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## Humanity: Texts and Contexts

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## CHAPTER EIGHT

# Humanity and Diversity

### 8.1 Isaiah 2:1–5; Galatians 3:28–29; Revelation 7:9–10

*John Prior*

These texts on the theme “humanity and ethnic or cultural diversity” speak of fostering international peace in a time of ongoing warfare, intercultural community building without cultural imperialism, and witnessing to hope in the face of apparently impossible odds.

Some 2,700 years ago, in an age of political turmoil, shifting military alliances, and crass exploitation of the poor, the prophet Isaiah of Jerusalem inserted a vision of international justice and peace among his harsh judgment on the ruling elite. Peace among nations, but on whose terms? Seven hundred years later in what is today Turkey, small, scattered congregations of a variety of cultural and religious backgrounds struggled to form communities of faith. Ethnically and culturally diverse, on what basis could they sustain authenticity and preserve their distinct personalities? In the same area almost a half century later, these communities were being harshly harassed by the Roman colonial power. How could they remain faithful and hopeful without locking themselves into an irrelevant ghetto?

#### Isaiah 2:1–5

The book of Isaiah is the first of the four volumes of major prophetic literature in the Hebrew Bible. The first thirty-nine chapters form a collection of sayings delivered during the last four decades of the eighth century before the Common Era (c. 742–701 BCE). Prophet Isaiah was active in Jerusalem, the capital of Judah, during the reigns of King Ahaz (c. 734–715) and his successor, Hezekiah (c. 715–687). He lived to see the fall of the Northern Kingdom to Assyria in 722 and the supine vassalage of the Southern Kingdom to the same world power, by choice in 732 BCE and, thirty years later (701 BCE), against its will.

The times were turbulent, an age of war and rumors of war, of political expediency and duplicity. The constant warfare resulted from the imperial ambitions of ruling elites

whose extravagant living depended upon the toil of the exploited majority. Assyria invaded from the north, and then Egypt from the south. One war led to the next, violence breeding violence. The ruling elite of both the Northern Kingdom of Israel and the Southern Kingdom of Judah sided with one or other of these belligerent forces.

Isaiah interprets the political chaos and coming defeat theologically: God is coming to judge, and Judah and Jerusalem will be thrown into chaos.<sup>131</sup> He accuses the Judean authorities of trusting in temple worship rather than seeking justice and caring for the oppressed. He condemns the rulers' rampant violation of the rights of the common people and their grabbing wealth and political power at any cost.<sup>132</sup>

For a while the prophet had access to both Ahaz and Hezekiah, both of whom he advised to keep out of any political or military alliance. For Isaiah, foreign alliances would be not only politically disastrous, they were also morally dubious and religiously wrong. In the face of imperial ambitions to the south and the north, insignificant Judah should place its complete trust in God alone. Judah should neither fear nor trust armed force, neither their own nor that of others. Promoting a military buildup is contrary to trusting in God alone as savior. With this background in mind, I shall now comment on the text in more detail.

2: 1—"The word that Isaiah son of Amoz saw . . ."

This inscription marks a new beginning, the opening, perhaps, of an older collection of prophecies now incorporated into the larger book of Isaiah.

2:2—"In days to come . . ."

Not at the end of time, not in another world, but in this world although in the distant future.

2:2—"the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established as the highest of the mountains and shall be raised above the hills."

Not so much the physical Mount Zion, which is not even the highest hill in the region, but rather a "theological" mount established and raised by God; a symbol of the meeting place between God's Word and the nations of the world.

The prophet uses mythological and cosmological language and imagery inherited from Canaanite traditions of pre-Davidic Jerusalem. Mountaintops were the homes of war-like gods; Canaanite deities lived on Mount Zaphon while the Lord of Hosts resided on Mount Zion. Mount Zion, the cosmic mountain, is invulnerable, the source of fertility and prosperity, destined to unite the nations of the world. Jerusalem on Mount Zion is hailed as a model and source of prosperity and peace for all the nations of the earth. "The mountain of the Lord's house" is being turned into a place for a school in peacemaking. Given its checkered history and ultimate defeat, Jerusalem and its inviolability has to be understood spiritually and eschatologically rather than geographically or militarily.

2:3—“All the nations shall stream to it, many peoples shall come . . .”

All nations of the earth become pilgrims and seek instruction and revelation; the temple represents “instruction” and Jerusalem is where the word of God resides. Thus, this universal vision remains centralized, for the Word of God radiates from Mount Zion. There are two actors, God who instructs, judges, and arbitrates and the nations who come to learn and make peace.

In this passage God no longer instructs through the temple priests but instead instructs directly, and God judges openly rather than via the fallible authorities of Jerusalem. There is no question of the nations bringing taxes or tribute to Jerusalem. The nations join Jerusalem as coequals in God’s service; indeed, Isaiah may be including Judah (“the house of Jacob”) as one of them.<sup>133</sup> Later passages in the book of Isaiah declare that other nations have to submit to Judah, but not here. Here the gathering of the nations does not imply the victory of one people over the others but universal peace, the victory of all.

2:4—“Nations shall beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning-hooks.”

