

## AN INTRODUCTION TO THE ISLAMIC VIEW OF RACE

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As I write this paper, Amnesty International announces that the us vs. them narrative of blame, hate and fear have been the highest since the 1930s.<sup>1</sup> Politicians and governments are using economic prosperity and security as excuses to legitimize hate, racism and acts of exclusion. This gives me another reason to write this paper, while hoping to say something positive that fosters understanding among people, especially from the point of view of Islam.

This era, when it comes to hate and exclusion, adds Muslims as its target. From mosque shootings and vandalism to travel banning executive orders, the storm does not seem to slow down. It is only fair, here, for everyone to know the point of view of “the other” of this era.

Even though there seems to be distinct eras of racism and hate within American history, with each having a specific group more than others standing at the guillotine waiting line, this era can be optimistically described as different. The communist scare era, the Japanese internment camp era, and so on, compared to this era, seem to have smaller and less effective crowds standing in opposition against the hateful perpetrators. Let's be realistic here; no one ever thought that an executive order, banning Muslims, would backfire to the point where fellow citizens and police force would stand in solidarity to protect Muslims who are praying inside airports. Airports, out of all places and not too long earlier, were specifically the most Muslim unfriendly places, where *hijab* (head scarf), anything remotely sounding like Arabic, certain Middle Eastern complexion and specific names like Muhammad are alarming red signs. What is to be noticed, here, perhaps, is that if the oppression caused by hate is becoming more severe, the light opposing it seems to be more luminous than ever.

In this paper, I will start by introducing an Islamic vision of what human diversity, including skin color, is. I will, also, give an overview of the very first act of discrimination, in Islamic history, as it sets precedent for the consciousness of Islamic experience and understanding of racism, discrimination and/or hateful actions. Then, I will elaborate on the origin of the human race according to Islam. Next, I will explain the bases of human diversity to show that, within Islam, race has no place. I, after that, will discuss certain personalities, within Islamic history—early and recent history, who represent different cultural backgrounds and their role within Islamic society. In order to accomplish this task, I will, mainly, use the *Quran* (words of *Allah*), authentic *Hadith* (teachings) of the prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) and do it in a manner consistent with Islamic scholarship.<sup>2</sup>

To explain human diversity, from an Islamic point of view, including what seems like racial variety and skin color, I would like to use the analogy of a prism. Light, basically, enters the prism to exit as a variety of rays of colors from the other end. In a similar fashion, the actual light represents the oneness of our humanness (essence), the prism is the corporeal aspect of our human experience and the rays of colors represent the diversity among us. This is very clear in the *Hadith*:

Allah created Adam from a handful of earth (soil from all of earth), therefore, Adam's offspring, as well, has an earthly variety and among them there are those who are red, white, black and in between...<sup>3</sup>

Humans, in other words, are just like a variety of plants, so to speak, which grow in different sizes, colors and shapes, out of earth, and eventually go back to earth. No matter the shape or color, just like plants, humans are created from the same oneness and go back to it.

Based on the aforementioned, does that mean we are exactly and absolutely the same and is diversity in appearance an illusion? The answer is no. Diversity is not an illusion and we are not exactly the same. When we look at the whole, there is one earth as well as oneness to our essence. When we look at the parts, there is distinction and difference, yet not total separation among different soils of earth, such as desert sand, fertile soil, and so is human diversity. Human diversity, here, could be cultural, religious, linguistic and/or variety in physical appearances.

One might wonder here, why diversity among humans exist—e.g., different skin colors. The *Quran* answers,

And among His signs (Allah's) is the creation of the heavens and the earth, and the variations in your languages and your colors: verily in that are signs for those who know (reflect).<sup>4</sup>

These signs are part of the whole field of possibilities of knowledge, where those who reflect and, thus, understand make use of as their own actualities on their path towards a better life and eventually the hereafter. The ones who use these possibilities wisely, by manifesting them as their own actualities, will, be happier now and during the hereafter. One, for example, can ignore the signs or use them as one's reality to better one's life and get along with others in a more peaceful and respectful manner. Diversity, additionally, balances oneness and gives it expression, where both function as an equilibrium, just like heavens and earth are parts of an equilibrium and compliment one another. Oneness and diversity give rise to each other, where the parts (diversity) come together to make the whole (oneness) at the same time the whole gives further and deeper meaning to the parts. The Quran calls such oneness, as shall be seen later, the self.<sup>5</sup> The relationship, here, is reciprocal and not necessarily symmetrical. One might wonder, here, so how, where and when did things go wrong?

