# Religion, Unity And Diversity

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Abstract
The terms 'unity', 'integration' and 'diversity' have multiple layers of meaning in the religious context. While religions emphasize unity and integrity, they also address the issues of diversity.

When understood properly, unity does not mean uniformity and thus does not invite oppression and closure. By the same token, diversity does not mean chaos and lack of order. Both unity and diversity have a function within the larger context of things. But this context is not confined to the socio-political dimension alone. A broader understanding of these terms will help us understand the religious discourses of unity, diversity and integration. It will also lead to a more critical assessment of the Enlightenment and western modernity.

Religions offer a unified vision of reality because God is one and the reality that He created must have unity and integrity. This basic postulate underlies most religious traditions from the Abrahamic faiths of Judaism, Christianity and Islam to the Asiatic

religions of Hinduism and Buddhism. In Islam, this is expressed most clearly and forcefully by the doctrine of tawhid, the absolute oneness of God. Tawhid shapes and colors everything Islamic from theology and science to art and language. As an article of faith, it seeks to present a unified and integrated vision of reality in which God as the Creator has an intimate relationship with His creation. All deities other than God are false and must be recognized as such. Since God is the only source of reality, He alone must be worshipped. But unity is not only a matter of theology; rather it is a framework of analysis, a context in which reality emerges as an interconnected whole. Attempts to conceive reality as a whole have a long history from the classical to the modern period. Taoist sages, Native American medicine men, Hindu gurus, Greek philosophers, Jewish, Christian and Muslim thinkers, all have had a sense of the cosmos as an ordered whole. For them, it was inconceivable to perceive reality otherwise because our way of connect-ing to the world is possible only through conceptual unities. Our five senses, for instance, perceive the world as a whole. My five senses work together to have a meaningful experience of the physical world. Conceptually, our minds conceive things not as discrete and disconnected items but as an interconnected unity. Otherwise, we cannot make sense of the self and the world in which we live. It would be a mistake to take this as a purely subjective assessment. What we call 'reality' becomes intelligible and thus lends itself to rational analysis only when it is conceived as a whole.

As a matter of fact, we have no direct or disengaged experience of reality as an atomized entity. Even the most basic elements of the physical world present themselves to us as part of a larger whole.

Furthermore, cosmos as an ordered unity is also the foundation of socio-political order. As Eric Voegelin has shown in his Order and History, there is no political order without first a cosmological order. It is the unity between heaven and earth that generates order, proportion, balance and harmony in the world. Even though we have moved, to use Koyre's suggestive terms, from a 'closed world' to an 'infinite universe' in our modern conceptions of the cosmos, we still maintain the connection between heaven and earth, and ponder over how the two make up a unity in which we find order and meaning. Modern science has not completely destroyed this unity but changed the ways in which it can be understood. The world and the ways in which we understand it remain interconnected and 'networked'. The 'butterfly effect' reminds us of the underlying interconnectedness of the world of existence.

The idea of unity and interconnectedness, however, is not confined to abstract philosophical debates. Ever since we have lost the traditional sense of unity in the modern period, we have paid a heavy price and introduced fake, materialistic and inhuman distinctions into the very reality of which we are a part. The Cartesian wall of separation between res extensa (the physical-corporeal world) and res cogitans (the world of the mind) has led to a view of nature that is not only materialistic and opaque but also unintelligible and unsustainable. It has created such an abyss that the so-called endless war between nature and nurture or between what nature makes and what humans produce as culture has reached new heights with modern science and technology. The alienation of humankind from the rest of creation has resulted in the worst kinds of atrocities in the modern period. One should only remember the destruction we have wrought upon nature over the last two centuries, the

Holocaust, countless wars, and most recently weapons of mass destruction and biological weapons, all of which are the creations of our modern humanity made possible by a very different, flat and reductionist notion of the cosmos.

Unity and uniformity

To modern ears, such terms as 'unity', 'oneness', 'integrated whole', 'wholeness' may suggest imageries of totality, closure and oppression. From classical sophists and skeptics to modern atheists, a common argument has been made to the effect that religions advocating the absolute oneness of God have caused division and strife among people with different convictions, and that the categorical distinction between truth and falsehood in matters of religion has led to the classification of ideas and actions as good and bad, acceptable and abhorrent, and eventually lawful and unlawful. According to an argument by the prominent Egyptologist Jan Assmann in his The Mind of Egypt, the 'Mosaic distinction' between true and false gods has introduced something new to the tradition of ancient religions and pitted for the first time those who followed 'true faith' against those who believed in 'false deities'. Democratic belief in a plethora of deities without a moral judgment on them has been disrupted by the Abrahamic insistence of true versus false religion. This distinction, it is further claimed, continues to divide humanity and fuels religious tension and fanaticism today. A truly humanist approach to religion would abolish all such distinctions between true and false and let people devise their own pantheon of cosmopolitan deities. Unity leads to monopoly and oppression and we should forsake all such moral-ideological constructions.