This is surely one of the most quoted passages of the Hebrew Bible, poetic prophecy at its best, a vision of the nations of the world at peace. Not God but the nations themselves destroy their weapons of mass destruction. Although each village had its blacksmith who could beat weapons into farming implements, swords and spears were expensive; beating swords into ploughshares would entail a significant realignment of national resources. The goal is clear: investment in weapon security must be diverted to providing food security.

The new international empire that the Lord is planning with Jerusalem as its capital will be superior to Assyria. Unlike other passages in the Bible, here the Lord’s victories will be achieved not through warfare but as God’s initial creation was achieved, by God’s Word alone. The coming world empire is a new creation. The “theological” Mount Zion will be the world center of “knowledge” of the Lord. For Isaiah, human history and the future are in God’s hands, and God is the arbiter of peace.

It may well be that many of us focus our lives around one or two commanding texts that shape our horizon and guide our commitment. For many Christians one such remarkable text is this poetic vision of Isaiah 2:4: “swords into ploughshares, spears into pruning-hooks.” As Daniel Berrigan puts it, “the necessary has been fused with the impossible”—necessary political pragmatism merges with “impossible” humanitarian idealism.<sup>134</sup>

2:5—“O house of Jacob, come, let us walk in the light of the Lord!”

The text concludes with a liturgical refrain, perhaps sung by pilgrims entering Jerusalem. The text on international peace under the Word of God both encourages and challenges the pilgrims. Those who already live in the presence of God (“house of Jacob”) are

invited to take the first steps that all nations will take one day (“in days to come”). The pilgrim people should live and witness as all nations should live and witness, a sign of universal justice and peace. A world without war emerges only when all nations turn to God and walk in God’s ways.

The Isaiah text brings together the religious (instruction in God’s Word) and the political (universal peace), and seeks a response from both the individual reader (longing for justice and peace) and from political leaders (international policy). The text holds out hope of what is possible to those who struggle for a more just and peaceful order. “Without visions the people perish.”<sup>135</sup>

Isaiah dreams of a radical transformation of existing conditions between nations, a putting aside of conflict, a focus on food security. Economic security (“they shall all sit under their own vines and under their own fig trees, and no one shall make them afraid”) takes away a basic threat to life, the fundamental cause of fear and suspicion.<sup>136</sup>

However, this text cannot be separated from the rest of the Hebrew Bible; it is but one among a number of alternative visions. The book of Joshua celebrates war and knows God as a conquering warrior, and the prophet Joel goes so far as to reverse Isaiah 2:4, “Beat your ploughshares into swords and your pruning-hooks into spears, let the weakling say, ‘I am a warrior.’”<sup>137</sup> This Joel reversal, however, may well be ironic, purporting to record God taunting those intent on fighting, those trapped in ever more brutal cycles of violence.

Over the centuries many have interpreted this vision of international peace as an ideal beyond human history, as God’s eschatological future, whereas Isaiah’s counsel to kings Ahaz and Hezekiah was construed as purely pragmatic advice because Assyria and Egypt were too powerful to oppose at the time. In this reading, warfare is permissible when the odds are in our favor (just war theory). And yet Isaiah’s language is that of a visionary; his poetic words are eminently memorable, graphic words to fire the imagination and spark visionary possibilities, words to evoke the conviction that “another world is possible,” a world for which to yearn and strive. The liturgical refrain “O house of Jacob, come, let us walk in the light of the Lord!” invites us to take part in this future both personally and as a community.<sup>138</sup> This vision, then, drives forward on the road to international justice and peace those who are convinced that the future is in God’s hands, those who experience God’s Word (rule) breaking into daily life, and those who sense God as teacher and mediator, a God who settles disputes among nations.

How does Isaiah’s text relate to the theme of ethnic and cultural diversity? Isaiah centers his international vision on Mount Zion and Jerusalem (city of *salām*). There is a world of difference between peaceful intercourse between nations brought about through the hegemony of one nation over the others (imperial power) and peace obtained through a commonly recognized international authority (negotiation by legal equals). In the first case ethnic, cultural and religious differences antagonize and divide; in the second they can mutually enrich and unite. By raising up Mount Zion spiritually, by replacing the temple priests by God’s own self, by envisioning Judah on pilgrimage together with the other nations, and by insisting on the primacy of God’s Word and leaving aside any notion of submission to human authority whether from the Jerusalem palace or

temple, Isaiah has created a vision open to an egalitarian reading. “Nations” come on pilgrimage; therefore they presumably come in their ethnic groups and according to their living cultural traditions.

Jesus of Nazareth went to the temple on Mount Zion and prayed there. However, his attitude toward the temple was closer to the sharp critique of prophets such as Amos and Jeremiah rather than to the enthusiastic prospects of Isaiah. For although Isaiah is often quoted in the Gospels, it is not Isaiah of Jerusalem but rather Isaiah of the exile (586–539 BCE), in particular the songs of the suffering servant.<sup>139</sup> Jesus’s strategy is based in Galilee rather than Jerusalem, his “mountain” is not the hill of Zion but the “mountain” of Galilee from where he proclaims God’s Word.<sup>140</sup>

Jesus recasts the imagery of Isaiah 2:2–3. He does not picture the nations of the world coming to the temple in Jerusalem to learn to walk in God’s ways; instead the Messianic people encounter God’s Word wherever they go. The disciples are to “go into all the world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation.”<sup>141</sup> The fourth Gospel is quite explicit: “The hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem . . . the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth. . . . God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth.”<sup>142</sup>

