

AMSS 37th ANNUAL CONFERENCE

“Crossing Boundaries: Mobilizing Faith, Diversity and Dialogue”

Hosted By:

**The Harvard Divinity School
Harvard University, Cambridge, MA
October 24 – 25, 2008**

FINAL PAPER

“ ‘We have made you nations and tribes...¹:
A Qur'anically-Based Vision of Multiculturalism
and Inter-Religious Relations”

By: Aisha Y. Musa, Ph.D
(Florida International University, Miami, FL)

Religion is often seen as a major source of conflict and tension in the world. Perhaps no religion is as conspicuous in this regard as Islam. Islam’s popular image is increasingly negative, particularly in Europe and North America. The Qur'an is often misconstrued and sometimes even reviled as a book that preaches hatred, intolerance, and violence. This impression is influenced in no small part by the actions of terrorists who portray themselves as Muslims acting in the name of Islam. However, the text is not the exclusive property of those individuals and groups, who are only a tiny fraction of the world's Muslims. It is a text with a nearly 1500 year history of interpretation and implementation, which is read today as the sacred text more than a billion of the world's people, from various cultures in both the East and the West. This essay seeks to present a literal and holistic reading of the Qur'an's discussion of humanity, gender, intercultural, and inter-religious relations. By literal and holistic, I mean a reading that focuses on the literal meanings of the Arabic text read within the context of the Qur'an as

¹ Qur'an 49:13

an entire book, applying the time-honored interpretive principles of *al-aṣl fil-kalām al-ḥaqīqah* (the fundamental principle of speech is literalness) and *tafsīr al-qurʾān bil-qurʾān* (explaining the Qurʾān with the Qurʾān). Such a reading demonstrates that rather than being a wellspring of intolerance and hatred, the Qurʾān invites humanity to inter-religious and intercultural understanding and cooperation in striving to achieve social justice for humanity.

The examination of what the Qurʾān has to say on these important issues will begin with the Arabic of the verses, followed a translation² and discussion

The verse that lays the foundation for the present discussion is chapter 49 (Sūrat al-Ḥujurāt), verse 13:

yā ayyuhā al-nās innā khalaqnā kum min dhakarīn wa unthā wa jaʿalnā kum shuʿabān wa qabāʾila li-taʿrafū inna akramakum ʿinda allāhi atqā kum inna allāha ʿalīmun khabīr
 [O people! Indeed, we have created you from a male and a female, and have made you nations and tribes that you may get to know one another. Indeed, the most noble of you, in the sight of God, are those with the most taqwa. Indeed, God is Knower, Aware.] (Sūrat al-Ḥujurāt, verse 13)

We will leave the idea of *taqwa* untranslated for the moment and return to it shortly. First, it is important to point out that this verse, which is addressed to humanity in general, rather than to Muslims, or believers, informs us that gender and national and tribal differences are divinely ordained, so that people may get to know one another. A key term used in this verse is *taʿrafū*, translated here as

² Unless otherwise noted, all translations are those of the author.

“get to know one another.” The verb *ta'raf* is in the sixth form in Arabic, which carries the meaning of activity that is reciprocal and ongoing.³ Therefore, this verse does not simply refer to people of some groups learning about others, but various groups are actively engaged in relationships that are continuing and mutual, in which they are learning about one another.

The Qur'an also addresses various manifestations of national and ethnic differences. In chapter 30 (Sūrat al-Rūm) verse 22, the Qur'an declares:

*wa min y tibi khalq ul-sam w ti wa al-arḍi wa akbtil f
alsinatikum wa alw nikum inna f db lika la- y tin lil' lim n
[Among His signs is the creation of the heavens and the earth and the
variations in your languages and colors. Certainly, in that are signs
for the worlds.] (Sūrat al-Rūm, verse 22)]*

In chapter 7 (Sūrat al-'Araf) verse 26:

*y ban dam qad anzaln 'alaykum lib san yuw r saw' tikum
wa r shan wa lib su al-taqwādh lika khayrun db lika min ' y ti
all hi la 'allahum yadbhakkar na
[Ob children of Adam, We have sent down to you garments to cover
your nakedness, and as a means of adornment, but the best garment
is the garment of taqwa. This is among the signs of God, so that
perhaps you may reflect.] (Sūrat al-'Araf, verse 26)*

It is clear from these verses that variations color, language, and even clothing styles are divinely ordained. The Qur'an also makes it clear that such variations

³ W. Wright, *A Grammar of the Arabic Language* vol. 1 (Beirut: Librairie du Liban, 1996) 39B

should not be a source of discrimination or derision in verse 11 of Chapter 49 (Sūrat al-Ḥujurāt).

