THE ISLAMIC FOUNDATION
for Citizenship and Pluralism

Roy Mottahedeh*

Human diversity is an assumption of most people in most places. The reality of such diversity is handsomely and clearly stated in a famous and often quoted verse of the Qur'an.

Verse 13 of Sūrah 49 reads:

> Oh men, We have created you from a male and a female, and We have made you into groups (*shu`ūb*) and tribes (*qabā'il*) that you may come to know one another; truly, the noblest (*akram*) among you before God is the most righteous (*atqā*) among you; truly God is the All-knowing, the All-seeing.

I have deliberately chosen the colorless translation "groups" for *shu`ūb*, singular *sha`b*, to avoid prejudicing the interpretations of commentators.

This verse was a point of reference for a celebrated controversy among Muslims from the 3rd/9th century to the 5th/11th century. A group of Muslims calling themselves (after the word in the verse) Shu`ūbīs claimed that the verse advocated equality among Muslims. As Ibn `Abdar-Rabbih (d. 328/940), a highly talented Andalusi scholar, tells us, the Shu`ūbīs asserted:

> The believers are brothers, whose lives are equal in

> **While the Shu`ūbīyah controversy died out in the 6ᵗʰ/12ᵗʰ century, it was tragically resurrected in a most unbecoming way by the otherwise excellent Iraqi historian `Abd al-`Azīz ad-Dūrī**

value before the law (*tatakāfa `udimā' ulum*) . . . . As [Muḥammad] said in the farewell pilgrimage in the speech in which he bade farewell to his community and with which he set a seal on his prophecy: "O man, God has removed from you the baseless pride of the period of ignorance (*nakhwah al-jāhilīyah*) and its glorification of ancestors. You are all from Adam, and Adam was from the dust. The Arab has no superiority to the non-Arab *(`ajami)* except by virtue of righteousness (taqwā)." These words of the Prophet [add the *shu`ūbīs*] are in agreement with the words of God: "Truly the noblest among you before God is the most righteous."[1]

The Shu`ūbīs tended to be of Persian or Iberian (i.e., Andalusi) descent, although anti-Shu`ūbīs also include many scholars of Persian descent such as Ibn Qutaybah (d. 276/889), one of the greatest figures in classical Arabic literature. While the Shu`ūbīyah controversy died out in the 6ᵗʰ/12ᵗʰ century, it was tragically resurrected in a most unbecoming way by the otherwise excellent Iraqi historian `Abd al-`Azīz ad-Dūrī in the twentieth century. Dūrī stated that the Shu`ūbīyah represented "a literary, cultural, historical, linguistic and religious attack" on Sunni Arab society that has reappeared throughout history.[2]

The reactions to this verse show that ethnicity and religious difference are issues that often become confused. Two recent cases of the confusion of religion and ethnic identity are offeredby Bosnia and Sri Lanka. This confusion is well illustrated by the remarks of a Serbian mayor who, forgetting that Bosnians are southern Slavs like himself, said that Bosnian Muslims should go back to Turkey from where they came.[3]

In some understandings of ethnicity the shadow of racism can also be clearly seen. Community is created by the sense of social solidarity, the `*asabīyah* that Ibn Khaldun so well described as the basis of social organization. "Race" is also a social construct. The Qur'an regards social solidarity to be a natural aspect of society, yet ranks individual piety ahead of any affiliation of group or tribe.

I see the verse about groups and tribes as promoting a concept of citizenship in which people, while dividing themselves into religious or

language or lineage groups, believe that everyone (that is, every citizen) has an equal right to strive for virtue and that righteous acts may come from individuals of any group.

Such equality in citizenship can also draw strong support from the Qur'anic concept of *fiṭrah*, which can be translated as "innate pattern" meaning the inborn pattern of religiosity that God has created in every person. In Sūrah Rūm verse 30 reads:

> So set your face towards religion as (or "supporting") a true monotheist (ḥanīfan), according to the innate pattern on the basis of which He created people. There is no exchange for what God's creation has ordained, which is the upright religion. Yet most of mankind do not know it.

