# Proximity amongst Islamic Schools of Thought: A necessity for Muslims in the Contemporary Era

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**Message of Thaqalayn** Vol. 10, n. 3, Autumn 2009

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**Publisher(s):**

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***"Indeed this community of yours is one community, and I am your Lord. So worship Me."*** (***21:92***)

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A very important and immediate need of the Muslim world is to achieve proximity among different schools of thought in Islam. It is necessary for all Muslims to unite by focussing on the true teachings and values of Islam based on the Holy Qur'an, the Prophet's Sunnah, and the enlightening teachings of the religious leaders.

In October 2007 the Islamic Centre of England had organised a conference to fulfil its momentous Islamic duty by following on the footsteps of reformist thinkers and on the footsteps of the Imam Khomeini who emphasised Islamic unity and proximity among Islamic schools of thought from the beginning of Islamic movement and up to the lastn moment of his fruitful life, and following the wise guidance of the leader of Islamic Revolution, His Eminence Grand Ayatollah Khamenei, who named the Persian calendar year (21 March 2007 to 20 March 2008) as the Year of Islamic Cohesion.

This paper contains material presented at the conference in the hope that this activity can be revived. It is only by achieving unity that we can move forward and fulfill our responsibility to establish a just society.

# Necessity for Achieving Proximity

**First Point:** From the nineteenth century onwards, there existed in the Muslim world two main attitudes amongst Muslim scholars with regards to the West:

1. A positive attitude that those who were fond of the scientific developments and advances pursued. They described the way of progression and success to be in following the Western political, social and cultural philosophies and theories.

2. A non-positive attitude which stressed going back to Islam's glorious past and guarding Islamic identity by using all aspects of Islam. This was a reaction to the decline of Muslims and losing their dignity and grandeur.

We can see that after the Second World War, the first approach permeated the Muslim world, and many Muslim elites and politicians followed the West and organised their social, political and cultural lives based on the Western approach.

During the final two decades of the twentieth century, the attitude of going back to the Islamic identity and its revival strengthened and led to extensive movements. A wave of revival spread across the Muslim world from East Asia to North Africa and particularly with the victory of the Islamic Revolution in Iran, this wave impressed itself upon, and bewildered, many in the world, especially those in the West.

**Second Point:** From the early sixteenth century, Western civilisation surpassed other civilisations and categorised all the other societies from primitive to advanced civilisations and in this category considered itself to be the pinnacle of civilization. As time passed, Western civilisation, especially the liberal democracies in the West, not only humiliated others but also needed a foreign state to show their pre-eminence and prominence.

Thus, after World War II, the Cold War emerged between the Eastern and Western blocs. In that final decade of the twentieth century after the collapse of the Soviet Union, this conflict ended as well. But still the West needed an imaginary foreign enemy and to present this imaginary enemy as a threat to its existence to keep its internal vigour and the aim of achieving sovereignty over the whole world, so it can carry out its planned policies in order to dominate the world.

Thus, on the basis of this proposition, the theory of "Clash of Civilisations" was devised at the dawn of the twenty first century. After the collapse of Soviet Union the German chancellor, the French prime minister and the NATO chairman in 1995 concurred that "Islamic Fundamentalism" threatens the West the same way communism does. And also, the former American president officially announced before the U.S. Congress that we should focus on "Islamic Fundamentalism" instead of the Soviet Union.

In order to present this theory as a viable threat, the West needed to convince the people all over the world and particularly the Westerners that Islam is not only a threat to the West but also a great threat to

humanity.

It is no secret that the largest and most powerful multi-media sources including news agencies, television stations, newspapers and magazines and even blockbuster movies and video and computer games are at the disposal of the West. Thus, after the West took the decision that the communism threat is now over but the new threat of Islam has emerged, the media launched the negative publicities and propagandas.

To this end, the Western multi-media companies began to portray Islam as a violent religion full of terror and bloodshed. They demonstrated to the public that Islam is a very large threat to the West.

