

Women as Role Models (Exemplary Women in the Holy Koran)

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Abstract: There are some ambiguities about the status of women in Islam, and this paper studies exemplary women in the holy Koran by content analysis, referring to valid interpretations. Its basic questions include: Koran's method in introducing models, gender roles in Koran, and Koran's criteria and modeling principles about exemplary women. The findings demonstrate that the Koran has acted very precisely to introduce models based on certain criteria. Koran uses the term "osveh" for "model" and discusses two kinds of models: positive and negative ones; and explains their characteristics and behaviors in a creative manner. Most of the required virtues stated in the holy Koran are common or similar for both genders, and some other virtues are embodied in women examples. The most significant of them is Mary who is praised as a very great human being, a believer and also a sign of God for all believers including men. Koran mentions that gender is not an obstacle for having freewill and independence in making decisions; and presents two women as examples for freewill; even though they usually are under greater pressure than men. The holy Koran concentrates on two virtues for all: standing against oppression and leading a pious life; and introduces two women as role models with such virtues, not men. Furthermore, the Koran introduces and praises a female governor who takes a different approach from men in governing a country and successfully manages complex issues such as war and peace. Instead of confronting the army of King Solomon, she took a diplomatic approach. Regarding women's gender roles, motherhood and women's role as a wife is greatly emphasized. In this regard, the holy Koran underlines the pivotal role of moving towards the right path; a woman accompanying her husband in this path is a perfect spouse, and on the contrary, a woman should not obey or accompany her husband if he is going astray. Furthermore, regarding motherhood, the holy Koran mentions mothers' suffering and their love and protection for their children under the most severe conditions.

Keywords: Islam, Koran, Exemplary women, Modeling, Education method.

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Introduction

Developed countries believe that they have gained human rights for women, and endeavor to help the women of developing countries to secure such rights. Islam, however, has its own definition of women's position and their rights, which, for various reasons has always been covered in a veil of ambiguity and which, because of the essential metamorphosis of all values in the modern world, is misunderstood. The eternal quest for truth, however, has always been the duty of those who consider spiritual perfection as the most important aim in life. Thus, it seems necessary to clarify the viewpoints of Islam about women and their position in life.

One of the best ways of achieving this goal is to study the status of exemplary women in the Koran and Islam. This will provide us with a panoramic view of women's position in Islam, of those virtues that help to make them exemplary, and of the vices which must be eliminated. It will also help us see whether there is any distinction between men and women in the Islamic image of human perfection.

There are many studies about exemplary women in Islam. Some of them are historical reports of great Muslim women. Bursali (1979) and Kahaleh (1984) have stated that Muslim women have had many opportunities for social and political activities, and some of them even became experts in Islamic theology and Jurisprudence. Some of the other studies are about exemplary women in the Koran, praising their dignity, particularly Mary for her special status in the Koran. For example, Javadi Amoli(1996) emphasized that Mary has the spiritual status of a prophet; and Harun Yahaya(2010) described her as an "ideal Muslim woman's character."This paper goes beyond the above researches and concentrates on Koran's method in introducing models and gender roles in the Koran. Thus, the paper tries to answer these basic questions:

How Koran introduces models?

Is gender a criterion for being a model of humanity in the Koran?

What are the Koranic criteria for exemplary women?

The research method used in this article is content analysis and Koranic verses related to modeling and exemplary persons being analyzed. In this regard valid Koran interpretations to complete and explain the findings have been referred. In the first step, it is necessary to understand the educational method of modeling and then the holy Koran's method of introducing exemplary human beings.

Modeling as an Educational Method

Every human being has an inherent drive to follow and emulate a person whom he respects as especial and exemplary. This drive, which is rooted in the human soul, makes him/her desirous of achieving perfection. In fact, every human being has some aptitudes which are to be discovered and developed in his/her contacts which sometimes conflicts with his/her surroundings. But, for the formation and development of these aptitudes, it is necessary to have examples or people to whom the person can refer as living embodiments of his/her ideals. All human beings consciously or unconsciously follow the examples that they have had in their surroundings. They look up to the intended image until they manage to find their own way of life. But the choice of the example itself is influenced by the person's basic beliefs, viewpoints, values, and also by the depth of his/her understanding. Thus, one of the best educational methods is a careful introduction of exemplary characters that are likely to be respected and emulated. This method, being highly effective, is used by all social and cultural institutions, such as mass media, magazines, newspapers, television, radio and films. In fact, it has been used as the main way of transmitting cultural beliefs from the western nations to the developing nations. For instance, a great number of athletes, artists, and movie celebrities are standing out as examples in every country.