The Quran displays a scene of the first sinful act ever, which was an act of discrimination, arrogance, wrong understanding based on a wrong interpretation of diversity and rejection of Allah's command:

It is we (Allah) who created you and gave you shape: then we bade the angels prostrate to Adam, and they prostrated, not so Iblis (Satan); he refused to be of those who prostrate. (Allah) said: what prevented thee from prostrating when I commanded thee? He (Satan) said: I am better than he, thou didst create me from fire and him from clay.<sup>6</sup>

This event has shaped Islamic consciousness in a tremendous manner and in many ways. First, Satan set himself as the ultimate enemy of humanity, from Adam until the very end. It was one of the consequences of arrogance.

Second, Arrogance (and illnesses of the ego) and everything based on that, such as thoughts, words and actions, are punishable by Allah in the most severe manner, where Satan has been banished from the mercy of Allah, *Alrahman* (The Most Merciful), which

is one of the names/attributes of Allah! These sins are not forgivable unless one repents and does not repeat them. Satan, however, did not and instead challenged Allah further, where he will prevent Adam's offspring from ever following the path of righteousness. Arrogance, within Islamic theology, therefore, became so vile and wicked that it had to be warned against in a harsh manner, where the prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) said,

Does not enter heaven/paradise one who has an atom's weight of arrogance/pride in one's heart. A man said, one likes one's clothes and one's shoes to be decent/clean. The prophet (ﷺ) replied, Allah is beautiful and loves beauty; arrogance/pride is rejecting the truth and looking down on people.<sup>7</sup>

It is essential, here, to note that the punishment of arrogance is the impossibility of entering heaven, unless one repents and does not repeat such action, which is the ultimate goal in Islam.

Third, this event marks the initiation of the history of racism. The despicable action of Satan, who chose to be the absolute worse creature, was based on the idea that his origin is superior to Adam's. Any similar actions of racism, in the future, will join this act and its perpetrators will join Satan's side. In fact, if Satan had any excuses, and he had none, to claim superiority on the bases of difference in origin, at least his origin was actually different than Adam's. A human claiming superiority over another, however, has no excuses because the origin of all humans is one, which makes a racist action committed by a human worse than that of Satan's and such human worse than Satan. I, therefore, would like to explain the Islamic view of the human origin.

The origin of all humans is one and the same. All humans are created by Allah from the same self:

O humankind! Revere (venerate, have piety towards) your Guardian Lord, who created you from a single self (person, soul), created, out of it, its mate, and from them twain scattered (dispersed) countless men and women...<sup>8</sup>

There are two main ideas to be noted here. First, looking down on people, discriminating and/or committing negative and/or hateful acts against anyone is absurd. It is absurd because one is the other, since all come from the same original self (the same oneness), and harming another is no different from harming oneself. Harming oneself is a negation of one's being as well as wellbeing. Since the origin of everyone is the same, moreover, harming another is, also, harming and being an enemy to humanity as a whole, which is the aforementioned position of Satan. The Quran, in fact, forbids any type of harm directed towards any human on the very bases of human brotherhood/sisterhood, when discussing the two sons of Adam, Qabil (Cain) and Habil (Abel):

...if anyone slew a person...it would be as if one slew the whole people and if anyone saved a life, it would be as if one saved the life of the whole people...<sup>9</sup>

When the Quran says "a person," it is talking about any person from any background. Second, besides the dignified position of Adam, and all humans, whom Allah ordered the prostration for, humans are specifically dignified and honored and wronging them is a direct violation of Allah's intention for them:

We have honored the offspring of Adam... and preferred them over most of what We have created with definite preference.<sup>10</sup>

