


MULTICULTURAL VALUES IN THE NOBLE QURAN AND THE PROPHET MUHAMMAD'S (S) SUNNAH (*the Prophet's tradition*)

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ABSTRACT

As we know, multiculturalism denotes a society in which many different cultures co exist. It is a concept aimed at the preservation and development of the cultural diversity of people of different ethnicities and faiths in any country and in the world as a whole and the ethnocultural integration of ethnic minorities. As a crossroads of different civilisations, our ancient homeland Azerbaijan has, for centuries, been known as a country with an established atmosphere of ethnocultural diversity where representatives of different ethnic groups and faiths have lived in an environment of peace, tranquillity and mutual understanding. Multiculturalism and tolerance have historically been a way of life of Azerbaijanis, and today it has become a way of life of every citizen of the Azerbaijani state regardless of their national identity, language or religion. The rich multicultural past of the Azerbaijani people has survived not only in today's tolerant lifestyle of our people, but also in the literary-artistic, scientific-philosophical and political-legal sources and documents created by our people.

In the broad sense, the essence of multiculturalism is that the state does not discriminate against individuals or social groups representing different and unique cultures, does not regard any of them superior or inferior to the others, and grants equal rights to representatives of all cultures.

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Introduction

Before understanding what multicultural society really means, it would be advantageous to know how this word originated and what shapes and shades this word has acquired through its currency over the years. Multiculturalism is considered a set of policies and practices that promotes attention to and representation for various groups and communities who want to maintain a certain level of distinction for their cultures and identities (Cashmore, 1996; Modood, 2007).

Multiculturalism provides a forum for all individuals to recognize, understand, appreciate, value, and be cognizant of diversity, thereby promoting trust, enhancing communication, and nurturing respect and concern for the welfare of all individuals within the society. Literally the compound term multiculturalism means the idea or principle of having many cultures regardless of being majority or minority. This in no way explains or details out the nature of relations between the cultures in a given society. Tolerance and harmony must be nurtured to safeguard the stability of the country. In many areas tolerance is a commendable virtue. One can be tolerant on non-moral issues like language, skin color, race, etc. Multiculturalism shifted this discourse on race relations towards acceptance of diversity as opposed to its rejection. However, only certain aspects of culture were seen as publicly important: in particular, race, ethnicity, nationality, gender and sexuality. Other differences, such as religion and language, were to be reserved for the private or domestic sphere.

Allah, the Exalted, says in the Noble Quran:

“O humankind! We created you from a male and a female (Adam and Eve). Then We made you into peoples and tribes that you may know (recognise) one another. The most honourable of you in the sight of Allah is the most righteous of you. (1, Surah Al-Hujurat, 13).

In the Noble Quran, Our Almighty Lord says the humankind has originated from one father and one mother and there is no room for racial or ethnic discrimination among people, as they will be assessed for their piety and morality in the sight of Allah.

As you know, moral principles hold an important place in the religion of Islam. Multicultural values carry a special significance and weight among these moral principles. According to Islam, tolerant attitude means treating others gently, having good intentions towards them, and avoiding racial, ethnic or religious

discrimination. Multiculturalism is also characterised as manifestation of tolerance, which is commended in Islam as well. That is, mutual understanding, friendship and collaboration between people is impossible without multiculturalism.

There is a reason that our holy religion is called "Islam", which means "peace, safety and tranquillity", as it comes from its friendly and kind attitude towards representatives of other religions and ethnic groups.

Islamic Identity

The word "Islam" means both peace and submission. A Muslim, therefore, is a person who submits to his or her Lord peacefully. As, "There is no God but Allah, and that Mohammed is the last messenger of God. Bearing witness to or declaring this testimony is a key to the Islamic faith. This worldview provides a ground of unity for Muslim communities. At the same time, it may pose challenges in forming and fostering a Muslim identity in multicultural, predominantly secular societies.

Being the last heavenly religion, Islam has established people's freedom of life and conscience, informed that everyone will account for their actions to Almighty Allah, and stated that there is no compulsion in choosing one's faith. Allah, the Exalted, declares the absence of compulsion in religion as follows: "**There shall be no compulsion in religion**" (1, Surah Al-Baqarah, 256).

As seen from the above ayah, there is no compulsion in the spirit of the heavenly religions sent by Allah, because coercion, forcing someone to accept any religious belief is contrary to the fundamental principles of the heavenly religions. We can see this in the Torah and the Bible, as well as in the relevant ayahs of the Noble Quran. Perhaps, Islam highlights this matter even more than the other religions. That is, our Almighty Lord puts it openly by declaring that "**there is no compulsion in religion**". Based on this ayah, we can say that our religion is categorically against imposing its rituals on others and gives them complete freedom in terms of faith.