Isaiah 2:1–5 envisages a future when the nations will rally to Jerusalem and listen to God’s Word. When in New Testament times the first Christian communities expanded among the nations as a new religious movement rather than remaining a renewal movement within Judaism, the apostle Paul reversed Isaiah’s prophecy; no longer will the nations go to Jerusalem, but rather Jerusalem will join the believing nations.<sup>143</sup>

For Isaiah, as for the whole of the Hebrew Bible, our fundamental identity is found in our common humanity, our creation in God’s image.<sup>144</sup> In today’s globalizing world, embattled local communities tend to seek security in their ethnic and cultural identities rather than in their common humanity. In Southeast Asia ethnic, cultural, and religious identities are closely interwoven. Under repressive regimes where the majority are politically silenced, economically exploited, culturally repressed, and socially disrupted, religion or ethnic identity is often the final bastion of human dignity and identity.

Some multireligious and multicultural countries have developed a political philosophy (for Indonesia it is the *Pancasila*) that underlines all national law. In religious societies this political philosophy is rooted in moral principles drawn from each of their cultural and religious traditions. More secular societies develop a “global ethic” upon which is built international law. Human rights law (personal, social, minorities, and environmental) is gradually creating a legal framework that can nurture a humanitarian culture between nations.

### Galatians 3:28–29

The apostle Paul wrote the Letter to the Galatians most likely between 49–56 CE. It is a controversial letter written with great passion, quite possibly because of conflicts within

churches recently founded by Paul. These disputes arose when people of different ethnic and religious origins attempted to live together as a single congregation. These congregations were mainly drawn from the lower strata of society but also from the periphery of the local upper classes. Deeply rooted in the popular classes, the Christian movement tried to live out an egalitarian ethic. Social equality, once the privilege of peer groups (among the elite or indeed among groups of slaves), now embraced the socially excluded: foreigners, slaves, and women. This new ethic was articulated primarily in creed, ritual, and community life; eventually, in much later times, it came to impact on the wider society.

Galatia was in central Asia Minor (modern Turkey). It was a heterogeneous society of many cultural and religious backgrounds. Celts settled in Galatia in the third century BCE, followed by various Hellenist and Roman migrations.

Paul himself was born in Tarsus in Cilicia but brought up in Jerusalem.<sup>145</sup> He was comfortably bicultural, with Jewish roots and a Hellenist education; thus, in his person and his ministry, Paul bridges the Aramaic–Hebraic and Greek religious environments. According to Lucien Legrand, Paul, in his letter to the Galatians, integrated both Greek and Hebraic cultural components, which work together in synergy.<sup>146</sup> Hebrew covenantal egalitarianism and Stoic or Cynic disregard of social, and ethnic discriminations coalesce in his argument.

A key concept in Paul's letter is the contrast between freedom and slavery, an apt image in a slave-based imperial economy. He castigates two forms of slavery: giving in to the imperial ideology of the Roman Empire and imprisoning oneself within (defining one's identity by) ethnic or religious laws. We can be enslaved by narrow ethnic values or by imperial global ideology; either would break a multicultural faith community apart.

Minority communities in mixed environments tend to maintain their identity through regular rituals, laws, and conventions. For Paul, however, life is not secured by law or ritual but by what is priceless: God's grace. Paul shows the problems that arise when churches try to preserve their identity through a legalism that crushes life out of a community, destroying its solidarity.<sup>147</sup> He addresses the absurdity of forgoing Christian liberty by favoring exclusionary laws that reduce life to ideologies that enslave.<sup>148</sup> Building loving relationships across racial, social and gender boundaries is the way of Christian liberty.<sup>149</sup>

The members of the multicultural communities in Galatia are all Abraham's children not by ethnic origin or adherence to religious laws and conventions but by faith in God and in God's Word. God's original blessing included Gentile believers.<sup>150</sup> The Galatians, through their baptism, are already Abraham's rightful heirs.<sup>151</sup> The abolition of social distinctions fulfills the promise to Abraham. Subsequent history informs us that this utopian vision has only very gradually permeated harsh social reality.

The issue was, do Christians who are not Jews have to become Jews to become Christians? That is, do they have to be circumcised and so follow the whole of Mosaic law? Paul's response is that Christ's death and resurrection inaugurated a new age in which the old laws and norms no longer apply: "Christ has set us free."<sup>152</sup> For Paul, the Christian community is no longer simply a reform movement within Judaism; it was in the process of becoming a new religious movement with its own separate identity.

3:28—“No longer Jew or Greek, no longer slave or free, no longer male and female.”

Paul is probably quoting an early Christian baptismal formula—words, therefore, pronounced over each believer in Galatia at the time of their baptism, words that declared the end of exclusionary boundaries.<sup>153</sup> For Paul, our root identity and human dignity is no longer decided by our ethnic and religious background (Jew or Greek), nor by our legal status (slave or free citizen), nor by our gender (male or female); all who believe have the grace, the status, and the freedom of Abraham’s children.

3:28—“No longer Jew or Greek.”