This verse makes clear that we are talking about the inborn pattern of goodness and right belief. Many of the commentators explain *fiṭrah* as "Islam" and certainly in the large sense of Islam, the virtuous and Godly religion that existed

> **The Qur'an regards social solidarity to be a natural aspect of society, yet ranks individual piety ahead of any affiliation of group or tribe.**

for Adam and his descendants, this explanation is correct.[4]

According to the classical Arabic dictionaries *fiṭrah* is "the natural constitution with which a child is created in his mother's womb."[5] A famous ḥadīth is often associated with this verse. It reads: "Every child is born according to his natural constitution (*fiṭrah*) and it is his parents who make him a Jew or a Christian or a Zoroastrian."[6] In my view these scriptural sourcesare very close to the concept of "natural religion." It is implied that this kind of "natural religion" is Islam in its widest sense, meant toinclude allthose who, like Adam, understand the oneness of creation.

The very perceptive Shī`ī Fayḍ al-Kāshānī (d. 1090/1679) says in agreement with many others that the innate pattern of each human is the recognition of the unity of God (tawḥīd) and quotes Imam Muḥammad Bāqir, the fifth Shī`ī Imam, as saying that: "Their innate pattern is based on recognition of Him (*al-ma`rifahbihī*)." He also quotes Imam Bāqir as saying that this recognition is based on the primal covenant between God and mankind when god asked all potential humans, "Am I not your Lord?" and was answered, "But yes!"[7]

`Allāmah Ṭabāṭabā'ī the great twentieth century commentator on the Qur'an interprets the verse even closer to a universal vision of the innate goodness of men. He understands *hanīf* to refer to

"the inclination of the ancients to the golden mean, that is to say, to balance (*al-'i`tidāl*)." As for fiṭrah, he explains that this innate religion is "nothing less than the customary behavior (*sunnah*) of life and the path that a person must follow so that he attains felicity in life."[8]

The highly respected and deeply thoughtful Ayatollah Murtaḍā Muṭahharī (d. 1979) discussed this verse:

> Inherent in every being who has deviated from its original path there is a propensity toward returning to its primordial state. In philosophical terms, in every nature that suffers from an impediment there exists an inclination to revert to its original state; i.e., there always exists in the universe a force to escape from disequilibrium and more toward health and equilibrium.[9]

Muṭahharī rightly sees in this religious principle an argument to give mercy precedence over anger and to forgive rather than to pursue people for their shortcomings.

To my mind the concept of *fiṭrah* is a strong argument for toleration and pluralism. Do we encourage people's better natures to emerge by beating them or, rather, by encouraging them? I believe that society will only get sincere expressions of our inborn better natures by encouragement. This sentiment fits in with the idea that regardless of tribe or group we should recognize that God respects piety and virtue over other characteristics, such as belonging to a specific group.

Another clear call to toleration comes from the many verses of the Qur'an which say that no one foretells the judgment of God. Verse 9 of Sūrah 46 reads: "Say, I am not a novelty among the Messengers [of God] and I do not know what will be done with me or with them."

As the Prophet is assured of his salvation in other verses, why was this verse revealed? As Muṭahharī suggests, it is to warn us that no person no matter how sanctified can assume to know what God will do with us after Judgment. No believer questions the salvation of the Prophet but the rhetoric of this verse strongly reinforces the view that humans cannot know the mind of God and be certain of anyone else's salvation or damnation.[10]

Then how are we in a position to punish people in this world as a prelude to God's as yet unknown decision as to how they should be punished in the next world? Moreover, the Qur'an (XVII: 20) says God's bounty will extend to all groups: "Each we

> **To my mind the concept of *fiṭrah* is a strong argument for toleration and pluralism.**

assist out of the bounty of our Lord, both this group and that one, and the bounty of your Lord is not restricted."