*y ayyub alladh na man l yaskbar qaumun min qaumin
'asa'an yak n khayran minbum wa l nis 'un min nis 'in 'asa'
an yakunna khayran minbunna wa l talmiz anfusakum wa l
tan baz bil-alq b...*

[O you who acknowledge, one people should not deride another, for it may be that they are better than them; nor should some women deride others, for it may be that they are better than them; and do not insult each other or ridicule each other with nicknames....] (Sūrat al-Ḥujurāt, verse 11)

So, according to the Qur'an, the differences in languages and colors, and even modes of dress are signs of God, which the Qur'an compares to the creation of the heavens and the earth; moreover, these differences should not be sources of rivalry or discrimination. On the contrary, the verb *ta'raf* in 49:13 indicates that people should recognize and appreciate such God-given differences.

A distinction that is sometimes popularly used to argue for an inevitable class of civilizations is the dichotomy of East and West. This issue is also addressed in the Qur'an, in chapter 2 (Sūrat al-Baqara) verse 115,

*wa li-llabi al-mashriqu wa al-maghribu fa-aynam tuwall fa-
thamma wajbu all hi inna all ha w si'un 'al m.*

[To God belongs the East and the West, thus wherever you turn, there is the face of God. Certainly God is all-encompassing, all-knowing.]

(Sūrat al-Baqara, verse 115)

Far from envisioning a clash between East and West, the Qur'an thus makes it clear that God is found wherever you turn, East or West. Both are equally encompassed by God.

In addition to an East/West dichotomy, religious differences are also alleged as part of an inevitable clash of civilizations. Here is how the Qur'an addresses differences in religious affiliation: chapter 5 (Sūrat al-Mā'idā) verse 69:

*inna al-ladh na man wa al-ladh na b d wa al-s bi' na wa
al-naṣārā man mana bil-l hi wa al-yawm il- khiri wa 'amila
s liḥan fa-l kbawfun 'alayhim wa l hum yaḥzan n*

*[Certainly, those who acknowledge, those who are Jewish, the Sabians,
and the Christians, whoever acknowledges God and the Last Day and
does good, will have nothing to fear, nor will they grieve.] (Sūrat al-
Mā'idā, verse 69)*

Earlier in the same chapter, Sūrat al-Mā'idā, there is an extended discussion of God's scripture, in verses 44-48. Verse 44, tells us that God sent down the Torah (*inn anzaln al-tawr • f b hudan wa n r* [Certainly, we sent down the Torah, in which there is guidance and light] (Sūrat al-Mā'idā, verse 44)). In verse 45, it says of Jesus (*atayn hu al-inj l f hi hudan wa n r*) [We gave him the Gospel, in which there is guidance and light] (Sūrat al-Mā'idā, verse 45). Those who received the scripture are not commanded to abandon what they received in favor of the Qur'an; rather, they are urged to rule according to what God has sent down in it (*yaḥkum bi-mā anzala allab*) in verses 44 and 47. Verse 48 tells us that the Qur'an has been sent down, not to replace previous scripture, but as a confirmation and validation of it:

*wa anzaln ilayka al-kit ba bil-ḥaqqi muṣaddiqan li-m bayna
yadaybi mina al-kit bi wa mubayminan 'alaybi*

*[We have sent down the scripture to you in truth, as a confirmation
and validation of what came before it.] (Sūrāt al-Ma'ida, verse 48)*

The Qur'an directs Jews, Christians, and Muslims to follow the guidance that God has sent down to them and promises that those who do so will have nothing to fear, nor will they grieve. After declaring that God has sent down the Torah and the Gospel containing guidance and that the Qur'an confirms and validates them and urging people to follow what God has sent down, the Qur'an goes on to say:

*li-kullin ja 'aln minkum shir 'atan wa minh jan wa law sh 'a all b
la-ja 'alukum ummatan w ḥidatan wa laḳin li-yabluwakum f m
t kum fa-astabiq al-khayr t ila'all hi marji 'ukum jam 'an fa-
yunabbi'ukum bi-m kuntum f hi takhtalif n*

*[For each among you we have ordained a law and a way of doing
things. If God had willed, He would have made you a single
community. But he wishes to test you with that which he has given
you. So compete with one another in good things. It is to God that all
of you will return, and then He will inform you of that about which
you used to differ.] (S rat al-M 'ida, 48)*

Here too, the Qur'an indicates that differences are God-given, for if God had willed, humanity would be a single community. However, each community has been given a law and a way of doing things and what they have been given is part of a test from God.

