

“Difference” in the Qur’an

Sobhi Rayan

Introduction

This article seeks to explain and analyze the concept of cultural *ikhtilaf* (difference) in the Qur’an. Islam introduces a model for human communication among cultures at the individual and group levels that is based on human values that guarantee a person’s dignity and human rights. The principle of difference in Islam means accepting the “other,” namely, the different person, by establishing relations based on acquaintance, dialogue, sharing, and reciprocity. Difference became an important conceptual tool in the framework of traditional Muslim societies’ willingness to accept diversity and has remained an important part of Muslim discourse.¹

The different person is not a mere independent isolated unit living within his/her own world and whose main concern is to protect himself/herself and his/her identity from loss and forgetfulness. Rather, he/she is characterized by his/her communicative and productive nature and entity, which are delineated by mutual dependence on the “other” while maintaining the independence of the “other.” The “other” also has an independent and confident character that qualifies him/her to establish a communicative and reciprocal relationship that seeks to achieve public advantage.

The “different” person can prove his/her truth, since “difference” is used in a saying based on evidence,² and the established truth based on this evidence grants its holder moral and logical confidence, thereby making him/her more open to the “other.” In addition, evidence indicates the power of argumentative logic and high epistemological level of those who differentiate.

The concept of difference, while based on rationality and logic, also carries a moral dimension as a complementary unity. As a result, therefore, difference turns out to be a fundamental element in establishing a civilized creative society.

The Qur’anic Concept of Difference

In the Qur’an, the concept of difference carries diverse implications. The term itself occurs in several aspects that deal with difference among living

Sobhi Rayan is a lecturer in philosophy, Department of Education, al-Qasimi College, Baqa al-Gharbia, Israel.

creatures and inanimate objects, as well as among human beings according to their religion, affiliation with a certain community or people, attitude, language and color. Its meaning of difference is comprehensive, for it applies to all creatures. The principle is one, but its applications take several forms.³

ART THOU NOT aware that God sends down water from the skies whereby We bring forth fruits of many hues – just as in the mountains there are streaks of white and red of various shades, as well as [others] raven-black, and [as] there are in men, and in crawling beasts, and in cattle, too, many hues? Of all His servants, only such as are endowed with [innate] knowledge stand [truly] in awe of God: [for they alone comprehend that,] verily, God is almighty, much-forgiving. (35:27-28)

The noticeable thing here is the pointing out and repetition of difference in colors and that color is a casual, rather than an essential, attribute. If the attribute of essence is absent, the object is also absent, whereas the casual attribute's absence and its change do not affect the object's existence.

Difference in the objects' essential qualities means that there is a full contradiction between them, whereas the difference between casual qualities attests to an external, rather than an internal essential, difference. In other words, they possess a similarity and a common ground, which indicates that there is commonality in difference. Thus, its subject is not disparity or dissimilarity.⁴

Consequently, people's different skin color should not distract us from the common human attributes that unite humanity. The connection between the difference of an item's color and the scholars' worry and care is, perhaps, a warning and a reminder to them that such a difference does not signify a negative contrast, which would negate or nullify the "other."

In addition, there is the difference of languages.⁵

And among his wonders is the creation of the heavens and the earth, and the diversity of your tongues and colours: for in this, behold, there are messages indeed for all who are possessed of [innate] knowledge! (23:30)

Here, God raises the status of different languages and colors to that of a prodigy or a miraculous sign connected to a similar one, "the creation of the heavens and the earth," thereby considering creation and difference as His apparent and visible miraculous prodigies. Also, they are amazing things to people who are knowledgeable. We do not plead for a prodigy in a materialistic or merely absolute mentality; we need suitable means or ways to attain it. In fact, there are no more suitable ways than intellectual contempla-

tion and meditation to lead people toward gaining the instruction and wisdom that transcend the relation between the phenomenon and the law.

The Qur'an shows the moral and value dimensions that result from human difference.⁶

O men [and women]! Behold, We have created you all out of a male and a female, and have made you into nations and tribes, so that you might come to know one another. Verily, the noblest of you in the sight of God is the one who is most deeply conscious of Him. Behold, God is all-knowing, all-aware. (49:13)

This direct address, which encompasses all human beings, serves to remind them of that which unites them, which is a fact of human existence, and then reminds them of their different origins as men and women, as if He were saying that this difference is a necessary condition for life's proliferation and continuation. The reader senses the parallel between the wedding and sexual relationship of a man and a woman, which guarantees humanity's perpetuation and the mutual acquaintance of various peoples. Just as a fruitful marriage is characterized by peace and tranquility, which is conditional on love and mercy between the man and the woman, so is the civilized human acquaintance conditioned by contact based on the high human values that make such a contact creative, useful, and motivating for human life's continuity and development.