To some extent the actual historical experience of Muslim communities through many centuries reflects the admirable ethic of pluralism. As is well-known, the moon-worshippers of Ḥarrān in northern Mesopotamia, preserved their religion in the early 2nd /8th century by claiming to be Sabeans, the monotheists of southern Arabia mentioned in the Qurʾān.[11] When Muslim armies conquered Sind, then a largely Hindu province of India in 92 /711, the general in charge declared the Hindus to be a "people of the book," a decision that has by and large been respected ever since.[12] The toleration of Jews and Christians in Muslim lands in the pre-modern period stands in considerable contrast to the predominant attitude toward non-Christians in Christian Europe of that period. At the same time no serious historian would deny that there have been and continue to be unfortunate episodes of intolerance in the historical record on all sides.

> **Even in the worst period of Sunni-Shīʿī sectarianism there were signs of the desires of leaders to rise above such intolerance.**

An outstanding example of tolerance, however, is offered by the Shīʿī Imam Jaʿfaraṣ-Ṣādiq (d. 148/765). According to a well-known account, a Shīʿī began to upbraid a famous *zindīq* or heretic, Ibn Abī ʾl-ʿAwjāʾ, for his disbelief. Ibn Abī ʾl-ʿAwjāʾ protested that he did not deserve such treatment because Imam Jaʿfar allowed him to come to the Kaʿbah of Mecca and dispute religious questions with the Imam himself.[13] Perhaps Imam Jaʿfar believed that one's faith could be strengthened through peaceful disputation.

Even in the worst period of Sunni-Shīʿī sectarianism there were signs of the desires of leaders to rise above such intolerance. In 403/1012-13 the Sunni Abbasid caliph granted the traditional black cloak of honor to the very great Shīʿī poet, as-Sharīfar-Raḍī, when the latter was appointed *Naqīb at-Ṭālibīyīn*. He was the first Ṭālibī, or descendant of ʿAli Ibn abiṬālib, to wearthe Abbasid black cloak. Although he and his brother, Sharīf al-Murtaḍa, were among the most prominent Shīʿī scholars of their day, they were both accepted (and were pleased to go) quite frequently to the palace of the Sunni, and indeed rather Ḥanbalīcaliph, al-Qadir billah.[14] In the same setting, with the same caliph and his successors, the very distinguishedSunni jurist al-Māwardī often acted willingly as an intermediary to resolve differences between the ShīʿīBuyids and the Sunni Abbasid caliphs.

A striking case of cooperation between Sunnis and Shi ʿis occurred in 442/1050-51. An extremely harsh police chief, Abū Muḥammad an-Nasawī caused the Sunni and Shīʿī toughs to unite against this man. So great was the fellow feeling of the two groups that Shīʿī muezzins in the Karkh neighborhood gave the Sunni call to prayer while the Sunnis of Bāb al-Baṣrah gave the Shīʿī version with its characteristic: "Come to the best of deeds."[15]

A new imperative for pluralism and toleration exists for Muslims in the modern world. There are now Muslim minorities in many countries throughout the world. Indeed, the second (or perhaps third) largest Muslim community is in India, a predominantly Hindu country. The 175 million Muslims of India are approximately ten percent of the Muslims in the world. If Muslim minorities very rightly ask for toleration in predominantly non-Muslim countries (and in some places receive toleration or at least protection in the law), do not predominantly Muslim communities owe similar toleration and protection to non-Muslims in nations that are largely Muslim? Religious conflict is not only contrary to the spirit of the Qurʾān's verses quoted above, but it is also contrary to the interest of Muslim majorities because they can only build powerful and prosperous nations through concepts of cooperation and equality based on the friendship between members of the seventy odd versions of Islam as well as the other varieties of religion.

In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries Europe was dominated by wars of religion, mainly between Catholics and Protestants. Estimates of the loss of population from this intra-Christian war in the German-speaking regions alone go from 25 to 40 percent of the population. After this horrible experience most Europeans realized that the cost of such opposition to pluralism was the destruction of their communities and their economies. In the late seventeenth century philosophers of tolerance such as John Locke began to put forth powerful arguments for pluralism.