This is the first conceptual correction we need to make. As the French philosopher and metaphysician Rene Guenon has pointed out, there is a difference between unity and uniformity. While uniformity denotes a state of bland sameness and oppressive homogeneity, unity points to what connects diverse things. There is no uniformity in nature but unity reigns in the natural order. We should remember that uniformity is produced by man-made machines and devices, and by the so-called 'systems'. The unity of an animal species does not amount to uniformity. Each animal, while belonging to the same species, remains unique and maintains its particular personality. But the series of machines produced in exactly the same ways and presented to hundreds of millions of people living in fairly diverse circumstances leads to a monopolizing uniformity. Living beings have 'identity' whereas machines have only a 'serial number'.

Furthermore, unity is needed for moral discernment because it entails a moral obligation to treat every being, living or not, with the respect that all deserve. The fact that I am connected to the rest of existence and that I am part of a bigger whole gives me a different perspective on things. By contrast, uniformity is a useful tool for control and management, and this is exactly what we do with the mind boggling level of uniformity and homogeneity we have reached with modern techno-science.

The second conceptual clarity we need to have concerns the relationship between unity and plurality. Just as unity does not mean uniformity, plurality does not mean divi-sion and chaos. Plurality and diversity have their own place in the great chain of being and fulfill an important function in the total economy of creation. According to Muslim theologians, God always creates something anew and His creation is never the same. The notion

of 'perpetual creation' or 'creation anew' (khalq jadid) explains the dynamic nature of existence. Furthermore, plurality and diversity are an essential component of the human plane where differences among human beings contribute to the universal telos of creation. Religions have developed different ways of dealing with diversity without giving up on unity.

Unity and diversity

In the Islamic tradition, the relationship between unity and plurality has been defined as complementary. The notion of 'unity-in-diversity' (al-wahdah fi'l-kathrah), elaborated by such sages as Ibn Al-ʿArabi and Mulla Sadra, has been a common and powerful idea from science and theology to art and architecture. Unity in the sense defined above does not negate plurality. To the contrary, it places plurality, multiplicity and diversity within a larger context of intelligibility. Thus God's absolute oneness, His unity, does not coerce or cancel out the plurality we see in the world because ultimately plurality is a necessary outcome of creation. Since God has decided to create and what He has created is different from Him, the world must have plurality and diversity as one of its essential traits.

This dual approach to things allows for what I call 'metaphysical transparency' whereby the world of existence is seen through the perspective of multiple layers of reality. The world is always more than how it appears to our eyes, and this means that we have an ontological duty to decipher the multiple layers of meaning contained in reality. Epistemology is nothing but bringing out the multidimensional aspects of existence and interpreting their meanings that require a hermeneutical exercise. But this is also an acknowledgment of the fact that the knowing subject cannot

fully encapsulate reality; it cannot exhaust its potentials. Unless we put the cart before the horse and reduce reality to our perceptions of it, reality always remains larger and bigger than our conceptual constructions can present it to be. There is always something remaining unarticulated, some-thing waiting to be discovered.

In his Mathnawi, Mawlana Jalal al-Din Rumi makes a distinction between 'meaning' (ma'na) and 'form' (surat) and applies it to various areas from religion and philosophy to society. Meaning is what gives substance to things; but what hits us first in the external world is their form. Our first experience of things is mediated through their external appearance. We have a perceptual sense about a person first by looking at his or her form. It is only after we interact with that person that we develop a particular idea, a certain conception about him or her. The first is the form and it takes us so far in our grasp of things. The second is the meaning and it is here that we begin to penetrate into the reality of things. This is where we go beyond the appearance and uncover the inner meaning of things. What we discover is not necessarily Kant's ding an sich. Nor is it something static. What lies beneath is often more dynamic and multilayered.

Understanding diversity through the eyes of unity does not land us in a static metaphysics where the reality of things is for ever frozen and stuck in some abstract mental con-struct. To the contrary, the goal of 'unity-analysis' is to break through such misleading constructs and witness the dynamic nature of reality to the extent possible for us humans. The reason for this is that the reality of things, as Mulla Sadra says in his Four Intellectual Journeys (Al-Asfar al-arba'ah al-'aqliyyah), defies

conceptualization because reality precedes concepts and informs them. As a result, all of our conceptualizations must be checked against the reality of things. In order to have access to the pre-conceptual reality of things, one needs to have a different epistemology – an epistemology that goes beyond the verbal and the mental and allows for a non-discursive experience of reality.