We have indeed created the human person in the best of moulds.<sup>11</sup>

Now, I will discuss how race is related to diversity in Islam. The Quran explains diversity by saying,

O humankind! We created you from a single (pair) of a male and a female and made you into nations and tribes, that ye may know each other (not that ye may despise each other): verily the most honored of you in the sight of Allah is the most righteous of you...<sup>12</sup>

The whole Quran doesn't confirm any existence of race (this verse is no different) and it is safe to interpret that within Islam there are no races. Yes, there are differences among skin colors, for instance, as mentioned earlier, but these differences do not constitute a race; they are mere colors. A red rose and a white rose, for example, could have no differences, scientifically or otherwise, except that they are both roses with different colors. The wrong conclusion of race, based on skin color, should, therefore, never be affirmed. Real differences, such as national differences, tribal differences and, the earlier mentioned, linguistic differences, on the other hand, exist to be acknowledged, embraced, learned, understood, appreciated and doing so is helpful to everyone. Since race is a wrong conclusion, there is really nothing to be known and such knowledge, if possible, will take nowhere. In addition, the true and highest honor, which is in the sight of Allah, is achieved through actions and character, where judgment can only be passed by Allah and only be based on one's conduct. This is, also, confirmed by the Hadith:

Allah does not look at your bodies nor at your faces but He looks at your hearts and your deeds.<sup>13</sup>

Human diversity exists as the colorful rays of the oneness of original light that goes through the prism. The essence of the light does not change, but its degree that gives the appearance of colors does. When the prism is removed, these appearances will cease and only the true essence of light will endure. Humans, similarly and temporarily, have their bodies, as vehicles, only during this short life. These bodies will, eventually, dissolve back into earth at the end of the current life, but essences, however, will endure and everyone will have a new body in the shape and characteristics of the very first self, during the true eternal life of the hereafter.<sup>14</sup> This current life is only a mere station during the overall journey.

Since race does not exist as a result of divine creation but exists as a wrong conclusion, based on an arrogant and ignorant interpretation of diversity, which was started by Satan and then continued by his followers, it has to be warned against. Racism, based on a socially constructed phenomenon (race) and started by defying Allah's command as seen previously, is destructive, beginning with oneself and one's immediate community. The Quran, consequently, mentions racially motivated misbehaviors right after talking about the ideal social order for Muslims to follow and how to follow it, especially during turbulent times:

If two parties among the believers fall into a fight, make ye peace between them... The believers are but a single brother/sisterhood: so make peace and reconciliation between your two (contending) siblings; and fear Allah that ye may receive mercy. O ye who believe! Let not some men among you laugh at others: it may be that the latter is better than the former, nor let some women laugh at others: it may be that the latter is better than the former, nor defame nor be sarcastic to each other, nor call each other by

offensive nicknames: ill-seeming is a name connoting wickedness to be used of one... and those who do not desist and repent are indeed oppressive...<sup>15</sup>

The long famous *Hadith* of the last sermon; where messenger Muhammad (ﷺ) stressed and confirmed the essential teachings of his message (Islam), during the last pilgrimage, before the biggest crowd ever during his life, in the holiest sight of Islam and during the holiest time of the Islamic year; also treats the issue of racism, giving it the care it deserves:

...O humankind! Your God is One and your father (Adam) is one. Arabs, therefore, have no superiority over non-Arabs nor have the non-Arabs any superiority over Arabs. Similarly, white and red have no superiority over black nor black has superiority over white. Yes, only the pious who transcends through good deeds has superiority in the eyes of Allah... Then the prophet (ﷺ) asked, what day is this? They (the crowd) replied, a holy day. Then he asked, what month is this? They replied, a holy month. Then he asked, what town is this? They replied, a holy town. Then he said, God, therefore, made your honor (referring to relationships within the family, especially to those regarding females: mothers, sisters, wives, daughters and so on), your blood (referring to the sanctity of life) and your wealth (referring to the idea that wealth is not to be wasted, or stolen and so on) as holy and forbidden amongst you as this day, this month and this town (except by Islamic reason, such as, for example, marriage in the case of honor and agreed upon economic exchange in the case of wealth).<sup>16</sup>