Modeling Method in the Koran

The holy Koran also makes use of this method, but with its own principles and criteria. The term example has its own definition in the Koran. "Osveh" which means embodiment and example (Tabatabaee,1988, Vol. 16, p.451), is a person who is to be emulated in his/her virtues and attitudes. Since human beings are likely to make mistakes in their choice of example, the holy Koran emphasizes the necessity of following "Osveh Hassaneh" or the righteous example. God's Messengers are not the only examples in the Koran; their true followers are also explicitly put forward as "Osveh" (SûratMuhammad,4); the Koranic method is indirect introduction. First, it reminds human beings of the messengers, and then by repeated praise not only shows its approval of their behavior but also encourages all to follow them (Sûrat al-Alanbiya and Sûrat Sad). Finally, it creates the desire of becoming living examples of human perfection in the heart: speaking from the viewpoint of the believers,

it prays "Our Lord ... makes us a model to the god-fearing" (Sûrat al- Fûrqaan, 74).

In Tafsir Almizan (Almizan, An Exegesis of the Koran), the grand Ayatollah Tabatabaee states that "A prayer of all the believers is to be the model for the virtuous and the god-fearing" and that this is a plea asking God to provide us with the opportunity to outrun one another in achievement of good deeds and in bringing grace to ourselves and our people so that others who love virtue learn and follow our example"(Tabatabaee, Vol. 15, p. 353).

Examples, however, are not enough and may be misunderstood. Thus, the holy Koran clearly explains its criteria. For instance, where it speaks of the prophets, it enumerates their specific virtues, "And Ishmael, Idris, Dhulkifel-each was of the patient,"(Sûrat al-Alanbiya,85) and about Zacharia, John, and Zachariah' s wife " truly they vied with one another hastening to good works, and called upon us out of yearning and awe; and they were humble to us"(Sûrat al-Alanbiya, 90). The same process can be seen in the Sûratin which it speaks of Abraham and his followers as "Osveh". Immediately, the reader is reminded that the reason for this epithet is that they resisted the infidels and did not worship their gods (Sûrat al-Mumtahanah, 4-6).

But even this is not enough because human beings may take the wrong paths even if they are given clear criteria. They might make mistakes in discriminating the practical use of these virtues. Here, the only road to correct choice is the person's power of discrimination. Thus, the holy Koran demands that human beings think about everything and highly praises the wise ones (for instance, Sûrat Âl-i Imran, 190-195). It also explicitly asserts that human beings not follow the things about which they do not have any knowledge (Sûrat al-Isrâ, 36).Lack of precise exemplary criteria or lack of discrimination can lead to hero worship and idolatry.

Gender and Introduction of Examples in the Koran

The holy Koran employs two methods in presenting its desired virtues: simple enumerations of the virtues in general and, introducing exemplary characters.

A study of Koranic verses demonstrates that in both methods, men and women are equally important.

Men and women who have surrendered, Believing men and believing women, Obedient men and obedient women, Truthful men and truthful women, Enduring

men and enduring women, Humble men and humble women, Men and women who give in charity, Men who fast and women who fast, Men and women who guard their private parts, Men and women who remember God oft for them God has prepared forgiveness and a mighty wage. (Sûrat al-Azhâb, 35).

The same approach can be seen in the introduction of exemplary human beings, "Surely, there is virtue for you in following Abraham and his followers" (Sûrat al-Mu'minun,4); "you have had a God's example in God's messenger for whosoever hopes for God and the Last Day, and remembers God oft" (Sûrat al-Azhâb, 21); or

God has struck a similitude for the believers the wife of Pharaoh, when she said, 'My Lord, make me a house in Paradise. in thy presence. and deliver me from Pharaoh and his work, and do Thou deliver me from the people of the evildoers '. And Mary, Imran's daughter, who guarded her virginity, so We breathed into her of Our Spirit, and she confirmed the Words of her Lord and His Books, and become of the obedient (Sûrat al-Tahrim, 11-12).