If creativity and birth are characterized by creation and newness, then there must be a mutual relationship between two different ends, one in which creativity requires difference. It is true to say that there is no creativity without difference and no creativity with similarity or contrast, even if the conditions of contact are secured, because birth or creation requires commonality in some attributes. But it is not a complete commonality, one that reaches the level of identification. In addition, no fruitful or useful creation can be produced from contrast because commonality is absent.

This difference between peoples seeks to achieve a human value, namely, acquaintance, which represents a supreme model for human cultural contact and is based on the frank acknowledgement of other cultures and the right of other people to develop and nurture their own culture. This acknowledgement represents the first step toward other elevated degrees in human contact. This divine discourse has come to legitimize the difference that exists among human beings who, supported by God and a natural law that humanity cannot change, oppose, or object to, turn it around in order to derive benefit from it.

If mutual beneficial cooperation is a value that we wish to pursue, we must create the suitable means to achieve it. The first step of this pursuit entails recognizing the different “other” and treating it with mutual respect. Acquaintance between people contributes to the ideals of cooperation and peace and decreases hatred, injustice, violence, murder, and war.

The above verse prescribes that the level of a given people’s cultural status is measured by the degree of virtue it possesses. Morals also constitute the criterion that defines the people’s preference and excellence. The verse ends by defining the standard of preference based on piety, which entails abstaining from vice, and is characterized by the virtues of good deeds and good behavior. This means that the best person is the one who has the best manners and the best virtues.

The fact that nations and people differ as regards their color, race, traditions, laws, and realities makes the principle of acquaintance necessary and very important in people’s lives. The idea of acquaintance and knowing one another is based on the principle of identification between “us” and “them.” This process takes place between different cultures and contributes to a society’s development and flourishing through the movement of reciprocal material and spiritual values.

Acquaintance and knowing one another produces acknowledgement and recognition of the existence of the needs, feelings, and richness of those previously unrecognized other groups. In actuality, acquaintance is the human and cultural experience that guarantees recognition of the existence of the “other” and of his/her importance as a cultural generator and partner. Such a recognition, which is not based on coercion, results from personal meetings among people of different cultures. It also requires an abundance of cultural knowledge as a factor in inter-cultural relations.

Cultural abundance comprises the concept of justice among people by establishing centers of recognition and learning about different types of lifestyles. The abundance of cultural knowledge can guarantee the creation not only of a constructive dialogue among nations, one based on mutual respect, but also of a contact among cultures that contributes to social change. Mutual acquaintance and knowledge among different cultural groups can constitute a basis for changing relations among societies by developing inter-cultural contacts as a constant activity at various levels.

The principle of recognition *per se*, which liberal pluralism calls for, however, does not achieve the values that result from acquaintance (e.g., sharing, equality, and reciprocity). This is because the principle of recognition is established on the basis of separation, “us” and “them,” which can lead to dividing society into disconnected units and undermining mutual rec-

iprocity among individuals and groups. The motion takes place from the knowing the self to the recognized self. Here, recognition becomes a possession of the knowing self, which means that the powerful ruling culture is the one that gives up its possession according to the element of value and experience in reality. In this case, full identification between the two sides cannot occur.

The problem with the liberal pluralism discourse is that it introduces the policy and morals of borders and separation, but does not approach reality from the viewpoint of intra-group sharing and partnership; to the contrary, it strengthens differences among them. Difference carries a more comprehensive meaning and deeper indication than mere diversity and pluralism, for it is a qualitative description and quality is a communicative issue, whereas pluralism is a quantitative description and quantity is a separatist issue.⁷

The acquaintance and knowledge of one another guarantees variety and abundance that seek to achieve human values via cooperation among groups and peoples. This mutual cooperation is based on direct communication and removing borders between different societies. Moreover, acquaintance guarantees that cooperation should be useful to people, because cooperation does not always seek to achieve good and deny evil. Cooperation can be used to achieve good or evil.⁸

And never let your hatred of people who would bar you from the Inviolable House of Worship lead you into the sin of aggression: but rather help one another in furthering virtue and God-consciousness, and do not help one another in furthering evil and enmity; and remain conscious of God: for, behold, God is severe in retribution! (5:2)

This is why the Qur'an emphasizes a cooperation that guarantees good to all of the cooperating sides. This cooperation possesses the ability to create human values that deal with existing things and rises to what it aspires to be. In other words, acquaintance is open to an infinitely wide world and it is not confined to the limited real world; rather, it seeks to change it constantly into a better world.

