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Difference Among Muslims

Wilson: The teaching of Islam seems to be very clear in most of its aspects. None of its doctrines is ambiguous enough to cause a split or dispute among the Muslims. Nevertheless, the Muslims are divided into more than one group. There are the two well–known groups: the Sunni and the Shi'a, and each of the two divisions contains a number of subdivisions. I know that division among the Muslims is not as acute as it is among the Christians. I understand that both Sunni and Shi'a often pray together in one Mosque and that there are no marital barriers between them. No Muslim is required to change his (her) affiliation with his respective group in order to marry a person from another group. But the fact remains that there is division and that there is more than one group.

The split does not seem to be justifiable. However, it took place, and I would like to know the reasons which led to that split.

Chirri: The split among the Muslims may not be characterized as religious. There is some difference on the details of some of the Islamic rules, and this is only a difference in interpretation of some of the Qur'anic words or the Prophet's statements. This has led to the establishment of various schools of thought. Fundamentally, the difference is political, and the germ of it began immediately after the death of the Prophet.

It is a well-known fact that Islam concerns itself with both spiritual and worldly aspects of man's life. The Prophet founded a Muslim state of which he was the head. He administered all religious, political and social affairs. He never showed his companions any sign of separation between religion and state. The well-being of the community and the prevalence of justice among its members are, in his teaching, as important as the devotional work which is required of the individual.

The integration of secular and spiritual affairs in the Muslim state at the time of the Prophet was so crystal clear that no Muslim at the time of the Prophet doubted the need for the establishment and continuity of a Muslim government. Thus, when the Prophet died, in 632, no question was raised about the need for a succeeding ruler. They all agreed on this, but they disagreed on who is to rule.

While Ali, the cousin of the Prophet, and some of the Hashimites (clan of the Prophet) were busy with

the holy funeral, some of the Muslims were gathering at a place, called "Saqifat Bani-Sa'idah" to select a new leader.

The Muslim community of Madina, the capital of the Muslim state, was comprised of the natives of Madina and those who immigrated to Madina. Most of those immigrants (who are called Muhajireen) were from Mecca. The natives of Madina were composed of two tribes, namely "Khazraj" and "Ous". These natives were called "Al-Ansar" (the Helpers). There was some rivalry between the immigrants and the natives of Madina. There was, also, a rivalry between the two Madinite tribes.

The conferees who were gathering to select a successor were mostly Madinites, and they were aiming at choosing one of them for the high office. Sa'ad Ben Abadah, the chief of the Khazrajites was the hopeful one.

The news of the conference reached Abu–Bakr, Omar, and others from the immigrants. They hurriedly went to the conference to prevent the Madinites from implementing their scheme. In debating with the Madinites, they offered the following argument:

The Prophet was a Meccan, and the Meccans are his relatives. Therefore, only a Meccan should succeed him.

By virtue of the mutual jealousy among the Madinites, the Ousites deserted Sa'ad Ben Abadah and leaned towards the Meccans. Abu-Bakr was nominated immediately and the majority of the conferees pledged to him their loyalty. And so did most of the Muslims, immigrants and Madinites. Thus, Abu-Bakr became the first "Khalif" (successor) in the history of Islam.

By this, the issue between the Madinites and the immigrants was settled forever; and since then no one from the Madinites ever contended for the right of succession. But the issue was far from being settled among the Meccans themselves.

Ali, as we advanced, was preoccupied with the funeral of the Prophet. He was not consulted in this important matter. He and many others believed that he was not only the proper one to succeed the Prophet, but also the Prophet's nominee and appointee. He thought that they made a fast deal and manipulated the election. Abu–Bakr and his group had defeated the Madinites by arguing that the Meccans are the relatives of the Prophet. If relationship to the Prophet should entitle any Meccan to succeed him, Ali should be the first one to be offered the job. He is the Prophet's first cousin and son–in–law.

Ali refused to join the supporters of Abu–Bakr and held out for several months. He finally joined the majority and pledged his loyalty to the new government. The situation of the Muslim State was too serious to allow a man, such as Ali, to cause any division in the Muslim community. Most of the Muslims outside Madina and Mecca rose in rebellion against the Madinite government, and a good portion of them disjoined themselves from Islam. The very existence of Islam was in danger. Ali is too pious to take

advantage of the difficulty of the Muslim government and too intellectual to worry about some Islamic instructions when the very existence of Islam is at stake. He, therefore, not only joined the supporters of Abu–Bakr but also took an active part in defending the state against the attacks of the rebellious elements.

