Types of Unity in the Quran and Fundamental Causes of Disunity

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Muhammad Wa'idh Zadeh Khurasani

Translated by
Salim S. Yusufali, Shaista K. Yusufali

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Authors(s):

Muhammad Wa'idh Zadeh Khurasani [1]

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Translator(s):

Salim S. Yusufali [3]
Shaista K. Yusufali [4]

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Types of Unity in the Qur'an and Fundamental Causes of Disunity

Ustadh Muhammad Wa'idh Zadeh Khurasani [1]

Translated by Salim S. Yusufali and Shaista K. Yusufali

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This article was translated from *Himase-ye Ittihad*, pages 51-59.

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Abstract

It is an obligatory duty on Muslims to strive for a single ummah, in the same way that they are obligated on the basis of tawhid to worship one God. A single, united ummah can only be actualized when the

whole group follows one political, social and ideological path, and falls under the umbrella of one law, one system of economics, etc.

Establishing such an ummah is a duty whose burden is shared by all Muslims. The fundamental causes of disunity are: siyasat (politics) of a perilous nature, political exploitation of madhhab (schools of jurisprudence, theology, or thought), and nationalism.

Keywords: Muslim unity, politics, Muslim sects, Islamic sectarianism, history of Islamic sects.

إِنَّ هَٰذِهِ أُمَّتُكُمْ أُمَّةً وَاحِدَةً وَأَنَا رَبُّكُمْ فَاعْبُدُونِ

Indeed this ummah (community) of yours is one community, and I am your Lord. So worship Me. 2

The great many followers of the Noble Messenger (S) throughout the world consider themselves not just as his followers but also as his devotees and lovers. It is hoped that the Muslim community can re-unite in light of the love they share for the Messenger of Allah. Just as the Messenger laid emphasis on unity before all things, we too must regard this matter with grave regard.

My discussion consists of an introduction and several points.

Introduction

Two lessons can be derived from the noble verse [quoted above]:

Firstly, the unity of the ummah is consignificant with tawhid, or in other words, unity [like tawhid] is one of the pillars of Islam.

It is a matter of regret that the issue of unity is spoken of as something that is merely advisable—a noble matter that ought to exist among Muslims and that they must exhort one another to adopt. In reality, however, the Qur'an highlights unity with the same emphasis as it highlights tawhid. So great is the stipulation of a united ummah, that the call for unity precedes the command to worship the One God:

إِنَّ هَٰذِهِ أُمَّتُكُمْ أُمَّةً وَاحِدَةً وَأَنَا رَبُّكُمْ فَاعْبُدُونِ

Indeed this ummah (community) of yours is one community, and I am your Lord. So worship Me. 3

[In this verse,] worship of the One God is predicated on the unity of the ummah and the unity of the Lord. Together, these two form the pillars for the monotheistic (tawhidi) worship of God.

The second lesson learnt from this verse is regarding the unity of the ummah itself. The phrase (ummah wahidah) is the answer to the question, “What is unity?” It can be ascertained that the Islamic community in its path for unity must reach a stage where it is able to form one ummah. It is an obligatory duty, therefore, on Muslims to strive for a single ummah, in the same way that they are obligated on the basis of tawhid to worship one God.

The words ummah and imamah (leadership) stem from the same root. Consequently, an ummah is a group that follows the same leader (imam), objective, and book. The Qur’an even uses the word imam for the Torah[4].

A united ummah can only be actualized when the whole group follows one political, social and ideological path, and falls under the umbrella of one law, one system of economics, etc. As long as this is not true, there can be no realization of a single ummah. The distinguished reformer, ‘Allamah Shaykh Muhammad Husayn Kashif al-GhiÔa’ (may Allah be pleased with him) has captured well the afore-mentioned lesson we derived from the verse in one of his aphorisms:

بني الإسلام على كلمتين (أو على دعامتين)، كلمة التّوحيد و توحيد الكلمة

Islam has been instituted on two expressions (or two pillars): the expression of tawhid and the tawhid (unity) of the expression [or a single, united voice].