Since there is no race, in Islam, and there is, definitely and consequently, no superiority on the bases of differences, whether racial or otherwise, where can a Muslim start when dealing with human differences? The *Quran's* answer, of openness towards and embracing these differences, however within an Islamic ground, gives Muslims the uniqueness and authenticity of being themselves, yet within a friendly pluralistic over all social order. This, for example, is clear when it comes to the creed of Islam:

Say ye: we believe in Allah, the revelation given to us, to Abraham, Ismail, Isaac, Jacob, the tribes (the twelve tribes of Israel), that given to Moses and Jesus, and that given to all prophets from their Lord. We make no difference between one and another and we submit to Allah.<sup>17</sup>

Even when dealing with those who totally reject Allah, a Muslim has to let them be what they have chosen to be. This is clear in the *Quranic* instructions directed toward the prophet (ﷺ) and is based on the Islamic tradition that there is no compulsion in Islam:

Say (Muhammad): O ye who reject Faith (and Ultimate/Absolute Truth: Allah): I worship not that which ye worship, nor will ye worship that which I worship... to you be your way, and to me mine (religion/Islam).<sup>18</sup>  
Let there be no compulsion in religion: truth stands out clear from error...<sup>19</sup>

One of the major personalities in Islam and a companion of the prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) is Bilal bin Rabah, who was originally from Abyssinia. Any child, who grew up in a Muslim country, who is in the second grade or older, knows Bilal *Almuathin*. *Almuathin* is one who calls for Islamic prayer, which is heard all over the

world, especially in the Muslim world (over 49 countries of which 22 are Arab countries) five times a day. The five prayers are the second most important act in the whole religion (the first is freely declaring that there is no god but God/Allah and Muhammad (ﷺ) is the prophet and messenger of God/Allah) and Bilal was in charge of calling all Muslims to them. Not only that, he was the personal prayer caller of the prophet (ﷺ). This is the equivalent to being a prime minister or vice president today, a divine one for that matter. This is truly astonishing, especially that Bilal was an African slave before he became a Muslim.

Within the Islamic tradition, Allah has made Bilal an exemplary human. Umayya bin Khalaf, Bilal's owner, was a rich member of the Quraish tribe, which is the tribe of the prophet (ﷺ), and it had major political, economic and cultural powers with a high pedigree in the old world, especially among Arabs. Quraish, furthermore, inherited the honor of being the tribe in charge of Holy Makkah, which is an honor that dates back to Ibrahim (ﷺ) and even Adam (ﷺ) before that.

When Islam dawned in Makkah, most members of Quraish, especially those who were considered elite, saw Muhammad (ﷺ) and his message as a threat that could possibly shake their foundation, take away their powers and discard their tradition. They also rejected the core of his message that there is only one God and saw it as a threat to their polytheistic idolatry. Many, on the other hand, saw the new religion as a solution and end to tyranny, especially those who were considered non-elite, such as slaves, women and the poor. They saw in Islam a balance of equality-equity that could free them and take them forward. Women saw fairness in the idea that they are equal to men, have the right to choose whom to marry, have the right to inherit, have a say within the political and social structures and so on. The poor saw a way out in Islamic economics, such as its abolition of interest. Slaves saw empowerment in the constant application of freeing them, through religious duties and the new possibility of freedom through marriage, as practical solutions to their situation. Within this background, Bilal started to blossom, but not without severe pain.

