

Nature of Society: Homogeneity or Heterogeneity?

An answer to this problem, too, as indicated earlier, is essential for every school of thought because only a discussion of this problem can throw light on an important issue whether all human societies can follow one and the same ideology, or if there must be a multiplicity of ideologies based upon various types of societies i.e. should each nation, community, civilization, and culture necessarily possess a particular ideology?

Ideology means the sum total of the general schemes and means which can lead a society towards the attainment of perfection and its summum bonum (the highest good). We also know that every species calls for specific qualities, conditions, and capacities; that which represents the 'highest good' in the case of a horse is not identical with that of a sheep or a man.

Hence, if all societies assuming their objective existence—should share the same essence and nature, they could also, possibly, share a single ideology. Their mutual differences being like those among members of the same species, any living ideology can be applied to them, allowing within its framework adjustments for individual difference according to the varying aptitudes of its members. But if societies have different natures and essences, they naturally call for different programmes, plans, ideals, and varying *summum bonum* particular to each. In this case, one single ideology cannot be applied to all of them.

A similar problem applies to the changes and mutations of societies over long periods of time. Do societies change their nature and essence in the course of changes and mutations, in the same way as species are transformed in the process of evolution? Does such a process of transformation occur on the level of societies? Or if the social changes are like changes in the circumstance of an individual of a certain species, whose nature and generic characteristics are preserved in the midst of all changes and transitions?

The first issue is related to sociology, whereas the second one is connected with history. We shall discuss the first problem at present and postpone the discussion of the second until we take into account

the nature of history.

Can sociological studies reveal whether or not there are some common characteristics among various societies? Are the differences among them only secondary and superficial, resulting from factors extraneous to the essence and nature of society, which itself remains unchanged? Or is it true that human societies are basically different in essence and nature, and even if supposedly similar from the point of view of external conditions, they function in intrinsically different ways? These alternative views are suggested by philosophy in its effort to disentangle obscurities surrounding the formal unity or plurality of things.

There is a shorter route also, and that is man himself. It is an established fact about man that Homo sapiens are the only species that has not shown any biological mutation from the very beginning of its emergence. Some thinkers say that as the process of evolution of living organisms culminated in the emergence of human being, nature altered its course and diverted the movement of evolution from the biological to the social course, and from the process of physiological evolution to that of spiritual and intellectual development.

In an earlier chapter, while discussing the question "Is man gregarious?" we came to the conclusion that man who is a single species is ordained by nature itself to be gregarious and sociable. That is man's intrinsic and inherent gregariousness that manifests itself in the form of society and the collective spirit, is derived from the essential nature of the human species. Man has social inclinations because through them he can attain the kind of perfection of which he is capable.

His gregarious propensity secures for him the ground for the collective spirit, which is itself a means to attain the end self perfection. Accordingly, it is human nature itself that determines the course taken by the collective spirit. In other words, the collective spirit serves human nature. As long as man exists, human nature would carry on its activity, supporting and encouraging his social spirit. The collective spirit is derived, therefore, from the individual spirit, which in turn is effused from human nature. Man is a single species, so human societies, also, have the same nature, substance, and essence.

However, as in case of individual, who can deviate from the course of nature and is occasionally even dehumanized, a society may also be diverted from its natural course and be dehumanized. The variety in societies is quite similar to diversity in individual morals, which are, in any case, not outside the sphere of human nature. Thus, societies, civilizations, cultures, and, finally, social spirits that govern societies, in spite of the differences in characters and forms, have ultimately a human character and not a non-human nature.

If we agree? With the fourth theory about the synthesis of society, and consider individual as only passive, receptive matter, an empty container without any content, it would be tantamount to a negation of the human nature. We may propound a hypothesis concerning diversity of nature and essence among societies, but this point of view in the form of Durkheimian theory is not at all acceptable; because it

leaves the very fundamental question unanswered.

If the origin of the collective or social spirit does not lie inside individuals, and if it does not spring from the natural and biological aspect of human beings, then where does it come from? Does the social spirit come from absolute nothingness? Is it sufficient for the explanation of the social spirit to say that society has existed as long as man has existed?

In addition to this, Durkheim believes that social phenomena such as religion, morality, crafts, art etc. are the products of its social spirit, which have been, are and would remain the expressions of the social spirit, and thus have 'temporal durability' and 'spatial extensibility.' This itself is a proof that Durkheim implicitly believes that all societies have a singular essence and nature, which manifests itself in the social spirit.

The teachings of Islam emphasize absolute unity of religion, and consider difference in religious codes and traditions as secondary, and not essential and primary. We also know that religion is nothing except a programme for perfection of the individual and society. It also reveals that foundation of these teachings have been laid upon an assumption of the unity of societies. If there were various 'species' of societies, then the ends of perfection and their respective means would have been also diverse, necessitating a diversity and plurality of religions.

The Qur'an repeatedly stresses that there is not more than one single faith throughout the world. There has been one religion in all regions, in all societies and at all times. According to the Qur'an, religions—in the plural form—have had no existence; only "Religion" (in its singular form) has existed. All prophets preached and taught the same faith, the same path, and the same purpose:

شَرَعَ لَكُمْ مِنَ الدِّينِ مَا وَصَّىٰ بِهِ نُوحًا وَالَّذِي أَوْحَيْنَا إِلَيْكَ وَمَا وَصَّيْنَا بِهِ إِبْرَاهِيمَ
وَمُوسَىٰ وَعِيسَىٰ ۚ أَنْ أَقِيمُوا الدِّينَ وَلَا تَتَفَرَّقُوا فِيهِ ۚ

“He has ordained for you the religion that He charged Noah with, and that we have revealed to thee, and that we charged Abraham with, Moses and Jesus, (saying), establish the religion and be not divided therein.....” (42: 13)

The verses of the Qur'an which prove that the faith remains the same at all times, in all regions, and in the scriptures of all true prophets of God, are numerous. The difference lies only in certain rules and ordinances, according to the relative stages of development or backwardness of societies. The logic that there is essentially no more than one religion is based on the outlook about man and society that mankind is one and a single species and those men are not different in their human essence. In the same way, human society, as an objective entity, represents a single species, not a plurality of kinds.

Source URL:

<https://www.al-islam.org/al-tawhid/vol1-n3/sociology-quran-part-i-ayatullah-murtadha-mutahhari/nature-society-homogeneity-or>