Truly, if there is no unity of expression there cannot exist any expression of tawhid [i.e. no expression of the creed of Islam]. Tawhid is more than worship; tawhid is the principle that there is only one Lord and one leader in the Islamic community:

... أَلَّا نَعْبُدَ إِلَّا اللَّهَ...

...that we will not take each other as lords besides Allah...[5]

Tawhid cannot prevail in an Islamic community where illegitimate rulers, kings, sultans, and tyrants have authority over the Muslims. Neither will “wa ana rabbukum” (I am your Lord) ring true for such a society nor will ummah wahidah (a single ummah) be realized. [Why not?] Because tyrants are always in battle with each other in order to take possession of more power. Each one desires to pull the community towards himself. As long as this is the status quo, a single ummah cannot be realized. Therefore, there is a necessary correlation between tawhid in its true meaning and a single ummah.

Types of Unity in the Qur’an

In addition to tawhid which is the foundation of all types of unity, there are several forms of unity that

appear in the Qur'an:

Unity of the ummah

إِنَّ هَٰذِهِ أُمَّتُكُمْ أُمَّةً وَاحِدَةً وَأَنَا رَبُّكُمْ فَاعْبُدُونِ

Indeed this ummah (community) of yours is one community, and I am your Lord. So worship Me. 6

Unity of all those who follow the heavenly books

قُلْ يَا أَهْلَ الْكِتَابِ تَعَالَوْا إِلَىٰ كَلِمَةٍ سَوَاءٍ بَيْنَنَا وَبَيْنَكُمْ أَلَّا نَعْبُدَ إِلَّا اللَّهَ وَلَا نُشْرِكَ بِهِ شَيْئًا

Say, 'O People of the Book! Come to a word common between us and you: that we will worship no one but Allah, and that we will not ascribe any partner to Him... 7

Unity of all religions

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 prescribed for you the religion which He had enjoined upon Noah and which We have [also] revealed to you, and which We had enjoined upon Abraham, Moses and Jesus, declaring, 'Maintain the religion, and do not be divided in it.'... 8

لَا نُفَرِّقُ بَيْنَ أَحَدٍ مِنْ رُسُلِهِ...

....[The apostle and the faithful declare:] 'We make no distinction between any of His apostles.'... 9

Unity of humanity

يَا أَيُّهَا النَّاسُ إِنَّا خَلَقْنَاكُمْ مِنْ ذَكَرٍ وَأُنْثَىٰ وَجَعَلْنَاكُمْ شُعُوبًا وَقَبَائِلَ لِتَعَارَفُوا

O mankind! Indeed We created you from a male and a female, and made you nations and tribes that you may identify yourselves with one another. 10

Perhaps it may be said that the sermon of the Messenger given in the early days after the Emigration encompasses all these forms: "O Mankind! Surely you have only one Lord and your father is one. Each one of you is from Adam, and Adam is made of clay. Indeed the noblest of you in the sight of Allah is the most God wary among you[11]. There is no preference for an Arab over a non-Arab except due to his taqwa (God wariness)."

Thus prior to examining the causes of discord, it is first necessary to believe that the unity of the ummah is a duty and an obligation on all of us. It is a duty whose burden is shared by all Muslims; only when each individual Muslim carries out his share can it be fulfilled. This obligation is not one of the wajibat-e-kifayi (collective obligations), so that if one individual carries it out, the burden is lifted from the rest.

Nor is it one of the wajibat-e-infiradi (one-time obligations) so that when it is carried out once then it need not be carried out again. Unity is a distinct reality that applies to all Muslims. The greater one's intellectual, political, and financial abilities are, the heavier this burden is. Clearly the burden on a scholar, a marja'-e-taqlid (legal authority capable of practical emulation), and a leader is very great, because when he fulfills his obligation his adherents will also follow suit.

