is that while Qur'an accepts the tribal or racial distinction on the basis of identity but it does not endorse the discrimination done on the basis of these diversities. Also it discourages the exploitation done by the upper economic classes done to the lower or poor sections of the society. In fact it paves the way for the elimination of the economic classes and forbids hoarding wealth by a few individuals or sections of the society. Due to its strong emphasis on economic justice, Qur'an strongly encourages a welfare society where every individual has the access to the basic necessities of life like food, clothing, shelter, education, healthcare etc. Important point to be emphasized is that Qur'an does not allow injustice done by one section to another while recognizing the tribal, racial or religious differences for the sake of identity and natural diversity among human beings.

#### Notes and References

<sup>1</sup> Qur'an (49:13)

<sup>2</sup> Qur'an 5:48

<sup>3</sup> Asad, Muhammad, *Message of the Qur'an*, 5:48, p. 224

<sup>4</sup> Qur'an 16:93

<sup>5</sup> ( <http://www.iqbal.com.pk/944-allama-iqbal-studies/scholarly-articles/1656-iqbals-vision-of-a-muslim-state> ).

<sup>6</sup> Qur'an 3:64-67. Translation: Muhammad Asad

<sup>7</sup> Ibid 2:136

<sup>8</sup> Ibid 5:5

<sup>9</sup> Ibid 2:62

<sup>10</sup> Ibid 60:8-9

<sup>11</sup> Ibid 5:52 Malik Translation

<sup>12</sup> Ibid 5:57 Asad Translation

<sup>13</sup> Ibid 7:159