Differences of Methods and Laws

Islam acknowledges the differences in peoples' methods and laws.⁹

Unto every one of you have We appointed a [different] law and way of life. And if God had so willed, He could surely have made you all one single community: but [He willed it otherwise] in order to test you by means of what He has vouchsafed unto you. Vie, then, with one another in doing

good works! Unto God you all must return; and then He will make you truly understand all that on which you were wont to differ. (5:48)

Religious pluralism is considered a decision of God's will is fulfilled and embodied in the real life of human societies as a human phenomenon. This implies that Islam acknowledges and respects a diversity and pluralism of methods and laws and indicates that religious truth is diverse, although its source is one. These facts are true for a specific time and place, but not in an absolute way.

Islam acknowledges the diversity of truths, despite its belief in the existence of a certain truth, which is Islam itself. But this truth does not nullify the truth of the other; rather, it respects the other person's right to believe in his/her own truth and does not coerce others to accept Islam's truth. Islamic law also allows the non-Muslims' freedom of worship and belief; independent religious and educational institutions; autonomy in matters of family law, personal law, marriage, and divorce; and freedom in financial, transactional, civil, and social matters.¹⁰

The Qur'an reveals that one aspect of the wisdom of difference is the anticipation of good things and the race to attain them. This feeling motivates competition among human beings – whether as individuals, groups, or nations – to make quality products that benefit humanity, stave off harm, and create a strong motivation for productivity and creativity. It refutes fanaticism for one's own race, kind, or ethnicity; the adoption of antagonistic attitude toward other races; and all claims of a monopoly on virtues by one nation and a denial of the same virtues to other nations.¹¹

God decides that this actual difference will remain, and that people will differ, forever. Each will stick to a certain truth, considering it the only one, even though discrimination between truths is impossible in this world and will be possible only in the eternal return and resurrection. In other words, only God knows the absolute truth, and people only know limited truths. Despite these limitations, many people have believed in the unity and oneness of truth, rather than in its diversity and pluralism. The prevailing belief has been that the truth is unique and can be reached only through certain methods.

The Qur'an points out that difference is a clear expression of the divine will.¹²

And had thy Sustainer so willed, He could surely have made all mankind one single community: but [He willed it otherwise, and so] they continue to hold divergent views. (11:118)

The wisdom of creation has judged that people should be different, and if difference is a fulfillment of God's will and a determined order over which humans have no power, then erasing or canceling difference and unifying humanity turns out to be no more than an attempt to replace the divine will that has decided this difference. This attempt can lead oppressing human beings and expropriating their liberties, which they were born to fulfill. Indeed, it constitutes the robbery of a gift that God has granted to them.

Conclusion

From the above discussion, we can conclude that the principle of difference is an original one in Islam, one that certainly contributes to the reconstructing of human society on accepted and existing human values among all people, irrespective of their affiliations and differences. Besides, difference constitutes a critical instrument that refutes reality as it is and works constantly to change it in order to abolish oppression, injustice, and exploitation and to establish justice for, and the emancipation of, humanity and granting freedom to all people. Thus, "difference" turns out to be a project of human liberation from fanaticism, domination, and war. It is a call for openness and peace.

Endnotes

1. John O.Voll, *Cultural Diversity and Islam*, eds. Abdul Aziz Said and Meena Sharify-Funk (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2003), 125.
2. Al-Tahnawi, *Kashshaf Istilahat al-Funun* (Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-Ilmiyah, 1998), 57.
3. Qur'an 35:27-28. Muhammad Asad, *The Message of the Qur'an* (Gibraltar: Dar al-Andalus, 1980).
4. Abu al-Ma'ali al-Juwayni, *Al-Irshad*, eds. Muhammad Yusuf Musa and Ali Abed al-Hakem (Egypt: Maktabat al-Khanji, 1950), 39.
5. Qur'an 30:22
6. Qur'an 49:13.
7. Taha Abd al-Rahman, *Al-Haqq al-Islami fi al-Ikhtilaf al-Fikri* (Al-Maghrib: Al-Markaz al-Thaqafi al-'Arabi, 2005), 52.
8. Qur'an 5:2.
9. Qur'an 5:48.
10. Saiyad Fareed Ahmad, "How Can We Understand Religious Diversity?" *Islamic Culture*, no. 4 (October 2004): 19.
11. Muhammad Imarah, *Al-Islam wa al-Ta'addudiyah* (Cairo: Dar al-Rashad, 1997), 119.
12. Qur'an 11:118, 119.