Sadly there are many who are not aware of such a duty. It is crucial that each must take care not to disrupt the unity of the Islamic ummah through his speech, writings or actions.

The parable of Islamic unity is like that of a building where each individual brick plays a role in the fortification and protection of the building as a whole. Any action or transgression that is carried out against this unity is equivalent to removing one brick from the building that is Islamic unity, resulting in the eventual destruction of the entire structure.

Fundamental Causes of Disunity

Many [potential] causes for discord can be enumerated but for now we will limit ourselves to actual [current] obstacles to unity. These obstacles can be summarized into three main categories:

First Cause of Disunity: Politics

Islam must be freed from siyasat (politics) of a perilous nature. Approximately 35 years earlier in a meeting attended by a number of distinguished individuals, I commented "Islam must be freed of the evil of politics." One of the attendees replied: Do you too belong to the group which alleges the separation of religion and politics? I said: No, in this lies the very mistake.

We have two issues at hand here: firstly, religion (din) is the same thing as politics and politics is the same thing as religion. Since Islam includes a system of government, it necessarily comprises of politics as well. Those who due to alien influence claim that religion and politics must be separated are in fact stripping religion of the strength it gains by providing a system of government. The second type of politics to which I was referring, is the form of politics that from the first century of Islam and throughout

the history of Islam has obstructed the path to unity. Below is a mention of significant dynasties that have been in rivalry with one another:

1. Rivalry between Bani Umayyah, the family of ‘Ali (‘a), and the Khawarij

2. Rivalry between the Bani Umayyah and the Bani ‘Abbas

3. Rivalry between the Bani ‘Abbas and the family of the Prophet (S)

4. Rivalry between the Bani ‘Abbas and the Bani Umayyah (in Spain)

5. Rivalry between the Bani ‘Abbas and the Egyptian Fatimiyyads

6. Rivalry between Ayyubis and the Fatimiyyads

7. Rivalry between the Buyids (a Shi’ite maddhab) and the Seljuks (a Sunni maddhab)

8. Rivalry between the Ottoman caliphs and the Safavid sultans

It is naïve to imagine that these caliphates, dynasties, and powers played no role in the creation of disunity among the Muslims. Sadly most if not all of these regimes purposely misused madhhab (schools of jurisprudence, theology, or thought) to create dissention between the masses.

Islam must be freed from the perils of such unhealthy politics that have racked Islamic history for the last 10–12 centuries. Muslims all over the Islamic world, both in the West and the East, are still suffering the consequences of these unfortunate politics.

At this point it is appropriate to quote one of the leading players in the efforts to create unity within Islam, the late Shaykh ‘Abd al-Majid Salim, one of the foremost scholars of Al-Azhar, a teacher of Shaykh Shaltut, and a founder of dar al-taqrib bayn al-madhahib al-islamiyyah (Society for the Proximity between the Islamic sects).

This was narrated from Shaykh Muhammad Taqi Qummi, the director of Dar al-Tabligh: Shaykh ‘Abd al-Majid Salim once said in a meeting, “Madhahib [plural of madhhab] that have gained ground in Islamic countries have not done so by [convincing others with] reason and logical proof, but rather, they have spread and made progress due to political forces.”

This is a reality that only furthers the argument that the matter of politics is a lone factor [in the genesis of madhahib]. The unfortunate consequences of this form of politics are to be found in the Islamic countries and we must make attempts to remove them. To this end, it is first necessary to scrutinize each and every common practice and tradition among Muslims and seek out its origin so as to clarify the original source from which it stems. The traditions whose origins lie in politics need to be sifted out and only those which can be established with proof [from Islamic sources] ought to be practiced.

The late Sayyid Sharaf al-Din Jabal 'Àmili, another reformer of this century, has a beautiful saying regarding the matter at hand:

فرقتنا السّياسة و ستجمعنا السّياسة

That is, the form of deviant politics which is opposed to Islamic values has caused divisions amongst us; however, a humane and just Islamic political system will soon gather us around one another. Perhaps this great man had been divinely inspired with the knowledge that the Islamic Republic of Iran would soon come into existence and gather Islamic nations around each other.