Bilal declared that there is no god but God and that Muhammad (ﷺ) is the messenger of God, making him one of the first Muslims. When his owner, Umayya, found out, Bilal went through the worst forms of torture, where public flogging was an everyday routine. Bilal, rebelliously, screamed in agony, God is one. Umayya would order four of his other slaves to place the heaviest rock on Bilal's chest after strapping him down to the steaming hot sand of Arabia. Bilal, still, chanted, He is the only one (referring to Allah, where The One is one of his glorious names). From the lowest human condition possible, Bilal ascended to become, "Our Master Bilal" as the early and current Muslims still call him, which is symbolic within the Islamic tradition. The height of such ascension, never experienced by any other human being, was reached when he climbed the Ka'aba (the cubic house at the center of Makkah, the holiest place for Muslims, which is normally dressed in black), and stood on top of it to deliver *Athan* (call for prayer).<sup>20</sup>

Bilal was not alone. There was companion Salman Al-Farisi (Salman the Persian), who the prophet (ﷺ) declared as his own chosen family. No one else ever has achieved such honor. There was, moreover, companion Sumayyah, who achieved the honor of being

the first martyr in Islam. She became the symbol of self-sacrifice for one's principles after she was stabbed with a spear for standing her ground. Another example was companion Suhaib Al-Rumi (Suhaib the Roman), and many others. Now, I would like to conclude this section, of early and recent Islamic personalities from different racial backgrounds, by elaborating on Malcolm X, specifically, on the shift in his consciousness after visiting Makkah.

There was a definite change in Malcolm after his pilgrimage to Makkah. There was a shift from "by any means necessary" to only by way of love.<sup>21</sup> This experience is the direct result of applying the abovementioned Islamic ideology in solving one's racial problems, especially between one and oneself. This is due to the simple idea that reaction and response are not the same. There is at least wisdom, resulting from reflection and consideration of the situation, behind responding, whereas reacting is based more on thoughtless swift instinct; of course, each has its place. This means responding to racists and racism is not the same as reacting to them. Problems between one and oneself is, also, due to the idea that one cannot give that which one does not have to begin with. This means that if one is lacking love, for example, how is one going to give it? If one, in addition, cannot fix oneself, how is one going to fix others? It seems that the journey to Makkah was a journey for Malcolm to get in touch with and repair himself. There is, furthermore, the idea that hurting another, even for wrongdoing, could only lead to further problems. This couldn't be more accurate than in the situation of being anti-another as a reaction to that person's hate. The realization, here, is that hate causes more hate and confrontation causes further negativity; only love can drive hate out, which was at the center of the change in Malcolm. Malcolm realized, it seems, that one is the other and harming another is harming the whole of humanity, including oneself. This realization of the oneness of it all, as a vision, seems to have magical impact on one's understanding and actions:

That same year, Malcolm went on a pilgrimage to Mecca, which proved to be life altering for him. For the first time, Malcolm shared his thoughts and beliefs with different cultures and found the response to be overwhelmingly positive. When he returned, Malcolm said he had met "blonde-haired, blue-eyed men I could call my brothers." He returned to the United States with a new outlook on integration and a new hope for the future. This time when Malcolm spoke, instead of just preaching to African-Americans, he had a message for all races.<sup>22</sup>

To conclude this paper, I would like to start with Islam's answer to the satanic notion that some are more superior than others based on differences of origin. For anyone, that is, to be better is solely based on one's deeds, which are judged only by God who truly knows the hearts of humans and what intentions lie within them. All forms of diversity, therefore, have nothing to do with superiority and/or inferiority. Any differences of diversity and/or similarities are to be used, within God's intention for them, to have a better life in this world and the hereafter. Islam, as seen above, has offered a general vision to establish a united humanity, including all and not only Muslims, with its dignity and freedom in mind. Such freedom, however, is contextual and within situatedness, where it's not limitless and inconsiderate of others. This Islamic vision has no race within it and sees it as totally baseless, not as a difference and, therefore, not existent within human diversity.