God forbid that the Islamic Middle East or any part of the modern world goes through an experience as bad as the European Wars of Religion. As concerned advocates for religious pluralism seek everywhere, in the face of the horrors of intolerance and the problems of exclusivity, to strengthen the ethic of pluralism, they are able to find important support in the Islamic tradition as well as in Islamic history. We will always be tribes and peoples but let us compete in honoring the virtuous whose deeds will not be lost.

> **Estimates of the loss of population from this intra-Christian war in the German-speaking regions alone go from 25 to 40 percent of the population.**

notes

*   Roy Parviz Mottahedeh is a Professor of Islamic History in the History Department at Harvard University. He was born in New York City. He graduated magna cum laude in history from Harvard College. Professor Mottahedeh Taught at Princeton University. Professor Mottahedeh is the author of numerous books and articles including Loyalty and Leadership in an Early Islamic Society (1980) and The Mantle of the Prophet (1985), which has been widely translated. Together with Angeliki Laiou he co-edited The Crusades from the Perspective of Byzantium and the Muslim World (2001). His translated book, Lessons in Islamic Jurisprudence by Muhammad Baqir al-Sadr, published in 2003, studies the philosophy of Islamic law as taught in Shi'ite seminaries.

1   I discuss the commentaries on this verse extensively in my article: "The Shu`ubiyah Controversy," *International Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 7 (1976) pp. 161182-. The passage from Ibn `Abd Rubbih is from *al-`Iqd al-Farīd* (Cairo: 1962) III, pp. 403404-, as I translate it on p. 164 on that article. This speech of the Prophet is quoted in commentaries and in ḥadīth books in slightly variant forms, some of which include quotation of Qur'an 49:13.

2   See Eric Davis, *Memories of State* (Berkeley: 2005) p. 131, who quotes `Abd al-`Azīz ad-Dūrī, *Al-Judhūr at-Ta'rīkhiyahli-l-Shu`ūbīyah* (Beirut: 1980).

3   See my foreword to *The Muslims of Bosnia-Herzegovina*, ed. by Mark Pinson (Cambridge, MA: 1994).

4   The importance of this verse for an ethic is argued for persuasively in the last chapter of *Divine Justice* by Murtaḍā Muṭahharī (Qom:2004) which is quoted here. The original is `*Adl-iIlāhī* in Persian and *al-`Adl al-Ilāhī* in Arabic (Qum: 1405 A.H.)

5   Ibn Manẓūr, *Līsān al-`Arab* (Beirut: 1990) V, pp. 5658-.

6   This famous ḥadīth is quoted in slightly variant forms in many books of ḥadīth as well as in numerous other sources. The version quoted here is from Shaykh Muḥammad b. al-Ḥasan al-Tūsī, al-Tibyan under the commentary on verse 30: 30.

7   Fayḍ Kāshānī, aṣ-Ṣāfī, accessed under *altafsir.com* on 23 June 2014,

8   Muḥammad ḤusaynṬabātabā'ī, *Tafsīr al-Mīzān*, accessed under *altafsir.com* on 23 June 2014.

9   Muṭahharī, *op.cit.*, p. 249.

10 *Ibid.*, p. 265.

11 Ibn an-Nadīm, *TheFihrist* (New York: 1970) II, pp. 751-753.

12 Friedmann, Y., "Muḥammad b. al-Kasim," *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, 2nd ed. (Leiden: 1991) VII, pp. 405406-.

13 See "Ibn Abī l-`Awjā'," *Dā'iratal-Ma`ārif-iBuzurg-iIslāmī* (Tehran: 1368) II, pp. 688690-.

14 Ibn al-Jawzī, Muntaẓam (Haydarābād: 1358) VII, p. 260.

15 *Ibid.* (3959) VIII, p. 145.