Consequently, no amount of effort spent in speaking and writing is too great in countering the dire effects the policies of corrupt rulers of the past have had on the views, practices, traditions, and on what the Muslims love and hate. As an example, in Egypt it was common to hold celebrations on the day of 'Àshura'. It is not clear which government or political faction started this unacceptable and divisive practice. But I recall that newspapers narrated that one year, the late Shaykh Shaltut and his colleagues held mourning ceremonies on the day of 'Àshura' in al-Azhar commemorating Imam Husayn (a), in order to expunge that evil policy left over from an earlier era.

There are both [positive and negative] examples. The opposite has also held true in other places [where influential forces have promoted divisive practices].

Astonishingly, even now when the dire consequences of such mistaken politic maneuvering have become clear, there are those who insist on carrying on the erroneous practices of the past.

[Corrupt] rulers have consistently promoted their own unwise and anti-Islamic politics by resorting to madhhab and by means of court-scholars (darbari) and preachers of the sultans. In other words, corrupt scholars have been a part of the promotion of such political strategies. From this does the relationship between these forms of politics and madhahib become clear, forming our point of departure for the second cause of discord.

Second Cause of Disunity: Madhhab

In our discussion of madhhab as the second factor in disunity, we must first clarify the true meaning of madhhab and to what extent it can be a cause of discord.

Madhhab differs from religion (din). When we say the religion of Islam, our intention is those beliefs and rulings that are present in the Qur'an and the Sunnah that the Noble Messenger (S) propagated. Madhhab, however, is a path started among the Muslims as a way to bring clarity to religion. On the whole, we can speak of three categories of madhhab that correspond with three dimensions of Islam:

The dimension of beliefs and the formation of the theological madhahib of the Ash'ari, Mu'tazili, Shi'i, etc.

whose underpinnings lie in beliefs. Followers of a madhhab maintain the belief that the path to true religion is the path that they are traversing, and all agree that the path of madhhab differs from religion.

The practical and fiqhi (jurisprudential) dimension.

The dimension of akhlaq (ethics) and 'irfan (gnosis).

Usually when disagreement among madhahib is spoken of, the second dimension (jurisprudential differences) comes to mind. These sects correspond to the four mainstream and well-known Sunni madhahib and the two or three Shi'i madhahib, as well as those less-popular madhahib in both groups.

It is evident that in some instances the above madhahib are in alignment with their theological counterparts, and in some instances they differ. For example the Shi'i madhhab has independence in the dimensions of beliefs and jurisprudence, and each is a necessary corollary of the other. However this is not the case for the Sunni madhahib, where it is possible that someone who belongs to the Shafi'i madhhab in jurisprudence may belong to either the Mu'tazili or the Ash'ari theological madhhab.

Viewpoints regarding the genesis of madhahib

The different viewpoints about the genesis of these madhahib can be divided in two major stances:

The first stance is that of the Salafis, or those who maintain loyalty to the Pious Predecessors (salaf-e Salih) and believe that the genesis of madhahib in Islam is an innovation (bid'ah). The current leaders of this group are the Wahhabis. One of their leaders by the name of Shaykh Nasir al-Din Àlbani has written a book about innovations that exist even within the madhahib of the Ahl al-Sunnah. In this he declares any fatwa (legal opinion) that does not suit his own taste as an innovation.

They are of the belief that the Islam of today should be identical to the Islam of the time of the Prophet (s), the companions and the Pious Predecessors, when no madhhab, path, or differences had yet appeared. Anything that came to be after that time is an innovation.

The second group holds the belief that the development of madhahib is a positive event. However this group as well errs in that they typically have chosen madhhab in place of religion, asserting that anyone who opposes the roots and branches of the madhhab is in fact opposing the religion.