“No longer Jew or Greek” sums up the central thrust of the apostle Paul’s ministry in both West Asia and Southern Europe. Faith is no longer tied to a particular people but is available to every people that places its faith in God and joins a faith community (*umat/jemaat*). Circumcision, and thus the Mosaic law, protected the religious and cultural separateness of the Jewish people; everyone else was collectively categorized as “the nations” (Gentiles). In Christ, this separateness is abolished because Jews and Gentiles are reconstituted as one new people of God.<sup>154</sup> Consequently, circumcision as a boundary marker separating Jews from Gentiles is no longer significant.<sup>155</sup>

“No longer Jew or Greek” is a creedal statement that maintains the absolute impartiality of God, for “God shows no partiality.”<sup>156</sup> This is a theological statement rather than a cultural ideal, a statement that does not demand cultural homogeneity but does reject exclusion. There is no indication that Paul discouraged Jewish Christians from remaining Jews or continuing to be part of their local synagogue. Just as Greek Christians do not have to become Jews to be Christian, so Jews can similarly maintain their Jewish identity. “No longer Jew or Greek” does not annihilate cultural distinctiveness but rather allows and affirms the continued existence of cultural pluralism within the faith community. It does, however, deny ultimate significance to ethnic distinctions.

In the parallel passage from Colossians, the terms “barbarian” and “Scythian” are added while “male and female” are omitted: “There is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free; but Christ is all and in all!”<sup>157</sup> “Barbarian” and “Scythian” represent stigmatized groups. Thus, old designations referring to the cultural inferiority or superiority of nations are no longer relevant. This baptismal creed helped give cohesion to fragile multiethnic communities in Galatia, Corinth, and Colossae.

3:28—“No longer slave or free.”

In the faith community, social distinctions are secondary. In baptism everyone, whatever their social position, becomes a child of God and is therefore related to the others as a brother or sister. Among siblings there are no masters or slaves, there is no rigid social hierarchy because brotherly and sisterly attitudes break through social class and power distinctions, at least within the faith community.<sup>158</sup> Christians are to form an alternative community that lives by an “ethic of compassion” that softened legal distinctions within



the community and eventually in the wider society. Paul never drew this creedal statement to its logical conclusion—the abolition of slavery—possibly because he thought the last times were at hand. In Paul’s day, a movement that turned slaves rebellious would have been crushed. It took around eighteen hundred years before “no longer slave or free” became not only a matter of interpersonal relationships within the believing community but also a statement of political and legal rights and duties for everyone as co-citizens. All the same, the apostolic movement gave slaves greater scope within their faith communities within a social order where life without slaves was inconceivable.

3:28—“No longer male and female.”

The term “male and female” echoes the book of Genesis: “male and female God created them.”<sup>159</sup> If this distinction no longer counts, then a new creation has taken place. Gender roles and distinctions are no longer decisive, initially within the Christian community (before the gender norms of the wider society reasserted themselves), and centuries later in wider society.

The baptismal formula quoted by Paul does not assert that there are no longer men and women, but that male-centered gender relations in the wider patriarchal society are no longer normative for Christians who are to form a contrast community with a rough equality between the sexes. The male is no longer normative, as perhaps he might tend to be where male circumcision is a religious marker. In principle, gender identity is no longer a ground for status, exclusion, privilege, or power.

In Paul’s letters and other apostolic writings, all distinctions between men and women were not disregarded within the faith community. This baptismal formula helped shape the “symbolic universe” of the community. In turn, the symbols of faith enacted in worship impacted upon social interrelationships and the structures of the community itself.

Perhaps slaves and women took the baptismal creed into everyday social life and so raised troubling questions. This is perhaps the background to post-Pauline teaching that reasserts the old Aristotelian rule: “Wives, be subject to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord. . . . Slaves, obey in everything those who are your earthly masters.”<sup>160</sup> The Christian movement was not yet ready to live out its creed fully.

In his ministry, Paul does not focus on gender justice; the phrase “no longer male and female” is not only missing from the parallel formula in Corinthians, it is also not decisive in his theological argument.<sup>161</sup> Paul worked tirelessly breaking down barriers between Jew and Gentile; this parallel statement has had to wait almost two thousand years before it became a vital issue, first in secular society and then in the church. Nonetheless, Paul’s emphasis on mutuality in marital sexual relations and his acknowledgment of prophetic women have been steadily undermining male supremacy within most churches.

3:28—“For you are all one in Christ Jesus.”

Here is the decisive argument: the most salient feature in the identity of the Galatians is their unity in Christ. Our ethnic, cultural, and social identity has value insofar as it is

rooted in faith; that is, we have become a new creation incorporated into a new body through baptism (dying and rising again) and eucharist (table fellowship). Ritual confronts the social group with its underlying ethos, values, and worldview through powerful, imaginative language and so reinforces them in social life.<sup>162</sup> In ritual, communities experience *communitas*, where social distinctions are temporarily collapsed or inverted.<sup>163</sup> In ritual enactment, hierarchical distinctions are eliminated; in worship and in table fellowship, all have equal dignity. “For neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is anything; but a new creation is everything!”<sup>164</sup> In principle these impartial statements qualify social differences. This egalitarian ethos was nurtured through regular ritual, weekly meals together, mutual help in daily life, mutual concern in sickness and death, care for children and the old, mutual assistance in travel and business, in short through a practical love, a “solidarity of compassion.” Unity in Christ transforms social relationships; no cultural marker must diminish this primary identity.

