

**ISLAM IS A RELIGION FOR UNITY, HARMONY AND RESPECT:
MULTI-RELIGIOUS NATION, MALAYSIA AS A ROLE MODEL***

By

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The word “Islam” is derived from the Arabic root “SLM” which means, among other things, peace, purity, submission and obedience. In the religious sense the word Islam means submission to the Will of Allah and obedience to His Law.

Islam acknowledges the fact that Allah s.w.t. has created mankind in the form of different races and creed. Islam teaches us that diversity is a fact of nature and it makes the nature beautiful. God has created this whole universe with diversity. God says in Surah Fatir, verses 27 to 28, which is translated thus: *“Seest thou not that God sends down rain from the sky? With it We then bring out produce of various colours. And in the mountains are tracts white and red, of various shades of colour, and black intense in hue. And so amongst men and crawling creatures and cattle, are they of various colors. Those truly fear God, among His Servants, who have knowledge: for God is Exalted in Might, Oft-Forgiving.”*

In another surah of Al-Hujurat verse 13 of the Holy Quran, Allah says, which is translated thus: *“O mankind! We created you from a single (pair) of a male and female, and made you into nations and tribes, that ye may know each other (not that ye may despise each other). Verily the most honoured of you in the sight of God is (he who is) the most righteous of you. And God has full knowledge and is well-acquainted (with all things).”*

Thus Islam recognises that there is diversity among human beings. These diversities are considered natural and are called “God’s signs” in the Quran (Surah al-

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Ruum, verses 20-22). They are indicative of God's creative power and wisdom and are good and healthy since they endow human life with richness and beauty. God wants human beings to derive benefit from this diversity and not to allow it to generate unhealthy schisms and divisions in their ranks.

The diversities of races, families and tribes also have a healthy and constructive purpose, namely for mankind to know each other as mentioned in the verse above. Aside from enabling human beings to know each other better, there is no reason why these diversities should create barriers, or cause animosities among human beings.

In addition to these natural diversities, there is another dimension of diversity that is part and parcel of the human societies and cultures. This is the diversity of viewpoints. The Quran recognises the individuality of each human being as well as the individuality of their groups and communities. It is mentioned in Surah al-Maidah, verse 5, to the effect that: *"...To each among you have We prescribed a Law and an open way. If God had so willed, He would have made you a single People, but (His plan is) to test you in what He hath given you; so strive as in a race in all virtues. The goal of you all is to God; it is He that will show you the truth of the matters in which ye dispute."*

Islam does not consider all viewpoints correct or of equal value. However, it is also the fact well recognised in Islam that very often the differences of opinions (*ikhtilaf*) are also a token of God's mercy. If God had so willed, says the Quran, He could have forced people to come together to one point, but he did not do so. God did send His Prophets and Messengers from time to time so that the right path might be made clear through them. As regards the final judgement as to who followed the truth and who did not, that will be made known on the Day of Judgement by God Himself.

So, with the acknowledgement that there is diversity in the world, what does Islam enjoin its followers to do? Islam enjoins unity not only amongst Muslims but also between Muslims and non-Muslims. Muslims must ensure that unity, harmony and respect exist in a community, what more in a multi-religious community like Malaysia.

This can begin within a neighbourhood, before extending it on a large scale, such as at the district level, state level and subsequently the national level.

We acknowledge that there exists fundamental differences vis-à-vis our religious beliefs, but the focus should not be on these differences, rather it should be on the shared common values that we all hold dear. By understanding this, we can then inculcate respect in our community. This is stated in Surah Al-Nisa', verse 36, which is translated thus: *“Serve God, and join not any partners with Him; and do good to parents, kinsfolk, orphans, those in need, neighbours who are near, neighbours who are strangers, the companion by your side, the wayfarer (ye meet) and what your right hands possess : For God loveth not the arrogant, the vainglorious.”*

Unity is the natural need of human beings. It must be emphasised however that unity is not the total negation of diversity. Unity in diversity means to explore and enhance common virtues that emphasise interdependence, equality, justice, human rights, and the sanctity of each individual's dignity. The goal should be to further a unified vision and recognition of the principle of “unity and diversity” and of the fact that we all are fellow-citizens of a country. We must try to build a more inclusive community grounded in respect of differences based on age, race, ethnicity, gender, religion and culture.

It is indeed possible to have unity with diversity. In the world in which we are living today, rightly called “the global village”, we cannot imagine having unity without diversity. It is not only that people in different parts of the world are diversified, but now we have a lot of diversity in our own cities, towns, indeed in our neighbourhoods. People who live next door to us are often very diverse in colours, cultures and religions.

Malaysia is such a unique diverse country. We know that Malaysia consists of various races, such as Malays, Chinese, Indians, the natives and others. While this holds true and while we profess different beliefs, all of us share a common goal towards the betterment of the country. Islam espouses many virtues that is shared by all the other

religions. It is these shared virtues that our forefathers have focused on in building this nation. This is what makes Malaysia inherently special. We can put aside our differences and focus our attention on similarities to bring success to the country.

What Malaysia is doing is essentially emulating the spirit of the Constitution of Madinah which was introduced by the Prophet Muhammad s.a.w. upon the opening of Madinah some 1,400 years ago. Madinah was made up of people of various tribes and faiths, such as the ‘Aus and Khazraj who were Muslims and the Muslim migrants from Makkah, as well as Christians and Jews. Yet, the Prophet succeeded in uniting these people as one community under the Constitution of Madinah.

What we have in Malaysia is a testament of a successful melting pot of diversified cultures and beliefs. While it is true that we have many religions in Malaysia, we acknowledge and respect one another. It is interesting to note that certain developed countries such as the USA are still thinking and exploring ways and means to develop a society where people of diverse faiths and cultures can live together in peace and harmony. Yet, Malaysia is fortunate because of the wisdom of our forefathers, we already have a unified society with diverse faiths and cultures. No doubt, there is still room for improvement, but the foundation for this is already strong.

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