

## *“We have conferred dignity on the children of Adam”*

**Shaykh Faïd Mohammed Saïd**

Questions of humanity and humanism, what even constitutes a human being, have exercised both ancient and modern thinkers—and such questions acquire urgency in moments of stress and tension. The conventional worldview among religious traditions, albeit with divergences between and sometimes within them, holds that God brought into being a creation invested with angelic qualities and able to attain a higher, godly nature; and yet is simultaneously prone to lapses which, when taken to extremes, gives way to a demonic nature. As conceived in the Islamic tradition, the human being is both spiritual and material, invested with the capacity to freely choose between its own higher and lower natures. Infused with the attributes of the Creator, the human being, when faithful to God-like qualities, can rise higher than even the angels, for God endowed the human species with an elevated dignity far above the rest of His Creation.

Religious traditions and secular humanism would find comfortable accommodation in Islam, for the Qur’an provides a direct expression of the primacy of the human:

*“Now, indeed, We have conferred dignity on the children of Adam, and borne them over land and sea, and provided for them sustenance out of the good things of life, and favoured them far above most of Our Creation.”* (Al-Israa’, 17:70)

This elevation of the human (viewed from a God-centric humanism) is in fact central to Islam. If the Qur’an is communicable to all humanity, it is because “the human” occupies a central role in a divinely ordered universe. Far from being left to swim in a cosmos without meaning, the human being is

installed on Earth with responsibilities concomitant to that of the caretaker. The status of this being, the human, in God’s Creation is made explicit in the verse cited, as are the responsibilities of this creature in both its spread across the habitable environments of this living planet which we call Earth, and in its management of the planet’s resources. Especially significant is the fact that the elevation of the *children of Adam* is without discrimination. The Qur’an insists on stressing this point. Humankind—the children of Adam—is one family; if the evolution of Adam’s progeny entailed diversity of ethnicity and multiplicity of beliefs—and this, too, oft-repeated in the Qur’an, is God’s design—it is still one family. Narratives of “progress” once provided legitimizing cover for the subjugation of peoples and appropriation of their resources, underpinned by notions of racial superiority that extended to wars of extermination. When all is said and done, exploitation of peoples and resources, and the resulting socio-economic injustices (increasingly inseparable from the mounting evidence of ecological harm), involve the creation of tribal and national rivalries, and the fear of an imagined other.

Speaking from within a tradition appears problematic when that tradition—as a system of peace and social justice—is seen to be discredited, tarred with the brush of intolerance, violent conflict and disharmony. We have discussed elsewhere the yawning gulf between representation and reality; and yet, if Islam is misrepresented externally and convulsed by distortion from within, we nonetheless remain convinced of the inherent mercy in the culture of Islam and its true principles of universal—universal because it is

rooted in natural law, social and economic justice. And nothing is more universal than the recognition of the unity of the human race and the equality of all human beings. It is inherent in both testimony and enactment of submission to God: *"I am your Creator; says He, 'and you, O children of Adam, must know I sustain and cherish all."* In this view, human differentiation is measured not in terms of sectarian or racial identity, social status or privilege, but in true submission to God: *"O humankind! 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 God's sight is the most righteous. Behold, God is all-knowing, all-aware."* (*Al-Hujurat*, 49:13)

The formation into nations and tribes, and the development of diverse cultures and systems, does not undermine the unity of the human family, nor its equality before God—a proposition maintained by the Prophet Muhammad throughout his life. The essential oneness of mankind was the core theme in his famous "farewell speech" and he exhorted those privileged to hear it to spread the message. The Prophet's appeal to mankind's oneness is a timeless reminder that humanity is sacrosanct and equality inviolable:

*"O people! Know indeed that your Lord is one, and that your father is one. Indeed, there is no superiority in the Arab over the non-Arab nor is there superiority in the non-Arab over the Arab. There is no superiority in white over the black nor is there superiority in the black over the white, except in righteousness. Have I, then, conveyed the Message?"* All in attendance replied: *"The Messenger of God has conveyed the message."* *"God has made sacred your money and your blood. Have I conveyed the message?"* And all in attendance replied: *"The Messenger of God has conveyed the message."* *"Behold, those present should convey the message to the remotest regions,"* said the Prophet. (Musnad Ahmad: 23489)

Humanism, in the Islamic expression, insists on the fundamental of human dignity—of the essential oneness of our species—regardless of a particular ethnic identity or tribal affiliation, so that all our social relations, be they individual or communal, between the individual and the state or between states, do not merely embrace "tolerance", but nurture a willing, harmonious coexistence. Therefore, the principle of unity in diversity and harmonious coexistence reflects the cosmic order. Humankind in its composition, individually and socially, is a microcosm of this cosmic order operating in just balance. For this very reason, the Prophets of old always exhorted a so-

cial justice foundation of equitable coexistence: the thread connects the past with the present. Scriptures and rituals are, in a manner, expressions of cosmic diversity but equitable coexistence (including humankind's ecological responsibility) is wholly dependent on a just balance. The timeless teachings of those Prophets offer much-needed remedies to our contemporary socio-economic imbalances that are both cause and symptom of division and intolerance.