Nothing is absolute, not even one’s cultural, legal, or gender identity. The only ultimate is the new creation. Nonetheless, ethnic distinctions are not to be disregarded; the ideal is not a monochrome, monocultural community but rather pluralism without pressure to conform. The grace of God is made visible precisely in the reconciliation of Jews, Gentiles, barbarians, and Scythians. Reconciliation consists not in eliminating but in overcoming discrepancies. The goal is the eradication of hostility that springs from difference.

Consequently, Christians should not engage in “cultural imperialism” and try to impose one set of cultural norms, rituals, and traditions on another people, as some Jewish Christians in Galatia insisted on the circumcision of Gentile Christians. Paul passionately rejects this kind of ethnic or religious “identity politics.” Experience shows that where ethnic markers do not generally coincide with religious boundaries, multicultural and multireligious societies help to prevent our faith from enhancing narrow class, ethnic, or national ambitions. But even where ethnic and religious boundaries coincide, as long as faith identity is primary, then ethnic, social, and gender distinctions will be subservient to our faith commitment. Local ethnic, social, and gender divisions should never decide the shape of the faith community. Christ’s death frees us from such ethnic, social, economic, and gender captivity.<sup>165</sup>

In Paul’s letters a certain ambiguity remains: if in Christ there is no longer male nor female, what roles should women have in the faith community, and how should Philemon treat his slave Onesimus?<sup>166</sup> In apostolic times, social and gender distinctions are maintained and yet softened by an ethic of compassion. In creedal statements, ritual enactment, and community living, class distinctions and hierarchies no longer matter. We are no longer to distinguish Jews from non-Jews, no longer to discriminate between those called slaves from those called free, and no longer to make hierarchy according to gender. Paul is not talking about a change of masters in a continuing structure of domination; he is talking about restructuring the relations of domination for you “have clothed yourselves with Christ.”<sup>167</sup>

“For all of you are one in Christ Jesus.” Composed of both Jew and Greek, the communities of Galatia were, in an important way, already distinct from either Jew or

Greek, for they did not meet in the local synagogue and were developing their own ethic, so they were already becoming a distinct religious movement in their own right.

The law that seems to determine life today is the so-called (imperial, global) free market, which is not free at all. In a commercialized world, everything and everyone is treated as a commodity, is defined by its price. 'The law of the market' is treated like a "natural law," a normal way of behaving, as though there is no alternative. The global market forces non-equals to compete; it suppresses the weak and enslaves those who lose. As such, the law of the market brings death, not life. For Paul what is truly free comes from God: divine grace, the divine Spirit, faith, absolute trust in God, rather than obedience to the law.

### Revelation 7:9–10

Unique among the twenty-seven books of the apostolic scriptures, the final book in the Christian Bible is written in an apocalyptic idiom, a coded language of allegory and myth, of dreams and visions. Traditionally this book has been ascribed to John the Divine, a mystic who lived his last days on the isle of Patmos in Greece. By their vivid imagery and apparent incongruity, John's metaphors provoke the reader to look at the world with new eyes. Much of the imagery is violent, as is the language of many oppressed peoples; victims of violence rarely find such images offensive.

Apocalyptic speech seeks to "reveal" the deeper dimensions of our existence into which is breaking "the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God and the authority of his Messiah."<sup>168</sup> Apocalyptic code is the choice of harassed minorities suppressed by imperial tyrants, who alone wish to determine truth in the public sphere. Born in the vivid imagination of John the Divine, the coded speech allows a subversive minority to opt out of the empire's public truth, to maintain its integrity, to recall God's Word and stubbornly sustain a flicker of hope: a word of optimism for an embattled minority, encouragement to the weak and vulnerable, a challenge to the rich and powerful. The images stimulate rather than prescribe while exciting the imagination. Its meaning is revealed to those who remain faithful.

The book of Revelation was written in tumultuous times when the empire of Rome ("the Beast") seemed to have history under its heel, when the ideal human was the male warrior, and the ideal task was "service" of the divine emperor. In such times, the Word of God appeared to have as much impact as dust scattered by the wind. The survival of the faithful few appeared to demand both silence and amnesia. What price a sustaining witness to hope?

The book was crafted to encourage small faith communities scattered throughout Asia Minor (roughly modern Turkey) who were being harassed and martyred during the final decade of the first century CE. The embattled minorities are urged to resist "the beast of Babylon," a symbol of oppressive social, political, and religious power. God's people are encouraged to create contrast communities over against the culture of the Roman Empire. Worship of the Beast is a cult of power, the decadent culture of an

autocratic regime. The Beast of absolute political power replaces God (idolatry) and enslaves humans. The crime of “Babylon” is to persecute those who reject unlimited political power and who unmask the ideological propaganda that ensnares those not vigilant enough to see through it.

Apocalyptic discourse of picture and symbol refuses to accept that the dominant powers are the ultimate point of reference, and asks the reader to participate in another way of speaking about God and the world. Among grassroots communities in the Third World, the book of Revelation both offers hope and stimulates resistance, motivating Christians in their struggle for a more justly liberating world. Today images used in Revelation to castigate the oppressive Roman Empire at the end of the first century have been applied to the repressive economic, political, and cultural neocolonialism of globalization. Such communal reading at the grass roots helps to maintain hope that another world is possible.