Religion, truth and diversity

The point I am trying to make here must be clear by now: it is wrong to reject unity in the name of liberating us from totalitarianism and to worship multiplicity in the name of defending pluralism. Both unity and diversity have their place within the larger context of existence; creating a binary opposition between the two does justice to neither one of them. More importantly, it is not entirely true to say that religions speak only the language of unity and do not know how to handle multiplicity. As a result of this common misconception, religions have been accused of advocating theological totalitarianism and moral exclusivism. It is argued that since religions subscribe to a notion of religious truth that is absolute and exclusivist and since they all want to impose this truth on their followers, they cannot accommodate difference and instead prefer uniformity and absolutism. Some conclude that this is a fundamental problem with all religions and that we have to secularize religious world-views in order to create democratic and pluralistic societies in the 21st century.

There are a couple of points to be considered here. First of all, one does not need religion to advocate totalitarianism, absolutism and violence. As Talal Asad argues in his Formations of the Secular: Islam, Christianity and Modernity, non-religious

ideological constructs such as nationalism or communism can be used to justify absolutism and violence. Certain trends in secular western modernity are no less oppressive and totalitarian. Most European wars since the 18th century have been fought with very little or no religious justification. Secularism per se does not guarantee liberal credentials. In some cases, laicism and especially its militant versions as an ideology can be more oppressive. The truth-claims of traditional religions can be a source of tension but so can secular truth-claims. A case in point is the top-down imposition of state secularism in Muslim countries in the name of modernization and development. A good part of the tension that exists between secular elites and traditional-religious masses is fed by policies of top-down modernization-cum-secularization.

Second, religion and secularism clash when secularism is presented as an alternative world-view to religion. Combined with positivism, scientism and naturalism, secularism has often been defended by its aggressive supporters to supplant religion and construct a pseudo-religious identity. But as Serif Mardin shows in his Religion, Society and Modernity in Turkey, militant Turkish secularism and Kamalism have failed to produce a social ethics for the Turkish public and thus fallen short of providing an alternative identity for the citizens of the modern Turkish republic – an identity that would supposedly make Turkish citizens more secular than religious and traditional. Furthermore, the founding fathers of Turkish modernization have used the power of the state to impose this incomplete and unconvincing identity on the people and forced them to react. As a result, secularism has become antithetical to religion and religious faith. Given the realities on the ground, it is secularism, not religion, that is a source of division and tension in most Muslim societies

today. One should also add that the militant defenders of secularism in Muslim countries have taken no critical attitude towards the failing aspects of secularism and have adopted western customs and mores at the expense of local traditional Islamic values. While accusing Muslim masses of blindly following (taqlid) the example of their predecessors, they themselves have fallen into the same trap vis-a`-vis the Enlightenment and western modernity. As a result, the largely westernized elites have become deeply alienated towards their own history, their own culture, their society and its religious vocabulary.

Third, we need to be more discerning about the history of religions. When we talk about religion as a source of integration or division, we should keep in mind that each religious tradition has its own unique historical experience. Christian socio-religious history is different from that of Judaism and Islam, and each offers different possibilities for different socio-political circumstances. As Seyyed Hossein Nasr has shown in his numerous works and especially in Islam in the Modern World, one of the devastating mistakes of western modernity has been to create a general theory of religion based on the specific experience of western Christianity in Europe and apply it to all religions in toto. This reductionist and imperialist approach has not only led to the loss of the remarkable diversity of religious history but also to the misunderstanding and misjudgment of non-western religious traditions. Just imagine for a moment what Judaism and Christianity would look like if we had adopted the Buddhist notions of truth, salvation, morality and religious community world's other religions. It would be impossible to make sense of any of the fundamental teachings of Judaism and Christianity, and their history would appear to be a strange

collection of myths, legends, personality cults, abstruse metaphysical concepts, and social impurities.

The spirit of cosmopolitan Islam

This point is particularly pertinent for non-western societies because when we talk about religion as a source of integration and/or division in modern societies, most of the discussion concentrates on the role of Islam in contemporary Muslim and western societies. In its long history, Islam has acted both as a religion and a social imagery. The fact that Islam has emerged within a diverse religious and ethnic environment in Arabia has helped it become a fairly cosmopolitan religion early on. This is clearly seen in the ethnic composition of the first Muslim community with a number of non-Arab personalities. The Qur'an displays a frank awareness of the existence of other religious traditions especially those of Judaism and Christianity and engages in a number of theological debates with them.

The later history of Islam after the Umayyads and the Abbasids shows the extent to which a truly cosmopolitan and pluralistic Muslim culture has emerged in such diverse places as Bukhara, Isfahan, Hyderabad, Baghdad, Alexandria, Istanbul, Sarajevo, Cordoba and Granada. While it would be anachronistic to look for examples of constitutional citizenship and liberal tolerance in the modern senses of the terms, a notable experience of convivencia, the living-together of different religious groups, has been recorded and the goal of creating a fairly global culture based on common values achieved. More often than not, Muslim societies have embraced religious and ethnic diversity to the benefit of both the majority and minority communities. Without

giving up their own claim to the truth, they have recognized the reality of other traditions in their midst.