**Third Point:** To prove the threat of Islam to the West, some politicians pursued another policy which was to cast divisions and fractions between Muslims, by amplifying the theological, jurisprudential and historical differences amongst Muslims and inciting their religious emotions against one another. They wanted to achieve a number of aims. The most important of those being:

1. By causing religious conflict and bloodshed between the different sects of Islam, they wanted to show the West how the Muslims have blind prejudices and are illogical and their only logic is violence.

2. To show the West if this is how Muslims treat each other imagine how they are going to treat foreigners!

3. To put an end to the revival of Muslims by these religious divisions and sectarian conflicts, and to prevent Muslims from achieving their main goal of the revival of Islam and the Islamic identity.

## Proximity among Different Schools of Thought

Now after this introduction, one has to ask the following questions:

Is it not time for the intellectuals, theoreticians and the scholars of the Muslim world, either Shi'a or Sunnis, to come together and work towards bringing hearts and minds of Muslims across the world closer, by benefiting from the assets available in Islam, the Qur'an and the Prophet's (S) tradition and example, and prove to the world and particularly to the West that Islam is a religion of justice, peace, brotherhood, equality and humanity and that its prophet is the prophet of compassion and benevolence?

Is it not time to prove to the world that Islam is not the religion of violence and conflict but the most formidable opposition to terror and violence?

Is it not time to come together with empathy, understanding and compassion and tell the world the statement by French intellectual, Boulian Wielers who has said: "Mohammed's religion is so intellectual that in order to convey its message, you need not any force or wrath, you just need to put its principles across to people and they would join it. The principle of Mohammed's (S) religion is so in line with logic

and common sense that in a short period of time of less than fifty years it filled the hearts of half the population of the world."

Is it not time to come together with empathy, understanding and compassion and prove that Islam is not a threat for the West or indeed for anyone else in the world? And that Islam does not want to go to war with anyone and that Muslims do not have any wish to expand their territories?

And is it not time to prove to the world that the message of Islam is peace, justice and humanity?

Is it not time to come together with empathy and understanding to find a solution for the sectarian and religious conflicts that are built by foreign secret agents or people who are unknowingly serving their ends and stop the bloodshed of innocent Muslims every day?

Is it not time to come together with empathy, understanding and compassion, to interact with young Muslim girls and boys who live in the world of information explosion to respond to the many innuendoes which are raised by different programmes on television and the internet about Islam with finesse and accuracy, and with the consideration of the time we live in, so that we can prevent them from being in bewilderment and confusion and God forbid from going astray, and to equip them with the genuine teachings of Islam?

## Unity of God and Unity of Cause, the Most Important Axis of Proximity

But a question always emerges whenever there is a discussion of proximity among Islamic schools of thought. The question is: How and with what discourse can we invite the Muslim thinkers as well as the followers of various denominations of Sunni and Shi'a sects to proximity and ask them to engage in intellectual give and take?

In brief, we must realise that the most important principles in proximity discourse are the unity of God and the unity of cause, because Islam is the religion of Tawhid and Tawhid is, in turn, the spirit of Islam. Tawhid is not only one of the principles of our belief, but also the distillation of beliefs, teachings, and individual and social programs of Islam.

Since Tawhid is the main pillar of Islam and is rooted in the innate nature and foundation of all human beings, it can help the Muslims, regardless of their race, language, nationality and gender, achieve not only the goal of proximity but also the goal of unity. Hence, Islam commands Muslims to establish the United Worldwide Muslim Community (ummah wāhidah) based on the Oneness of God so that under the effulgent rays of Tawhid they can achieve wide-ranging physical and spiritual perfection which is what God Almighty wants.

The Prophet of Islam indeed spared no effort during the difficult period of his prophethood to establish

the United Community (ummah wāhidah) and to bring about the unity and brotherhood of Muslims. He diligently worked towards leading the Muslims away from disunity and waged a struggle against those who were seeking to sow the seeds of discord. He was able to fashion Muslim community into an ummah wāhidah, much to the disbelief of the world.