The book contains two cycles of visions: 1:10b–11:19 and 12:1–22:5. The first cycle has three sections, namely the seven messages, the scroll with seven seals, and the seven trumpets (1:10b–3:22; 4:1–8:5; and 8:2–11:19, respectively). The text under consideration here has been inserted among the opening of the seven seals, immediately before the breaking of the last. The first four speak of war, dissension, famine, and pestilence; suffering is the lot of the faithful, neither as punishment nor judgment but as social injustice. Our text is a hymn of hope inserted in the midst of this world in turmoil. It proclaims a vision of political utopia: all nations unite in praising God. The hymn will be clarified by John in the verses that immediately follow (7:13–17).

7:9—“A great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages.”

The hymn welcomes every ethnic and national grouping in a single, inclusive act of adoration that in its variety (“from all tribes and peoples and languages”) manifests a remarkable range of praise. “From every nation” denotes both variety and universality; each joins in, without impediments, in the universal chorus of praise. Although earlier 144,000 children of Israel are marked out, here ethnic distinctions no longer decide.<sup>169</sup> This vision prefigures the future symphony of Iranians and Iraqis; Palestinians and Israelis; Malaysians, Singaporeans, and Indonesians; North Americans and British; and every other nation. In this vision, no one group is set over against another; God is sovereign over the history of the nations.

Unlike earlier in this chapter, here the great multitude does not bear a seal and hence is beyond calculation.<sup>170</sup> Their number “that no one could count” goes beyond all numerical limits and so breaks through all ethnic and cultural boundaries, indeed, bursts through the restrictions of organized religion, beyond the visible limits of God’s people on earth.<sup>171</sup> The universal multitude, whatever their ethnic, cultural, or religious background, could include all those who have suffered the violence of the “great ordeal” of the ongoing oppression of the empire; the economic, political, social, cultural, and religious oppression endured by those not willing to be integrated into the *imperium* and take part in its oppressive and idolatrous structures; and those who willingly suffer the effects of

war, hunger, pestilence, and persecution.<sup>172</sup> Identified with the Lamb, they are both dignified and defiant.

7:9—“robed in white with palm branches in their hands.”

White is the color of the ceremonial dress of martyrs, those not stained with the idolatry of the empire, and palm branches are a token of the victory of the weak over the strong, of the slaughtered Lamb over the Beast. Such a victory demands the “reevaluation of all values.”

7:10—“Salvation belongs to our God.”

*Sōtēria* (salvation) means total well-being. The official source of welfare, peace, and salvation, according to the political ideology of the time, was the Roman emperor. However, those who stand before the throne acknowledge not the emperor but God and the Lamb (Christ) as the ultimate source of well-being, security, and salvation. In this understanding, salvation involves radical transformation, bringing to birth a new world of justice and equality.

Salvation entails the abolition of all dehumanization and the restoration of the fullness of human well-being. This vision responds to the outcry of those seeking justice for the destruction of their lives. The central meaning of history lies not with the apparent success of empires imposing their might, wealth, and ideology on the nations of the world but in “Jesus Christ the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth.”<sup>173</sup>

For the author of Revelation, “the earth” is in the control of the idolatrous and the oppressors, while “heaven” is the transcendent world of God within history; it is the world of the holy ones, of those who do not oppress or idolize; it is the world carved out by communities of hope. “Heaven,” then, is at the heart of human experience and is already here in an anticipatory and fragmentary way in fragments that encourage human action in the present. “Heaven” is not fully possible without a radical changing of the present order.

7:14—“Having washed their robes in the blood of the Lamb.”

The multitude from every nation identifies with “the Lamb,” Jesus the Nazarene, who was also a victim of injustice and condemned to death.<sup>174</sup> Jesus continues to suffer among those who, like him, are the victims of the injustices of our world. There is no guarantee of security and well-being for God’s people on earth. “Washed . . . in the blood of the Lamb” could allude to the readers’ present experience of suffering and violence, to the faithful who do not conform to the oppressive aspects of the dominant culture but doggedly hold on to a distinct way of life. The faithful martyrs who endure are singing a liturgy of praise in heaven. The faithful themselves wash their robes in the blood of the Lamb, that is, they are active participants in “God’s project.”

This text of Revelation has some clear implications for a Christian attitude toward ethnic and cultural diversity. Those who refuse to rely on the means deemed sufficient for assuring national survival—that is of economic, political, and military power—shall endure to the end. A person of faith identifies not first with the dominant culture or the nation but with God’s people.

God’s faithful, wherever they may be, prefigure the coming unity of humankind. Nations must be liberated from their own entrapments and brought into the global symphony praising God. Meanwhile, the faithful of each nation form an alternative community with their own reading of history. The well-known churches of Sardis and Laodicea had given in to the ethos, values, and principles of the empire while the least affluent churches of Smyrna and Philadelphia remained faithful.<sup>175</sup>

The vision of 7:9–12 is completely inclusive; it is an image of everyone anywhere, each with their own language, culture, and identity—those who resist the Beast, who refuse to compromise, and who are following the Lamb.