Notes:

- 1) “Politics of Demonization Breeding Division and Fear” *Amnesty International*, February 22 2017, [www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2017/02/amnesty-international-annual-report-201617/](http://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2017/02/amnesty-international-annual-report-201617/). Accessed February 22 2017.
- 2) This is a complex issue to explain in English, but what I basically mean is that I will not use any of the teachings of Muhammad (ﷺ) unless, hermeneutically according to text and lineage, is considered authentic (there are degrees of authenticity).
- 3) Muhammad AlAlbani, *Sahih Sunan Altirmithi* (Riyadh: Maktabat Alma’arif for publication and distribution, 2000, Vol. 3, Hadith 2955, p. 183, my translation).
- 4) *The Holy Qur-ān* English translation of the meanings and commentary (Almadinah Almunawarah: King Fahd Holy Qur-ān Printing Complex, 1410 AH-1989 AD, Sūrat: Ar-Rūm, No. 30, verse 22, p. 1182). Words, in the quote, between parentheses are mine and are for further clarification.
- 5) The original self was created perfectly. It is the self, the spiritual, before any distinctions such as gender, color and so on. The first distinction, man/woman or male/female as polarities, came to be after eating from the forbidden tree, where sexual organs, for example, first appeared. This was the result of human choice. The self was perfect but it made a choice and, consequently, deviated from its selfhood. The oneness of the self was, so to speak, the wholeness of perfection that contained possibilities of otherness, as, the wholeness of silence contains all possibilities of sound. The original self is the spiritual where all other possibilities are contained and could, therefore, be manifested as ontological actualities.
- 6) *The Holy Qur-ān*, op. cit., Sūrat: Al-A’rāf, No. 7, verse 11 & 12, p. 399.
- 7) Imam Muslim ibn Al-Hajjaj Al-Naysaburi, *Sahih Muslim* (Riyadh: Darrusalam, 2007, Book 1: The Book of Faith, Vol. 1, chapter 39: The prohibition of pride and definition of it, p. 178, my translation).
- 8) *The Holy Qur-ān*, op. cit., Sūrat: Ān-Nisāa, No. 4, verse 1, p. 205, my translation.
- 9) *Ibid.*, Sūrat: Al-Mā’ida, No. 5, verse 32, p. 293.
- 10) *Ibid.*, Sūrat: Bani Isrā-īl, No. 17, verse 70, p. 799, my translation.
- 11) *Ibid.*, Sūrat: Bani At-Tīn, No. 95, verse 4, p. 1978, my translation.
- 12) *Ibid.*, Sūrat: Al-Hujurāt, No. 49, verse 13, p. 1593.
- 13) Imam Muslim ibn Al-Hajjaj Al-Naysaburi, op. cit., Book 32: The Book of Virtue, Good Manners and Joining of the Ties of Kinship, Vol. 6, chapter 32: The Prohibition Of Wronging, Forsaking, Or Despising A Muslim And The Inviolability Of His Blood, Honor And Wealth, Hadith No. 6221.

- 14) Imam Yahya bin Sharaf An-Nawawi, “Riyad Us Saliheen Book 20 Hadith 14” muflihun.com, <https://muflihun.com/riyadussaliheen/20/14>. Accessed March 4, 2017.
- 15) *The Holy Qur-ān*, op. cit., Sūrat: Al-Hujurāt, No. 49, verses 9, 10 & 11, pp. 1590-1591.
- 16) *Musnad Ahmad bin Hanbal* (Beirut, Lebanon: Dar Ihya Al-Turath Al-Arabni, 1994, third Ed., Vol. 6, Hadith No. 22978, p. 570, my translation).
- 17) *The Holy Qur-ān*, op. cit., Sūrat: Al-Baqarah, No. 2, verse 136, p. 54, my translation.
- 18) *Ibid.*, Sūrat: Al-Kāfirūn, No. 109, verse 1, 2, 3 &6, pp. 2021-2022.
- 19) *Ibid.*, Sūrat: Al-Baqarah, No. 2, verse 256, pp. 115-116.
- 20) This would be similar to reaching sainthood in Catholicism, being one with God in Hinduism, or achieving nirvana in Buddhism.
- 21) “By any means necessary” *Wikipedia*, last modified February 22, 2017, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/By\\_any\\_means\\_necessary](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/By_any_means_necessary). Accessed March 5, 2017. By any means necessary is a Sartrean phrase that Malcolm X used in his speech at the Organization of Afro-American Unity Founding Rally in 1964.
- 22) “Biography an abridged biography of Malcolm X” *Malcolm X*, <http://malcolmx.com/biography>. Accessed March 5, 2017.