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The Dignity of Difference

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By Bachar Bakour

‘He who knows himself and other, will also recognise that East and West cannot be separated.’ (Goethe)

‘Oh, East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet.
Till the Earth and Sky stand presently at God’s great Judgement
Seat.’ (Kipling)

Is the notion of difference, as some argue, bound to breed violence and hatred? How can one live side by side with those who are different from him? Are there any guidelines in this regard?

First: Difference is a universal phenomenon

48]. As these verses clearly indicate, God has created human beings with a whole range of beliefs, ideas, customs, interests, as well as various intellectual abilities.

Second: Freedom of belief

“There must be no coercion in matters of faith.” [the Qur’an 2: 256]

Islam sees faith as a matter of conviction. It never seeks converts by means of compulsion. Instead, it addresses the human mind, intellect and human commonsense. On the top of that, freedom of belief indicates freedom of expression and thought, without fear of potential threat and suppression. Otherwise, that freedom turns to be meaningless.

Third: Difference should lead to harmonious and amicable relationships, as well as constructive exchange.

In this context, the Qur’an says, “O people, We created you from male and female, and made you into nations and tribes, so that you may come to know each other.” [49:13]

Historically speaking, in addition to the well-known periods of military confrontations, adherents of various religions and cultures did benefit from the rich intellectual heritage of each other exchanging ideas and principles. For example, as a sign of the huge impact of the Arab scholarship, a lot of Arabic words were introduced in European languages, such as, alchemy, alcohol, algebra, Damask (from Damascus), muslin (from Mousl).

Fourth: Targeting religious symbols is strictly prohibited.

“And do not insult those whom they worship besides God, lest they insult God wrongfully without knowledge [the Qur’an 6:108].” One is entirely free to adopt his own way of worship. This freedom, however, must not be manipulated by lowering the religious symbols and sacred places of the others.

Commenting on the 2006 outrageous, Danish cartoons depicting

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democratic values and everything to do with a European media that reflects and plays to an increasingly xenophobic and Islamophobic society. Cartoons defaming the Prophet and Islam by equating them with terrorism are inflammatory. They reinforce Muslim grievances, humiliation and social marginalization and drive a wedge between the West and moderate Muslims, unwittingly playing directly into the hands of extremists.”

Fifth: Justice is first and foremost

“O believers, be steadfast in your devotion to God, bearing witness to the truth in all equity. And never allow your hatred of any people to lead you away from justice. Be equitable, that is nearer to god-fearing [The Qur’an 5:8]”. According to this verse, people in general and believers in particular are ordered to act justly towards each other and never let hatred be conducive to giving a rough deal to any one.

The principle of difference implemented

1. Aiming to effect better relations among the religious different groups in Madinah, Prophet Muhammad drew up a constitutional document defining the obligations and responsibilities of every group within the Muslim community, and outlining the nature of its relations with the Jews. The Jews, as the document stipulates, are regarded as citizens within the new-born Islamic state. They enjoy religious freedom and state protection. On the other hand, they are requested to back Muslims against any potential enemy and never plot against them or threaten the security of the Muslim state.

2. Asserting the sanctity of life and property of non-Muslims who live in the domain of Islam, Prophet Muhammad said, ‘On the day of Resurrection I shall dispute with anyone who oppresses a Mu’āhid, or violates his right, or puts a responsibility on him which is beyond his strength, or takes something from him against his will.’

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4. When the Prophet died, his armour was mortgaged to a Jew for thirty Sas. (A measure of capacity (3 kg. approximately) of barley.***)

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