## Four Concluding Questions

On Isaiah 2: Daniel Berrigan describes the vision of forging swords into ploughshares and spears into pruning hooks as the fusing of “the necessary with the impossible.” Do we find in this passage an image of utopia, a pragmatic political project, or the fusing of the two? What would such a fusion of the idealistic and the necessary say about ethnic or cultural diversity today?

On Galatians 3: There were a number of options open to Paul as he sought to end disputes among the multiethnic and multicultural communities of Galatia. He could, for instance, have demarcated clear boundaries and insisted upon strong leadership. In fact, Paul deemed it sufficient to propose a transparently egalitarian faith that softened ethnic, social, and gender distinctions so that they no longer discriminate nor divide. Paul apparently left any implications regarding ethnic or cultural plurality for the Galatians to work out for themselves. Would such an approach make sense today?

On Revelation 7: John the Divine encouraged small, scattered faith communities to live as a creative minority over against the hegemonic military culture of the Roman Empire. As a contrast culture, they are urged to witness to other values and to another ethos. A distinct minority, they are to avoid becoming fanatic or exclusive by openly engaging with the world around them. What does this “creative minority” option say to us in a world where global hegemonic power is being opposed by extremist networks, each encapsulated within its individual ethnic, cultural, or religious self?

On all three texts: Each of these has been explained in an all-inclusive manner. Many texts in the Hebrew and Christian scriptures cannot be elucidated so all-embracingly. How should we engage discordant voices in the Bible? Do we simply focus on texts that confirm our contemporary agenda? Or are we discovering that such ecumenical texts are a key to reinterpreting the entire scriptures?

*Isaiah 2:1–5*

<sup>1</sup>The word that Isaiah son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem.

<sup>2</sup>In days to come

the mountain of the Lord's house  
shall be established as the highest of the mountains,  
and shall be raised above the hills;  
all the nations shall stream to it.

<sup>3</sup>Many peoples shall come and say,

“Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord,  
to the house of the God of Jacob;  
that he may teach us his ways  
and that we may walk in his paths.”

For out of Zion shall go forth instruction,  
and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem.

<sup>4</sup>He shall judge between the nations,  
and shall arbitrate for many peoples;  
they shall beat their swords into ploughshares,  
and their spears into pruning-hooks;  
nation shall not lift up sword against nation,  
neither shall they learn war any more.

<sup>5</sup>O house of Jacob,

come, let us walk  
in the light of the Lord!

*Galatians 3:28–29*

<sup>28</sup>There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. <sup>29</sup>And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise.

*Revelation 7:9–10*

<sup>9</sup>After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands. <sup>10</sup>They cried out in a loud voice, saying, “Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!”

8.2 *Hūd* 11:118; *al-Rūm* 30:20–22; *al-Fāṭir* 35:27–28;  
*al-Hujurāt* 49:13

*Osman Bakar*

All of the Qur'ānic texts selected for discussion in this section shed light in various ways on the Qur'ānic perspective on diversity within the human race. But these texts are not the only ones dealing with this theme. Another text worth quoting by virtue of its clarity in stating the Qur'ānic position on human diversity is the following: “For each of you We have appointed a Law and a way of life. And had God so willed He would surely have made you one single community; but (His Plan) is to test you in what He had given you.”<sup>176</sup>

Taken together, these texts suggest that this diversity is given by God and is to be embraced as a sign of the divine wisdom and as a blessing for human beings. The Qur'ānic perspective is that the ethnic and cultural diversity of humankind should not serve as a basis for divisive claims to superiority between different human groups but rather should provide opportunities for mutual knowledge and cooperation.

Diversity as treated in the selected texts pertains to both the natural world and the human world. Diversity in the natural world of minerals, plants, and animals—now popularly known as biodiversity—is entirely the product of natural forces and processes that are beyond human choice and determination. While the coming into being of this biodiversity is not determined by human beings, its future survival can be adversely affected by destructive human acts. The great tragedy in our own times is that biodiversity is under such increasing threat from human greed that many living species are on the brink of extinction, not to mention those that are already obliterated from the face of the earth as a result of unwise and excessive development.

Diversity in the human world is somewhat different. It is partly the product of natural forces and processes, and partly the product of human cultural development. This means that human diversity has two dimensions. One is the natural dimension, which refers to the physical and biological traits and characteristics of human beings such as skin color and gender; the other is the cultural dimension, which refers to such things as language and belief system or religion.

In what follows I note particularly relevant features of the different texts in turn.

### *Hūd* 11:118

The wording of this verse is partly paralleled in other verses of the Qur'ān, all of which contain the phrase “*umma wāḥida*” (one nation, people, or community).<sup>177</sup> The interesting exegetical questions raised by this range of texts would take us beyond our present purposes; for now I simply note that in this verse (in contrast to the other passages considered below) differences between human beings are presented in a negative light.



The protracted differences or disagreements mentioned here (*wa lā yazālūna mukhtalifīna*) suggest religious disputation and division (cf. *akhtulīfa*, shortly before this verse, referring to disputes over the revelation given to Moses<sup>178</sup>). According to the following verse, it is only those on whom God has mercy who are delivered from this ceaseless disputation.<sup>179</sup>

In contrast to this kind of human disunity apparently bound up with tensions between belief and unbelief, the other Qur'anic passages considered here focus on positive examples of diversity at the level of ethnic and cultural diversity.