It is clear that gender is of no importance in any of these. Man and woman can both develop the desired virtues in themselves and become exemplary; furthermore, there is no restriction between the genders to reach that point. Exemplary women are introduced as models not only for women but also for all the faithful. The same is true for exemplary men; they are also examples for all who hope for God's grace on the Day of Judgment.

Hence, the choice and introduction of exemplary characters in the Koran is done without any attention to gender; this verse makes it very clear: "And whosoever does a righteous deed, be it male or female, believe, we shall assuredly give him/her to live a goodly life ..." (Sûrat al-Nahl, 97).

Exemplary Women in the Koran

All of the Koranic exemplary women, except one, belong to the nations of the past, whose history is common in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. These women can themselves be subdivided in to two opposite groups: the virtuous, who are highly praised; and the evil ones, who are denounced. The virtuous include Mary, Mary's mother, John's mother, Moses' mother, Pharaoh's wife, Abraham's wife, Job's wife, and the Queen of Sheba. Examples of the evil are: Noah's wife, the Egyptian governor's wife, Abu Lahab's wife (whose husband was an evil and sinful leading figure

of Mecca during the first years of Islam).

It should first be noted that the reports presented in the Koran are completely different from those presented by humans. Whatever is presented in the Koran is the specific representation of a universal and timeless principle (Javadi Amoli, 1996, pp. 280-281), and not just a factual representation of a particular event that holds its truth only for that particular case. Thus, each one of the virtues mentioned for exemplary women in the Koran is an illumination of the potentials and existential feature of all women.

Mary

The most prominent female figure in the Koran is Mary. She is the only woman whose name and pedigree is mentioned in the Koran. The other characters are mentioned by reference to their relations. Mary is mentioned in the Koran with reverence and is exalted beyond imagination:

1- Mary is the "Ayat" and the sign of God's presence in the world. "Ayat" is a sign, the existence of which can lead the mind to an understanding of God and his grandeur (Sûrat al-Alanbiya, 91/ Sûrat al-Mu'minun,50).

2- Mary is one of the elects. In the Sûrat Âl-e Imran, God speaks of Imran's family as one of the elect families, "God chose Adam and Noah and The House of Abraham and The House of Imran above all beings..."(Sûrat Âl-e Imran, 33).

3- Mary is the perfect example God uses to reject the idea of gender as a criterion of human worthiness. During her pregnancy, Mary's mother vowed her baby in dedication of The Lord. But when the baby was born and she realized it was a girl, she did not know what to do. The holy Koran says, "The boy she thought of could never be equal to the girl" (Sûrat Âl-e Imran, 36). The verse emphasizes on the worthiness and the priority of this particular girl over any boy; rejecting gender as a criterion of worthiness.

4- According to Imam Sadegh's saying of the holy Messenger, Mary has the spiritual status of a prophet. It is stated in religious texts that a prophet can see the heavenly angel in person and hear him present the words of God (Tabatabaee, 1988, Vol. 14, P. 60). And according to the Koran, Mary saw the heavenly angel as a man speaking to her and telling her of God's will that "she will have a child"(Sûrat Âl-i Imran and Sûrat Maryam). This is the highest spiritual status a human being

can achieve. Nevertheless, Mary was not responsible for delivering the message of God to her people; the reason for this will be discussed later.

5- Mary is one of the truthful (Sûrat al- Mâ'idah, 75 and Sûrat al-Tahrim, 11). The truthful are those who alongside with the prophets, the righteous, and the martyrs make the leading group of the pious (Sûrat al-Nisâ', 64).

6- Mary is the embodiment of humanity and a symbol of faith, "God has struck a similitude for the believers... Mary, Imran's daughter, who guarded her virginity, so we breathed into her of our spirit, and she confirmed the words of her Lord and His Books, and become one of the obedient" (Sûrat al-Tahrim,11,12).

7- God granted Mary with all His blessings in the various stages of life: when she lived in the temple (Sûrat Âl-e Imran, 37); when she was pregnant and during the delivery, He grew fresh date and made a stream for her to brighten her eyes(Sûrat Maryam, 26);then when she was taking care of Jesus, he gave her a peaceful place and refreshing water(Sûrat al-Mu'minun, 50).