Undoubtedly the unity of cause is among the biggest and most important goals of Islam. Therefore, after Prophet Muhammad (S), the great men of religion, the eminent men of integrity, and Muslim thinkers have emphasised Islamic unity, have warned Muslims against disunity and have reminded Muslims of the ominous consequences of the division and discord.

## Proximity Began from the Time of Prophet (S)

The invitation to proximity and Islamic unity and avoiding discord and disunity has not been started by such luminaries as Shaykh al- Maraghi, Shaykh Mustafa ʻAbdur-Razzaq, Shaykh Abdul-Majid Salim, Shaykh Mahmoud Shaltout, Shaykh Tantawi, Ayatollah Boroujerdi, Shaykh Muhammad Husayn Kashif al-Ghita, Sayyid Abdul-Hussayn Sharaf al-Din, Imam Khomeini and Imam Khamenei, as well as other Sunni and Shiʻa thinkers whose names cannot all be mentioned here. This invitation, indeed, began when God Almighty revealed the following verses to His Prophet:

***"Indeed this community of yours is one community, and I am your Lord. So worship Me."*** (***21:92***)

***"The faithful are indeed brothers."*** (***49:10***)

***"Hold fast, all together, to Allah's cord, and do not be divided."*** (***3:103***)

***"and do not be like those who were divided*** [***into sects***] ***and started discord."*** (***3:105***)

***"and do not be among the polytheists of those who split up their religion and became sects."*** (***30:31*** **&** ***32***)

***"and do not dispute, or you will lose heart and your power will be gone"*** (***8:46***)

Thus, it becomes clear that the foundation of proximity was in fact established from that time, a foundation based on the unity of God Himself. But since the beginning of the twentieth century the religious leaders, the reformist thinkers and conscious scholars have witnessed that the Muslim Ummah has become divided due to the ignorance of the people and the selfishness and worldly desires of some leaders and rulers who had control over vast sections of the Muslim lands. They noticed that Muslims had lost their past dignity, majesty and grandeur, and that the Islamic culture, ideology and identity of the Muslims have been plundered by the enemies of Islam and the colonialists.

Inspired by the teachings of the Qur'an and the tradition of the Prophet (S), these great men promoted the proximity among Islamic schools of thought so that they could bring about awareness among the

Muslims all over the world, compensate for past mistakes and regain their past majesty and grandeur in the form of the Worldwide Islamic Community.

They rightly believed in the fact that the differences in opinions and jurisprudential, theological and historical disputes were only accidents, and not part of the essence of Islam, and hence they should not prevent Muslims from getting closer to each other in their thinking, their hearts and their aspirations. They believed that the proximity could be achieved by setting aside dogmatic thoughts, blind imitation and ignorant prejudice and by engaging in debate, dialogue, writing, speaking and enlightening one another about the truth. They believed that through piety, cooperation and good deeds, the Islamic Ummah could be guided toward establishing united worldwide Muslim Nation.

They believed that those whose disputes go back to the essence of their faith, for instance the Catholics, Protestants and Orthodox Christians within the Christendom, are not only getting closer to each other, but also are going to become united and become one entity. At the same time they were wondering how the Muslims--who enjoy the unity in the essence of their religion, and who all worship one God and follow one Prophet and pray in the direction of one Qiblah, and circumambulate around one Ka'bah—cannot achieve proximity and cannot avoid separation and enmity.

They were asking the following questions: How can the followers of Islam not achieve unity despite the fact that Islam itself is a religion that is based on reason, understanding, wisdom, and brotherhood; a universal religion whose message is peace and justice and whose teachings are founded upon Oneness of God?

We believe that as long as Muslim thinkers and scholars have not gathered as elites and have not paved the way for the path of unity, the ultimate goal of establishing a united worldwide Muslim Nation will not be achieved. Therefore, one of the first requirements for achieving such a goal would be to create a context for dialogue and proximity. It is hoped that Muslim scholars and thinkers will engage in dialogue and debate about the proximity among Islamic schools of thought which is the most urgent need of the Islamic world today.

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