### *al-Rūm* 30:20–22

This passage is about the natural dimension (physical and biological) of human diversity, which is to serve as a substratum or vehicle of cultural diversity. It is part of a longer sequence of verses (20–25) all beginning with “And of his signs” (*wa min āyātihī*), listing various manifestations in the created order of God's mercy and power, which should be recognized and acknowledged by human beings. Verse 20 refers to the sign of the creation of human beings from dust and their dispersion through the world. Verse 21 mentions the creation of human beings as male and female and refers to blessings associated with this.<sup>180</sup> Our chief interest is in verse 22.<sup>181</sup> Most striking here is the juxtaposition of “the creation of the heavens and the earth” with the diversity of human “tongues and hues” or, updating the translation, languages and skin colors. Here we have a significant reference to human diversity both in ethnic and in cultural terms, for language is a central marker of cultural identity. It is hard to imagine how the Qur'an could accord greater dignity to these aspects of human diversity than to mention them in the same breath as the creation of the heavens and the earth and to say of all these together that they are signs of God. So we are encouraged to consider the cultural diversity of the human race as being as “natural” and as good as all the other signs of God in the heavens and the earth. As well as affirming that ethnic and cultural diversity are given by God, this passage is also making the point that such diversity does not exist just for its own sake but as a “sign” of the mercy, wisdom, and power of God. The diverse phenomena within God's creation thus point back to the unity from which they all derive. This interplay between affirmation of both plurality in the created order and the underlying reality of *tawḥīd* is a central feature of the Qur'anic *Weltanschauung*.

### *al-Fāṭir* 35:27–28

These two verses again set human diversity in the context of the wider created order. Here, however, there are slight differences from the last passage considered. In this case the focus is just on ethnic diversity or, more precisely, its natural dimension, which is again mentioned in terms of color. The distinctive way in which this passage suggests the God-given nature of ethnic diversity is to link it with the rich range of colors lavished

on other parts of God's creation. Just as fruits and animals occur in various colors, and as a range of colors are to be seen in natural phenomena such as mountains, so also there is a diversity of colors in human beings. It follows that just as we appreciate the biodiversity evident throughout the earth, so also we should gratefully accept the ethnic differences among human beings. The second half of verse 28 suggests that to do so is to demonstrate piety (or fear of God) and the resulting true knowledge.

### *al-Hujurāt* 49:13

In his essay in this volume, Vincent Cornell comments at some length on this much-cited verse. He points out that there are questions to be asked about the frequent use made of it in discussions of Islam and religious pluralism, and he alerts us to the danger of assuming too easy an equivalence between what the Qur'an here calls "races" (*shu'ūb*) and "tribes" (*qabā'il*) and contemporary understandings of "nations," "ethnicities," "cultures," and so on. He also refers to the traditional explanation of the occasion of the revelation (*sabab al-nuzūl*) of this verse. It is reported that when Bilal, a black African, gave the call to prayer at Mecca, some newly converted Arabs were surprised at this.

In response to such a negative and arrogant attitude toward a person of a supposedly inferior race, the Qur'an first affirms the common origin of all human beings and the positive place of ethnic difference (as well as sexual difference) in God's purposes. The branching out of the human family tree into numerous tribal and ethnic branches is a natural process that is in accordance with the divine cosmic plan. The aim of this diversity is that people should "know one another," suggesting respectful mutual understanding and recognition. Second, this verse insists that, in God's sight, what is of the greatest significance and value in human beings is not their race but the piety, or fear of God (*taqwā*), that they demonstrate. Thus the Qur'an both provides a basis for valuing ethnic difference, as part of the richly diverse reality created by God, and relativizes ethnic difference by pointing to the religious virtue of *taqwā* as being ultimately more important. Once again, affirmation of the diversity within God's creation leads us back to *tawḥīd*, for the person who displays true *taqwā* is the one whose life is truly oriented to the divine unity from which all things come.

### *Hūd* 11:118

<sup>118</sup>Had thy Lord willed, He would have made mankind one nation; but they continue in their differences.

### *al-Rūm* 30:20–22

<sup>20</sup>And of His signs is that He created you of dust; then lo, you are mortals, all scattered abroad.

<sup>21</sup>And of His signs is that He created for you, of yourselves, spouses, that you might repose in them, and He has set between you love and mercy. Surely in that are signs for a people who consider.

<sup>22</sup>And of His signs is the creation of the heavens and earth and the variety of your tongues and hues. Surely in that are signs for all living beings.

*al-Faṭīr 35:27–28*

<sup>27</sup>Hast thou not seen how that God sends down out of heaven water, and thereafter We bring forth fruits of diverse hues? And in the mountains are streaks white and red, of diverse hues, and pitchy black; <sup>28</sup>men too, and beasts and cattle—diverse are their hues. Even so only those of His servants fear God who have knowledge; surely God is All-mighty, All-forgiving.

*al-Hujrāt 49:13*

<sup>13</sup>O mankind, We have created you male and female, and appointed you races and tribes, that you may know one another. Surely the noblest among you in the sight of God is the most godfearing of you. God is All-knowing, All-aware.