This second view is in direct opposition to the first. The first viewpoint states that no madhhab should exist since it is an innovation, whereas the second states that my madhhab is the scale by which religion is measured and whoever disagrees with my sect is in fact disagreeing with Islam.

Given the above, which one of these two opinions should we adopt? Which represents the truth?

We can not take the view that madhahib are contrary to the nature of Islam. The Qur'an says:

أَفَلَا يَتَدَبَّرُونَ الْقُرْآنَ

Do they not contemplate the Qur'an? 12***...***

and

فَلَوْلَا نَفَرَ مِنْ كُلِّ فِرْقَةٍ مِنْهُمْ طَائِفَةٌ لِيَتَفَقَّهُوا فِي الدِّينِ..

...Why should not there go forth a group from each of their sections to become learned in religion... 13

The Qur'an's primary goal is to call its readers to thought, comprehension (fahm), and fiqh (deep understanding). Is it not the case that in its general meaning, tafaqquh (becoming learned) in the dimensions of beliefs, practice, and akhlaq necessarily requires thought, deduction (istinbat), and ijtihad (intellectual effort to derive legal conclusions)?

Indeed it may be said Islam itself has laid the foundations of ijtihad and forming one's own opinion. Therefore Islam must allow for difference of opinion to a reasonable extent. This is because it is not possible for the Qur'an on one hand to command us towards tafaqquh in religion, and on the other hand for any matter that arises to declare, "Say this, and nothing else!"

Fortunately scholars of all the sects believe that in fundamental (Dharuri) issues there is no room for ijtihad and taqlid. However, such fundamentals can be and have been used as a basis for ijtihad in non-fundamental issues. It is important here to remind ourselves that issues in Islam belonging to all the three spheres fall within three categories.

One category consists of the fundamental issues, the same issues belonging to the spheres of jurisprudence, akhlaq, and beliefs that during the time of the Prophet and the Pious Predecessors existed in a general, summary form but at no point came under scrutiny or study. For example, never did the question arise, is the speech of God uncreated and eternal (qadim) or created and temporal (hadith)? Are the Divine Attributes separate from or identical with the Divine Essence? Such questions were not even posed. All that was discussed was that the One God has been described with those attributes that have been mentioned in the Qur'an.

However as the Islamic sciences advanced and such questions arose in the Islamic world, what ought to have been done? Is it correct to say that no discussion should have taken place at all?

The result of restricting such discussions is that all of Islamic heritage in all its spheres would be left aside. That would mean that the extensive fiqh (jurisprudence) of the madhahib should be erased, because in the earliest era of Islamic history there was no fiqh. There were only the Qur'an and the Sunnah. In the theological sphere as well, all the research of the different madhahib should be

abolished, because too came to exist anew. The same would be done in the sphere of akhlaq as well.

If the past scholars of the Islamic world had also considered every new thought and methodology to be an innovation, would it be expected for someone of the likes of Ghazzali to come about in the last part of the fifth century and produce books in all of the Islamic sciences such as fiqh, usul (principles of Islamic jurisprudence), theology, and akhlaq? Or would it have been possible for someone like Shaykh Tusi to appear in the same century?...Or would Ibn Taymiyyah and his student Ibn Qayyim, the founders of Salafi thought, have arisen in the 8th century? Didn't they make use of the knowledge of previous centuries in compiling and writing their own views?

The invalidity of such views is blatant. Islam itself has encouraged ijtihad, reflection, and contemplation [in verses containing]: a fala ta'qilun (do you not apply reason?) and a fala tatafakkarun (do you not reflect?), and so it must permit the people to think about different issues. Of course there are conditions on how to go about the process of deriving opinion that have been stipulated elsewhere. We must be aware of God as Omnipresent and All-Seeing when presenting our opinion.