The ayah of the Noble Quran given below proves that Islam has been tolerant towards synagogues and churches, the places of worship of the followers of these two religions (Jews and Christians). In this ayah, Allah, the Exalted, says: "...**Had Allah not repelled the aggression of some people (polytheists) by means of others (believers), cloisters (monasteries inhabited by monks), churches, temples (Jewish synagogues) and mosques, wherein the name of Allah is much invoked, would have been destroyed...**" (1, Surah Ah-Haj, 40).

Also, Muslim identity is founded on faith and the practices can be found in the cultural expressions of Muslim communities. Such as: "Assalamu Alaikum," a greeting meaning "Peace be upon you," are universal among Muslims. "Bismillah," or "In the name of God," when starting anything, is a common preface to any declaration. "Alhamdulillah," means "thanks to God," a phrase used if someone is responding to a greeting or whenever one accomplishes a task. "Insha Allah", or "God willing", is said when referring to a future undertaking. These terms and many others go beyond race, ethnicity, nationality and even one's level of faith, practice, or tendencies towards traditionalism, fundamentalism, and modernism. These phrases are all in Arabic. However, they are now part of the Muslim lexicon and generally are used by Muslims all over the world irrespective of what language they speak. Some may use the Arabic version while others may translate to their local languages. However, they all understand what is meant by the terms.

As you can see, Islam regards tolerance, genial attitude towards representatives of other religions and ethnicities, as well as tolerance towards the religious and ethnic diversity in society as key elements of faith. In the sixth ayah of Surah Al Kafirun of the Noble Quran, the Almighty Creator says: **"For you is your religion, and for me is my religion"**. This ayah clearly shows that people may hold different beliefs and opinions, and how those people are to be treated.

If we look at the history, we can see that Christians and Jews, as well as representatives of other religions and ethnicities have always co-existed in our country. As admitted by Western researchers, they have not lived as prosperously in their own country as in our country. Our Muslim people have taken them under their wing and protected them, but have never forced them to accept Islam. They have had separate schools and practiced their own religious rituals and holidays freely. This means that we, people, are children of one father and one mother, and no faith, sect, denomination or national identity can separate us from one another. If the proof is the Noble Quran, which Muslims believe in and which was sent by Allah, our Quran invites us to unity and also says that Allah's Jannah (paradise) and Jahannam (hell) are for all people. The Noble Quran addresses this matter as follows:

"Those among believers, Jews, Christians and Sabaeans, who believe in Allah and the Last Day and do righteousness, will have their reward with their Lord; they shall have no fear, nor shall they grieve" (1, Surah Al-Baqarah, 62). Another ayah goes as follows: **"Those among believers, Jews, Sabaeans and Christians, who believe in Allah and the Last Day and do righteousness, shall have no fear, nor shall they grieve"** (1, Surah Al-Maidah, 69).

Unfortunately, the enemies of Muslim ummah (community) strive to destroy the faith and culture of Muslims and bring them under their yoke and sometimes they are successful at it. They induce Muslims, who follow Western traditions under the name of culture and development, to look at their religion as backward, inconsistent with fashion, etc. Intellectuals play no small role in this regard. They express opinions or write articles and books that are ignorant and cause controversy among Muslims lacking expertise and deep knowledge in the field of religion, and by doing so, they serve the enemy, maybe without knowing it. Nowadays, everyone has education, much or little, i.e. there is no uneducated person. Therefore, it is every Muslim's duty to submit to the only Allah and obey His commands in order to find the truth.

Not everyone's knowledge is enough for them to attain bliss. Therefore, there is a need for a guide, who is superior to intellect and gives strength to intellect. Humans need divine revelation, i.e. a guide sent down by Allah, who has created humans, sees their shortcomings, knows their grieves and needs, and has a solution for them all. Prophets (peace be upon them) were sent to meet these needs. **"Mankind were one community. Allah sent unto them messengers as bringers of good tidings and warnings (of retributory punishment) and sent down the Scripture with the truth to judge between mankind concerning that in which they differed. And only those unto whom the Scripture was given differed (concerning religion), after clear proofs had come unto them, through hatred (jealousy) among themselves..."** (1, Surah Al-Baqarah, 213).