Now loyalty to a nation, tribe or language group, or the preservation of heritage and traditions, are all inherent traits in mankind. Islam recognizes and even recommends such affiliations where they serve to strengthen social bonds. Diversity enables human beings to make contact, share knowledge and experience different customs. As the Qur'an reminds us: *"We have made you into nations and tribes that you might come to know one another."* (*Al-Hujurat*, 49:13) Diversity, then, from a single-origin source, is an expression of the Divine Will and the command to recognize our own oneness mirrors our recognition of God's oneness.

And the divine command to *"know one another,"* in its layered meaning, entails much more than mere toleration of difference—it implies a whole-hearted embrace of kindred beings. Human history is blotted with conflict fuelled by tribal and sectarian rejection. The wars of princes, often under cover of religion, are not yet things of the past, while supposedly enlightened modernity has witnessed the terrible destruction of globe-spanning world wars. The first quarter of the 21st Century, with its grandiloquent claims of new world orders and rules-based systems, is no less stained with blood. Millions of lives have been lost in internecine conflicts in the name of race or religion. While unholy alliances of race and religion are depressingly common features of geopolitical power plays, their architects are driven by little more than callous economic interest, as if God somehow is unaware of motives. *"Does He not know—He Who has created? Indeed, He alone is unfathomable, all-aware!"* (*Al-Mulk*, 67:14).

Racial and cultural differences are, of course, not unimportant markers of identity and sense of being, markers that allow an individual to say, *"This is my heritage,"* or a community to declare, *"This is our tradition."* These identities have histories with their material and symbolic effects and the past will always speak to the present. But such identifications are also unstable, made and re-made through memory, experience, environment, narrative and social contract. In any case, those who exploit racial identity are always

on unstable ground since racial identifications are subject to history and thus in perpetual transformation. The constant, in Islam, is that all racial identities must cleave to the oneness of humankind, for God says: *“Had God so willed, He could surely have made you all one single community; however, He lets go astray him that wills to go astray and guides aright him that wills to be guided...”* (Al-Nabl, 16:93). Diversity, as mentioned, is the Divine Will, part of the Divine Plan, but it is the misguided who wilfully reject the unity within the diversity. Globalization and technological progress have also functioned to increase contact between different peoples and diverse cultures and these reasons should encourage us to reaffirm our shared humanity.

That so much strife has been attributed to religious conflict even as we are commanded to “know one another” does not, of course, diminish the authentic teachings of Muhammad SAW, the Prophet Jesus and the Prophet Moses, or Buddha or Confucius, or that any religious tradition should be held responsible for the acts of misguided individuals or sects. As mentioned, the principle of human unity in diversity and harmonious coexistence fundamental to Islam reflects the just balance of the cosmic order. In its recognition of human oneness as well as human diversity, Islamic humanism historically paved the way for fusing people of diverse ethnicities and beliefs to live and thrive harmoniously. Islamic tradition, then, is not so easily discredited. Of course, ideal and reality may not always match, but its exhortation of unity and equality makes the true culture of Islam the proper expression and style for modern societies. Approached without bias or distortion, the Qur’an and the Prophetic paradigm reveal the true

template and expression of the just balance. Its purest expression is the most illuminating light for all nations. Its greatest embodiment obliterated every current form of social injustice (that the Prophet’s struggle was a 23-year-long enterprise of total devotion is enough to know that wishful thinking is not for the serious). His embrace of common humanity is the signature style of a universal culture. Examples from the life of the Holy Prophet are legion. On one illuminating occasion, he was observed in a reclining position but stood up on his feet for a passing Jewish funeral cortege. Asked about his standing, an obvious act of respect, the Prophet replied: *“Is it not a human soul?”* (Muslim: 961) Bilal “the Abyssinian” was handpicked over Arab kinsmen and compatriots to be the Prophet’s muezzin. Newly freed from bondage, Bilal’s appointment to high public office in such a stratified society further appalled the proudest among those who rejected the egalitarian message of Islam—but the Qur’an is emphatic: *“Verily, the noblest of you in the sight of God is the one best in conduct. Behold, God is all-knowing, all-aware.”* (Al-Hujurat, 49:13)

In the context of seventh-century Arabia, Bilal’s elevation from torturous bondage to social pre-eminence was a remarkable triumph over racial and tribal biases. If today, citizens in majoritarian-white societies are able to elect “persons of colour” to high office, it is also true that Islam set numerous precedents fifteen centuries ago. We have spoken elsewhere about civilization in Islam, suffice to say here that the world would greatly benefit from the authentic expression of Islam as embodied in the life of the Prophet Muhammad.

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يَا أَيُّهَا النَّاسُ إِنَّا خَلَقْنَاكُمْ مِنْ ذَكَرٍ وَأُنْثَىٰ وَجَعَلْنَاكُمْ  
شُعُوبًا وَقَبَائِلَ لِتَعَارَفُوا إِنَّ أَكْرَمَكُمْ عِنْدَ اللَّهِ أَتْقَاكُمْ إِنَّ اللَّهَ

عَلِيمٌ خَبِيرٌ

Al-Hujurat, 49:13