Ijtihad must exist, and its existence necessitates differing paths and tendencies, all of which are mercy [from God]. Of course different madhahib should not be seized upon for political purposes, as has unfortunately been the case. Differences are necessary for reaching the truth, and until we have not arrived at this truth, differences will exist and are laudable. Only those sort of differences that exist even after the truth is made clear are reproachable:

أُوتُوهُ مِنْ بَعْدِ مَا جَاءَتْهُمُ الْبَيِّنَاتُ بَغْيًا بَيْنَهُمْ

...after the manifest proofs had come to them... 14.

Differences in and of themselves are not the cause of discord. There is no end to the amount of difference of opinion that can be found in the scientific world, in disciplines such as physics, chemistry, and medicine. Why then is difference of opinion in fiqh, kalam, and other Islamic sciences problematic? These types of differences should not be the cause of discord, hatred, and the shedding of blood! They only begin when political forces side with one opinion and promote it as part of advancing their own political strategy.

Third Cause of Disunity: Ethnicity and Nationality

Islam accepts nationalities and ethnicities to a reasonable, normal extent:

يَا أَيُّهَا النَّاسُ إِنَّا خَلَقْنَاكُمْ مِنْ ذَكَرٍ وَأُنْثَىٰ وَجَعَلْنَاكُمْ شُعُوبًا وَقَبَائِلَ لِتَعَارَفُوا

...Indeed We created you from a male and a female, and made you nations and tribes that you

may identify yourselves with one another... 15

The creation [of human beings] is based on tribes and nation. However lita'arafu (so that you may identify yourselves) means that different tribes and nations should be friendly with one another and have mutual ties, not that they should deny one other. However, when one of these ethnicities falls prey to ta'assub (prejudice), they act contrary to Islam and the Qur'an, as seen in the statement of the Prophet (S):

ليس منّا من دعا الى عصبية

One who summons to prejudice is not from among us.

But unfortunately, throughout history, and particularly in the present century, this matter has had extremely negative effects in the Islamic world.

Colonial powers have understood all too well how to unwind the thread that ties together Arabs, Turks, Persians, Kurds, Lurs, non-Arabs, and others under the banner of one Islamic ummah. That is why they appealed to nationalism, especially Arab nationalism, which was a blow the entire Islamic world has felt. The following slogan was written on one of the squares in Cairo:

الحكم لله و العزة للعرب

(Judgment belongs to Allah and might belongs to the Arabs) whereas God says,

وَلِلَّهِ الْعِزَّةُ وَلِرَسُولِهِ وَلِلْمُؤْمِنِينَ

...all might belongs to Allah and His Apostle, and the faithful ... 16

There is no preference for any ethnicity over another, and the only cause for preference is taqwa (God wariness). I would like to bring my discussion to an end and embellish these words with a verse from the Noble Qur'an:

وَاعْتَصِمُوا بِحَبْلِ اللَّهِ جَمِيعًا وَلَا تَفَرَّقُوا ۚ وَاذْكُرُوا نِعْمَتَ اللَّهِ عَلَيْكُمْ إِذْ كُنْتُمْ أَعْدَاءً فَأَلَّفَ بَيْنَ قُلُوبِكُمْ فَأَصْبَحْتُمْ بِنِعْمَتِهِ إِخْوَانًا

Hold fast, all together, to Allah's cord, and do not be divided [***into sects***]. ***And remember Allah's blessing upon you when you were enemies, then He brought your hearts together, so you became brothers with His blessing...*** 17

1. Director, World Forum for Proximity of Islamic Schools of Thought
2. Qur'an 21:92.
3. Qur'an 21:92.
4. Qur'an 11:17. (Tr.)
5. Qur'an 3:64.
6. Qur'an 21:92.
7. Qur'an 3:64.
8. Qur'an 42:13.
9. Qur'an 2:285.
10. Qur'an 49:13.
11. Reference to Qur'an 49:13. (Tr.)
12. Qur'an 47:24.
13. Qur'an 9:122.
14. Qur'an 2:213.
15. Qur'an 49:13.
16. Qur'an 63:8.
17. Qur'an 3:103.

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