Some ayahs of Quran underline that the religion of truth sent by Allah shall triumph over all religions and systems and ignorance shall be replaced by divine order: **"Who is more unjust than one who invents about Allah untruth (who calls His messenger a magician) while he is being invited to Islam? Allah does not guide the evil-doing people to the right path. They want to put out the light of Allah (the religion of Islam) with their mouths (their slanders and evil words), but Allah will perfect His light (religion), although the disbelievers dislike it. It is He who sent His Messenger with guidance (Quran) and the religion of truth to manifest it (Islam) over all religions, although those who associate others with Allah dislike it!"** (1, Surah As-Saf, 7-9).

As seen from the ayahs, our holy religion prohibits insulting others and a Muslim person must treat all people with respect, because respecting someone means honouring and cherishing them. The Noble Quran refers to the creature called human being as honourable. That is, Allah, the Exalted, says: **"Verily we have honoured the Children of Adam"** (5, Surah Al-Isra, 70). So, since the Noble

Quran calls humans honourable, everyone should value and respect one another regardless of their religion or nationality. In this sense, Muslims visit the places of worship of non-Muslims and participate in their holidays, because our religion has granted freedom of faith and worship to everyone. Their worship and religious holidays should be respected and disunity should be avoided. Of course, a Muslim does not harm anyone or try to persuade someone into leaving their religion and converting to Islam. A Muslim does not argue with anyone. He (she) talks to everyone with a smile and nicely. This is because the phenomenon of interfaith peace and life based on peace is a key moral principle of Islam, and as we can see from the ayahs above, this is clearly emphasised in a number of ayahs of Quran in different ways, while the notion of interfaith peace and life based on peace was completely alien to the humanity 1400 years ago. With the revelation of the Noble Quran, religious wars (e.g. Crusades) seen in some religions and stemming from the difference in faith are considered meaningless. Quran prohibits hatred and enmity against followers of other religions. Therefore, betraying others is not and has never been a religious method in Islam.

Core elements of Muslim Identities

While it is true that Islam provides Muslims with a unique system that caters to all aspects of life, it is also true that followers of the faith are highly diverse individuals and groups that sometimes appear to be very different in all aspects of their beliefs and behavior. In addition to all of the above, Islam invites the followers of other religions to unity and addresses them as follows: **“Say (O Prophet), “O People of the Scripture, come to a word that is equitable (not different) between us and you: that we will worship none but Allah and not associate anything with Him and not take one another as lords (to ourselves) instead of Allah”. But if they turn away again, then say (to them), “Bear witness that verily we are Muslims (those who have submitted to Allah)!”** (1, Surah Ali Imran, 64). This is one of the most well-known ayahs that invite the People of the Scripture to unity. The evidence brought by this ayah is different than that of other ayahs. The preceding ayahs make a direct invitation to Islam. Whereas, this ayah refers to the common points between Islam and People of the Scripture. According to the logic of this ayah, if non-Muslims do not cooperate with Muslims for their sacred purposes, then Muslims should at least attract them towards the common points between the religions and ultimately unite for the sake of sacred purposes. I should also note that since the motives of Islam are based on logic, evidence and peaceful methods, the Noble Quran recommends participation in debates using reason and logic. According to Islam, it is important to speak kindly and justly even against

superstitious and idolatrous religions, because beliefs and rituals of all ethnic groups should be respected, and because cursing and bad attitude will only make them even more attached to their beliefs and give rise to resentment in between. Therefore, the Noble Quran successfully prevents such resentment from arising by commanding as follows: **“Do not insult those who invoke other than Allah, lest they insult Allah wrongfully without knowledge** (for having no respect or esteem for Allah). **Thus, unto each community have We made their deed seem pleasing** (We have made believers’ actions done for the sake of Allah appear good to them, and disbelievers’ evil actions also appear good to them). **Then to their Lord is their return, and He (Allah) shall inform them of what they used to do!”** (1, Surah Al Anam, 108).

It should be particularly noted that, in fact, there is no different between the main subjects of all heavenly scriptures and they pursue the same goal: educational and moral evolution of human being. But each new religion is more upgraded and more comprehensive.

Besides showing respect and esteem for the previous prophets and scriptures, Quran affirms their original meaning and says: **“And unto thee (O Prophet) have We revealed the Scripture with the truth (Quran), confirming the scripture** (all divine scriptures) **that came before it and guarding it in safety** (as a witness to their authenticity). **Judge between them by what Allah has revealed (Quran). Do not follow their vain desires deviating from what has come to you of the truth. We have assigned a law and a path to each of you. Had Allah willed, He would have made you one single community** (submitting to the same law), **but this** (diversity) **is for Allah to test you in what He has given you. So, try to outdo** (compete with) **one another in good deeds. To Allah is your ultimate return all together. He (Allah) will inform you of that in which you differ!”** (1, Al-Maidah, 48).