It is very obvious that Mary has a high status in the Koran. The Koranic view of Mary and her potentials reflect "the potentials and the existential possibilities of women", which, as in the case of Mary, are to be achieved with perseverance and devotion. True, Mary was a member of an elect family. But a simple comparison between Mary and Noah's son demonstrates that being a member of a pious family is not sufficient for spiritual growth and salvation. Theholy Koran's descriptions about Mary and the terms it uses to describe her character prove that God appreciates the efforts of women to achieve perfection.

A Study of Required Criteria and Virtues

Verses 10 -12 ofSûrat al-Tahrim contain some important remarks about this matter:

God has struck a similitude for the unbelievers the wife of Noah, and the wife of Lot; for they were under two of our righteous (worshippers), but they betrayed them, so they availed them nothing whatsoever against God; so it was said, enter, you two, the fire with those who enter. God has struck a similitude for the believers the wife of Pharaoh, when she said, My Lord, make me a house in Paradise, in Thy presence, and deliver me from Pharaoh and his work, and do Thou deliver me from the people of the evildoers. And Mary, Imran's daughter, who guarded her virginity, so We breathed into her of Our spirit, and she confirmed the words of her Lord and

His Books, and became one of the obedient.

The following can be concluded from these verses:

1- Since men and women are introduced side by side as symbols of virtue and faith or impiety and sin, being a man is not a pre-requisite of being exemplary² .

2-A comparison between the two examples of impiety and those of virtue demonstrates that each example is contrary in a specific attitude to a counterpart on the opposite group. Noah's impious wife who lived with God's prophet and provided the ground for the education of Noah's impious son is juxtaposed with Pharaoh's pious wife who lived with a man who claimed of being a god (Sûrat al-Nâziât,20) and provided the ground for the growth and education of a prophet, Moses. Both characters are mentioned first in their respective group. Then Lot's wife is juxtaposed with Mary. Both are second in their respective groups. Mary is the embodiment of chastity and piety while Lot's wife provides the ground for the vilest kind of corruption and sin (Sûrat Hûd, 81).

After pregnancy, Mary managed to follow her virtuous path in spite of all the slandering remarks which surrounded her; on the other hand, Lot's wife chose to be with the corrupt, though she belonged to a pious family. Furthermore, Mary was chaste though she was single, but Lot's wife was corrupt though she was married.

3- The holy Koran demands two essential virtues in these verses: standing against oppression and leading a pious life. These two are the opposites of two essential vices; standing against the truth and moral corruption. Since standing against oppression demands involvement in socio-political activities, it is essential that all virtuous men and women be directly involved in these matters.

4- Another important point inferred from these verses is the emphasis on human's free will and independence in making decisions. The holy Koran provides various examples of some women who managed to resist the temptations and pressures of their surroundings and make wise choices. Considering the fact that women have always been under greater pressures than men, it has been a com-

2- What must be mentioned here is the influence of presuppositions in interpreting the verses; whereas Koran notifies "God has struck a similitude for the believers"(Sûrat al-Tahrim, 10 -12), you read in Harun Yahya (2010) after these verses: "we explore Mary's character, whom Allah raised above all other women, and thereby define the "ideal Muslim woman's character". (PP.12& 237).Why is the word "believers" defined as" women" and not all of believers (both men and women)?

mon misconception that women are passive and submissive to the conventions and pressures. But the Koran demonstrates that women can choose freely and their fates are not determined by their milieu.

Women as Governing Model in the Koran

Another position assigned to women by the Koran is the governmental position. The Queen of Sheeba is the monarch of a country called Sheeba, and a contemporary of the great prophet Solomon. The Prophet called her and her people to the worship of God and she ultimately converted to the true religion of the time. The holy Koran speaks of her power and the vastness of her domain (Sûrat al-Naml, 23); she had all that is needed for a great governor, that is, resolution, providence, strong will, dignity, treasure, and a powerful army (Tabatabaee, 1988, Vol. 14, P. 60). According to the Koran, her method of ruling was different from men. The terms she uses to refer to Solomon's letter are reverential, "A letter honorable has been cast unto me" (Sûrat al-Naml, 2). Then after perusing the letter, she consults her courtiers (all men). But in spite of the courtiers' desire to wage a war against Solomon, she rejects war, which causes destruction and misery. Thus, she chooses a strategy of gradual encounter and makes peace with Solomon, especially because she realizes his army is much stronger than hers. "But she also manages to keep her Queenly dignity in facing Solomon" (Ibid, Vol. 15, P. 550). Then, when she discovers the truth about Solomon's call, she readily acknowledges his rightful position and does not conceal her belief behind the mask of arrogance and selfishness. Nevertheless, she never acts as an impotent and cowardly monarch.