So, how is it that God-given differences have become a matter of dispute? The Qur'an provides this answer: *wa m tafarraq ill min ba 'di m j 'abumu al-`ilmu baghyan baynahum* [they only broke into factions after knowledge came to them, out of rivalry between them] (Sūrat al-Shūrā, verse 14). It is human rivalry that turns God-given differences into sources of conflict and discrimination, according to the Qur'an. It is important not to overlook the fact that the Qur'an says that communities are being tested with what they have been given.

The Qur'an further clarifies the purpose for which God tests humanity in chapter 67 (Sūrat al-Mulk) verse 2: *li-yabluwakum ayyukum aḥsanu 'amalan* [so that he may test which of you is best in action] (Sūrat al-Mulk verse 2)-- which is best in action, not which is the best gender, or a member of the best nation, or the best ethnic group, or the best religious denomination; not which has the best color, or the best language, but which is the best in action. Gender, ethnic and national background, language, color, geographic region, and religion are all-to-often used by both individuals and nations as sources of conflict and reasons to discriminate against each other. However, from a Qur'anic perspective, it is not such differences that determine our nobility in the sight of God.

Now, let's return to the quality that according to the Qur'an, does determine who is most noble in the sight of God: *taqwa*. The concept of *taqwa* is variously translated as "piety," "righteousness," "good conduct," "fear of God," or "God-consciousness," and it carries all of these meanings. *Taqwa* refers to a sense of awareness of one's actions and concern for the consequences of those actions. As indicated in chapter 67, verse 2, God tests humanity to determine who is best in

action. So, what are the actions that demonstrate our *taqwa*? The Qur'an clarifies this and describes those who have *taqwa* in chapter 2 (Sūrat al-Baqara) verse 177:

*laysa al-birra an tuwall wajhakum qibal al-mashriqi wa al-
maghribi wa lakinna al-birra man mana billahi wa al-yawm il-
khibri wa al-mal 'ikati wa al-kitabi wa al-nabiyina wa ta'alimul-
'alaḥibbi dhaw al-qurba' wa al-yatama' wa al-mas'kin wa
abna al-sab' li wa al-s'ailina wa fil-riqabi wa aqama al-salata wa
ta'al-zakata wa al-muf'na bi'abdihim idha'bad wa al-
s'birina fil-bas'ati wa al-darr'ina wa ḥan al-bas'ati l'ika al-ladhi na
adaq wa l'ika hum ul-muttaqin*

[Righteousness is not turning your faces in the direction of the East or the West, but the righteous are whoever acknowledges God and the Last Day, the angels, the book, and the prophets, and spends wealth out of his love for relatives, orphans, the poor, the wayfarer, those who ask, and for those in bondage. They establish prayer and pay alms; honoring the covenants they have made, persevering in adversity and bad times, these are the trustworthy, and these are the ones who have taqwa.] (Sūrat al-Baqara, 177, emphasis added)

So it is clear from the Qur'an that it is peoples' behavior, their actions, especially toward other human beings that determine which is most noble in the sight of God. It is not gender, nation, tribe, language, color, geographic region, or even particular religious denomination or sect. It is actions that demonstrate *taqwa*, or awareness, actions such as spending wealth to improve the conditions of those who are weak and in need, honoring covenants, and persevering in adversity.

A literal and holistic reading of the Qur'an portrays differences in gender, ethnicity, nationality, language, color, and religion as God-given qualities that are among the wonders of creation, which the text calls on people to recognize and appreciate, rather than use as a basis for derision and discrimination. It informs humanity that God encompasses both the East and the West, so that wherever they turn, they will find the face of God. It also tells people that they face an important test. The test of who is best in action. In keeping with its self-declared nature as a book of guidance, the Qur'an also tells people how they can pass the test. In conclusion, it is fitting to return to the Qur'an's own summary of its advice to the various communities:

*li-kullin ja 'aln minkum shir 'atan wa minh jan wa law sh 'a all h
la-ja 'alakum ummatan w hidatan wa lakin li-yabluwakum f m
t kum fa-astabiq al-khayr t...*

[For each among you we have ordained a law and a way of doing things. If God had willed, He would have made you a single community. But he wishes to test you with that which he has given you. So compete with one another in good things....] (S rat al-M 'ida, 48)