In addition to the Noble Quran, our Prophet’s (peace be upon him) hadiths (sayings and traditions) also recommend multicultural values and kind treatment of representatives of other religions and ethnic groups. In particular, the Prophet (peace be upon him) gave the following advice to his dear companion Abu Dharr before his demise: **“O Abu Dharr, I prohibit you from separating from your friends and brothers, because deeds are never accepted separately”** (3, page 32).

As we know, the society, in which the Prophet (peace be upon him) lived, was practising idolatry. Like the previous prophets, he was conducting a struggle against them to establish monotheism. For this reason, he was constantly assaulted, tortured and oppressed. In hadiths, we can clearly see the Prophet’s (peace be upon him) attitude towards and treatment of the followers of other religions in his

attitude towards Jews and Christians. The Noble Quran already makes frequent mentions of Judaism and Christianity due to them being heavenly religions. It calls Jews and Christians "People of the Scripture".

After his hijra (migration) to Medina, the Prophet (peace be upon him) firstly settled the disputes among Arab tribes and secured peace among them. He then established ties with Jews, who had population and economic power. In one of his hadiths, he says as follows: "O people! I advise you to be obedient and to be together with people, because this is the rope that Allah commands (you to cling to). There are so many things in being together with people that you dislike, but have more benefit than what you like as a firqah (group, sect)" (4). In another hadith, he encourages living together with people by saying: "Allah likes three things in you, and dislikes three. The three things He likes in you are: worshipping Him only; not associating anyone with Him; and, clinging only to His rope all together. The three things He dislikes in you are: arguing and gossiping; asking a lot of questions; and, squandering your wealth" (4).

Touching on the importance of unity in another hadith, the Prophet (peace be upon him) says as follows: "Do not fall into discord, because those that came before you perished for falling into discord" (2, page 89).

The Prophet's (peace be upon him) respect for the religions and rituals of the followers of other faiths regardless of their religion is a unique example in human history. One day in Medina, the Prophet (peace be upon him) stood up when a Jewish funeral procession was passing by. People said it was a non-Muslim and Jewish funeral. Having heard this, the Prophet (peace be upon him) said: "Stand up when you see a funeral procession!" By saying so, he stresses that death is thought provoking and the deceased, regardless of their religion, is a human being and should be respected by everyone, thus drawing attention to the necessity of unity and solidarity among people: "Unity is indispensable to you. Undoubtedly, Allah's hand is over unity and solidarity. Allah will unite my community only on the path of guidance" (3, page 33).

We need to promote an Islamic approach to multiculturalism that is based on learning from others, as well as, teaching others to create new possibilities. This approach acknowledges the common values, but it also urges people to recognize differences through mutual respect and spirit of "knowing to be known". The approach is rooted on a verse in the Qur'an that reads: "O mankind! Indeed, we have created you from male and female and made you into nations and tribes so that you may know one another---"(Qur'an: 49:13).

Conclusion

We conclude from the above ayahs and hadiths that Muslims has experience of living together with people of different religions from the very first days of Islam. By proclaiming that “**there is no compulsion in religion**”, Quran has helped to continue peaceful relations with the followers of other faiths. It is therefore that Jews, Christians and representatives of other religions have been able to live freely and without any difficulty in every Muslim-majority region, because according to Islam, the future of humanity is the humans themselves, who therefore are the biggest value. All religions have been sent for humans.

It is worth reminding that representatives of different religions, different ethnic groups and peoples have lived in an atmosphere of friendship and brotherhood in Azerbaijan for centuries. In today’s complicated geopolitical climate, multicultural values are more important than anything. Mutual recognition and acceptance of cultural differences is the main path to progress and prosperity. Multiculturalism and tolerance have become a way of life of every citizen of Azerbaijan. I’d also like to emphasise that multiculturalism plays a crucial role not only in the cultural development of people and resolution of national minorities’ problems, but also in the development of interstate relations and ensuring of transparency. This all boils down to our commitment to our religious values, Quran and the Prophet’s (peace be upon him) sunnah. Let us all heed to these blessed calls of our religion and respond to them positively!

The Almighty Allah tells us: “**Hold firmly to the rope (religion, Quran) of Allah all together and do not separate** (from one another by becoming divided into groups)! **Remember the favour of Allah upon you: when you were enemies, He brought your hearts together** (through Islam) **and you became brothers by His grace.**” (1, Surah Ali Imran, 103).

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