Today most Muslim societies have to a large extent lost this spirit of cosmopolitan Islam and instead adopted second-rate imitations of western modernity. There are several reasons for this but one major reason that sums up others as well is Islam's checkered experience with modernity and modernity's hostile attitude towards non-western traditions. With the legacy of colonialism leaving deep scars in the Muslim world from Africa and the Balkans to the plight of the Palestinians, Muslim societies are reacting to western modernity in the same way modernity has positioned itself in the new world: an expansionist, exclusivist and absolutist power. They think that by adopting modernity's self-destructive methods they will overcome it and replace it with something better. Thus they build monstrous buildings, mega mosques, rocket-like minarets all in the name of creating a modern urban society. They pollute the environment more than western countries in the name of rapid economic development. They advocate the worst form of entertainment culture in order to compete with western pop culture. They spend billions of dollars on arms and build atomic bombs in order to 'boost' the Muslim pride. The list goes on.

Such activities neither make them modern or western nor bring them closer to their own societies. By contrast, they further alienate themselves from the core values and social imageries of Muslim masses who, disappointed and disgruntled with the exclusivist and aggressive nature of western modernity and the double standards of western policies, turn towards the worst kinds of alternatives and entrust their future to different versions of irresponsible radicalism and extremism. Instead of addressing

the pressing issues of justice and equality, western countries and their cohorts in the Muslim world go further in their error and support authoritarianism and oppression in the name of fight-ing against religious radicalism, fundamentalism, violence, etc. In such circumstances, religion can act as a source of social cohesion and stability only when issues of justice are addressed and a degree of human decency is maintained in politics. Otherwise, fake religious justifications are useless and even harmful to cover up real oppression and real injustice.

Religions per se are neither the source of nor the solution for the socio-political problems of our age. Other social, political and economic issues need to be addressed to let religions play a constructive role in socio-political conflicts. Religious leaders and communities can make substantial contributions to issues of justice, immigration, xenophobia, Islamophobia, ethnic and religious hatred, discrimination, human trafficking, civil wars and other social ills. But they can do so to the extent to which other social and political resources are mobilized and the facts on the grounds are altered to allow for change for the better. Religious leaders would be deluding themselves into thinking that they have the panacea for all the problems of our world. Many of them do not pretend to have the magic wand and remain within the boundaries of religious humility and honesty. But the same moral attitude needs to be shown by political leaders, business communities, media bosses, NGOs and others to tackle the social maladies of the late modernity in which we live. What is also needed is a new attitude towards religion, one that will go beyond an instrumentalist approach to religion and respect its integrity and wholeness.

In short, religions can be a source of unity or division to the extent to which we mobilize other resources at our disposal for the same goal of achieving unity, integrity and integration. Creating chaos out of greed and ambition and then expecting religion to fix it is neither fair nor intelligent. And it will not work. It is true that religions have a moral responsibility to lead the world. But this can be possible only in a world in which religious values and moral principles are not made dysfunctional by the system in which we operate. As things stand right now in the long duree of western modernity, this is not the case, i.e. we are living a mode of existence that is still radically instrumentalist, pragmatist, and profit-driven. We still want to enjoy freedom to the fullest extent without undertaking the necessary responsibilities to make it possible for all human beings. We still treat the natural environment as if it did not exist but fully know that it can no longer renew and sustain itself because of the way we have been exploiting it. We want to have full dominion over the world without acknowledging the devastating consequences of such a (an) attitude. Religions cannot help such a world until and unless we change the way we relate to the world around us.

In conclusion, let me say briefly that integration needs to take place at the level of heaven and earth, the human and the universe, and what is substantial and what is instrumental before it can have any meaning and function at the social level. Muslim minority communities may or may not fully integrate into their host countries in Europe. But their integration would have no meaning as long as they integrate into a social environment which keeps producing new social ills, new forms of alienation and new causes of friction for us all as human beings. What we need is more than just better immigration laws and labor policies

(we need them too). What we need is a new sense of the cosmos, a new awareness of the great chain of being of which we are a part, a new sensitivity towards what constitute the most essential aspects of our existence, a new concept of existence and knowledge that will overcome the epistemic hubris of modernity deeply entrenched in our modern ways. This invites us to recognize the fact that we are part of a larger whole over which we should not vainly try to have full dominion. We should integrate into this larger reality without giving up our humanity and freedom. Only a mode of existence and a concept of will that maintain the balance between meaning and freedom will grant us an integrated and peaceful way of life.

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