She never says I surrendered to Solomon or believed in him, but speaks with self-esteem "I surrender with Solomon to God, ...". God reminds us of the sublime and profound nature of her attitude (Sûrat al-Naml, 23-44 & Javadi Amoli, 1996, P. 286).

The image of a woman's rule in the Koran differs greatly from those of men. She is the only monarch who surrenders to the words of God; and does not wage war against His prophet. She is the only ruler mentioned in the Koran who prefers peace to war and has the courage to sacrifice her royal arrogance to truth.

Women and Moral Integrity in the Koran

Chastity is a virtue of great importance in the Koran. Some of the characters introduced in this regard are Mary, Joseph (Yusuf), the Egyptian governor's wife and her friends.

Mary and Joseph are the embodiments of chastity because they were both put in intimidating tests and were able to come out victorious and pure. But there is an essential difference between them. Joseph managed to preserve his chastity. When the women desired him, he did not even think of committing the sin (Sûrat Yûsuf, 24). But this self-control and preservation did not go beyond Joseph; however, in Mary's case, it was different. When the angel told her "I am but a messenger come from thy Lord, to give thee a boy most pure"(Sûrat Maryam, 19), Mary responded "I take refuge in the All-merciful from thee! If thou fearest God..."(Sûrat Maryam, 20).

According to the grand Ayatollah Javadi Amoli, this is an act of "calling to good deeds and forbidding evil deeds". In other words, it means if you are pious, avoid the deed. The words are of instructive value. Mary not only takes refuge from the sin in the hands of God, but also warns the man against sinning by reminding him of God. Thus Mary's spiritual influence goes beyond her own self and affects the other person (Javadi Amoli,1996, P. 127).

To clarify the argument, it is useful to refer to "Sûrat Yûsuf ", in which the attitudes of Joseph, the Egyptian governor's wife, and her friends are represented. Though married, this impious woman falls in love with the young servant, Joseph, whom her husband calls 'my son'. She tries to trap and seduce him, but when her plot fails and her secret is revealed, she takes revenge by distorting the truth and pretending that he had tried to seduce her. Thus, Joseph is sent to prison by her machination. The fact that the holy Koran gives the example from among women but not men, reflects the importance of women's attitude in such conditions. Furthermore, the holy Koran uses the phrase "great cunning" while it describes the attitudes of the woman and her friends who tried to seduce Joseph and then later in revenge introduced him as the culprit (Sûrat Yûsuf, 27-28).

In fact, a close study of Joseph's story in the Koran (Sûrat Yûsuf) reveals cunning as one of the main themes. Joseph's brothers deceive their father and try to liquidate Joseph (verses4-18). Joseph conceals the Kingly goblet in his brother's saddlebag and accuses him of theft (verses 70-76). The holy Koran states that God

taught Joseph the use of this cunning (verse 76). When the Egyptian governor's wife learns that her friends criticize her for falling in love with Joseph, she invites all and gives each of them a fruit and a knife and then displays the beauty of Joseph to this dazzled group to watch him cut their hands instead of the fruits (verse 31).

Among all these cunning or hidden plots, however, only the cunning of the women is called "great cunning". The reason is the destructive effects of such deceptions in misleading others. It also reflects the power of women in attracting men.

Considering the fact that Mary is one step ahead of Joseph in moral integrity and that women are given the power to attract men, and thus are capable of "great cunning", we can conclude that their role in preserving the moral integrity of the society is more important than that of men.

This, however, does not mean that men have no responsibility in this regard. Joseph is introduced in the Koran as the model of male chastity. Although single, attractive, and chased by numerous women, he controls his desires and chooses imprisonment over moral corruption. It is narrated by God's holy Messenger Prophet Mohammad that Joseph is the criterion of chastity for men, and Mary is the criterion for women on the Day of Judgment (Horre Amoli, Mohammad Hossein, 1983. Vol. 14, PP 2-3).

Prophecy and Gender in the Koran

In the section of this article in which the possibility of receiving revelations was discussed, it was emphasized that according to the Koran, Mary was a prophet and received revelations. But Mary is not the only woman having communication with the supernatural. Moses' mother is introduced in the Koran as receiving revelations (Sûrat Jâ Ha,38) and Abraham's wife as speaking with the angels(Sûrat Hûd, 73). Thus, the sublime status of being a prophet and receiving revelations does not belong just to men; however, a question is likely to be raised here: Why were all the prophets, who had the duty of delivering God's message to humankind, chosen from men, and no woman was given the responsibility of announcing the revelations?

The answer lies in the historical status of women in human societies. Even now, it is very difficult for patriarchal societies to accept the leadership or management of women. Hence, how can it be expected that in the past millenniums, a woman

be acknowledged as the religious and intellectual leader of people?

Koran's Explanation of Women's Roles in Life

The features and characteristics studied up to here are related to the essential identity of human beings as men and women. Now it is time to pay attention to the roles of women in life. The holy Koran assigns numerous roles to women by discussing some exemplary characters whose attitudes toward their lives and fulfilling their duties are either praised or highly reproached. Among such roles, the most important ones are the roles assigned to women as mothers and as wives.

As wives, such women as Imran's wife, Zachariah's wife, Abraham's wife (Sareh), and his other wife(Hajar), and Job's wife are referred to in the Koran. Two basic groups of virtues are praised in these women: first, they are praised as pious worshipers, performers of good deeds, and also for some similar personal virtues; and then they are praised for being perfect companions of their husbands in the way of God. It should be noted that mere accompaniment and obedience are not considered praise worthy. These are valuable only when they are done for the sake of God and for His cause only. Pharaoh's wife is praised for disobeying her oppressive husband; Noah's Wife and Lot's wife are reproached for being disobedient toward their pious husbands; and Abo Lahab's wife is reproached for being obedient and helping her evil husband(Sûrat Âl-e Imran, 34-36; Sûrat al-Alanbiya, 89-90; Sûrat Hûd, 69-73, Sûrat Ibrâhîm, 37; Sûrat Şâd, 41- 44, Sûrat al-Masad, 4-5).

As mothers, the holy Koran gives the examples of such women as Mary (Jesus' mother), Mary's mother, Moses' mother, and also Pharaoh's wife (Asiya) who saved, protected, and educated Moses. Mary's motherhood is from the beginning affected by suffering and pressure, but she manages to face them bravely and bring up and educate Jesus perfectly (Sûrat Maryam, 22-33). Mary's mother vowed the baby in her womb in dedication to God, and after she had been born, asked God to protect her and her children (Sûrat Âl-e Imran, 34-36).

Moses' mother, with mixed emotions of fear for her son's life and also trust in God, put her son in the Nile, and God returned her son to her bosom to make her eyes bright with happiness(Sûrat Tâ Ha, 36-40). Pharaoh's wife dissuaded her husband from killing Moses, performed all the motherly duties for Moses, and finally became his follower and sacrificed her life for her faith (Sûrat al-Qaşaş, 7-9; and-

Sûrat al-Tahrim, 11-12).

There is no direct reference to a woman as a bad mother in the holy Koran. Even when women such as Noah's and Lot's wives are criticized, it is because of their lack of faith and immoral behavior, not the influence they had on their children. Various examples in the holy Koran indicate that children's virtues or vices are not necessarily attributed to their parents (Sûrat Hûd, 81).

Conclusion

Studying the Koran revealed some points about the status of women in Islam that could reform wrong presuppositions and current misunderstandings in this issue. The Koran's method to present models is noticeable and innovative; Koran introduces certain criteria and reasons to recognize models, not just introducing certain persons. Yet, the holy Koran does not consider gender as a criterion to introduce the models and on the contrary, clearly notifies two women as the model for all believers. In other words, the required virtues and rejected vices in the Koran are same for both women and men; however, the Koran emphasizes that in preserving the moral integrity of the society, the women's role is more important than that of men because of their power in attracting men. And finally, in the Koran, women do not have a subordinated status compared to men.

"O mankind! Lo: We have created you male and female, and have made you nations and tribes that ye may know one another. Lo! The noblest of you, in the sight of Allah, is the best in conduct. Lo! Allah is knower, Aware" (Sûrat al-, Hujurât, 13).

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