When Ali gave up his claim and supported the government, the division among the Muslims disappeared. It remained in a dormant state for two decades during which Abu–Bakr, Omar and Uthman consecutively ruled the Muslim state. Ali was elected after the death of Uthman; and by his rise to power the issue of his rightfulness to be the first Khalif of the Prophet was awakened.

Ali was the most controversial personality among the companions of the Prophet. He was so magnanimous in the eyes of many pious Muslims that they believed that the succession to the Prophet was his exclusive right. He, at the same time, was bitterly opposed by many elements, and he had to fight three bloody rebellions during his short reign.

The reign of Ali continued for less than five years, and it ended by his assassination. Subsequently, his most ambitious adversary, Mu'awiyah, rose to power. This man ruled the Muslims in a manner entirely different from that by which the four good Khalifs administered the Muslim State. He continued in power about two decades, ruling the people by sword and bribery, and the followers of Ali were subjected to humiliation and persecution during his reign. He transformed the Muslim government from a republic form to a rule of dynasty. His dynasty, the Umayyads, continued in government for seventy years after his death.

The political sympathizers of Ali during this period acquired the title of Shi'a which means, follower (of Ali).

The Umayyad reign was ended in 750 AD by the rise of the Abbasides (descendants of Abbas, one of the uncles of the Prophet and Ali) to power. The Abbasides became the new dynasty which ruled the Muslim state for several hundred years during which the majority of the Muslims were named Sunni to distinguish them from the Shi'a. Thus, the Muslims were divided into Sunnites and Shi'ites.

Wilson: What are the opinions which are maintained by the Sunnites and the Shi'ites in regard to the issue of succession?

Chirri: The Sunnites maintain that Abu–Bakr was a legal Khalif; that the three good Khalifs who ruled consecutively after him, namely: Omar, Uthman and Ali were also legal Khalifs; that the Prophet never nominated anyone to succeed him; and that he left the matter of succession to his companions to exercise their right in choosing their own ruler.

The four Khalifs, however, were chosen by various methods: Abu–Bakr was elected by the Muslims of Madina. Omar was appointed by Abu–Bakr. Uthman was elected by the majority of only six persons whom Omar, before he died, had chosen as qualified for the high office: Ali, Uthman, Sa'ad, Zubayr,

Talhah, and Abdul-Rahman. No one besides them was allowed to elect or to be elected. The majority of these six had the right to choose the Khalif. The hopeful ones among these six were only two: Ali and Uthman. Ali did not have the support of any of the five except Zubayr, and Uthman won the election.

Ali, however, was elected after the death of Uthman by the overwhelming majority of the Muslims.

The Shi'ites maintain that Ali was not only the most proper person to succeed the Prophet, but was also his nominee for the high office. They believe that the Prophet actually appointed Ali as his successor, and that Ali himself had the right to appoint his own successor.

Both views command respect, and both have arguments that command respect.

Wilson: Since the views of each party have been outlined, now I would like you to state clearly the best arguments for each side. And let us start with the Sunnite argument.

Chirri: The first argument for the Sunnites was introduced, as you may recall, by the immigrants against the Madinites at the conference which was concluded by selecting Abu–Bakr as Khalif. The argument states that the Meccans are the relatives of the Prophet, and that the successor of the Prophet should be one of his relatives.

Wilson: The same argument can be, and actually was, used against the Sunnis in favor of the Shi'is. If blood-relation is to be taken as a foundation for the establishment of a Muslim government, Ali should be the successor, because he was by far closer than Abu-Bakr to the Prophet. He was his first cousin and his son-in-law.

Chirri: In addition to this, relationship to the Prophet cannot be a suitable base for the legality of a Muslim government. We know that Islam stands firmly and clearly against aristocracy and all inherited social privileges. The Muslims pride themselves upon the fact that there are no classes in Islam, and that all people from any nation or family are equal in the eyes of God. The Holy Qur'an declares the following:

"O mankind, certainly We created you from a male and a female and made you nations and clans, that you may recognize one another. Surely the Most noble among you in the eyes of God is the most righteous of you." 49: 13

The Prophet himself declared:

"... Certainly God has done away with the boastfulness of pre-Islamic society and its pride upon the ancestors. There is no superiority for an Arab over a non-Arab. (Nor is there any superiority for a non-Arab over an Arab.) Certainly the most noble of you in the eyes of God is the most pious of you."

The very concept of preference of a "Qurayshite" (Meccan) or a Hashimite over the rest of the people is

in contrast with the spirit of equality upon which the Muslims pride themselves. It means that God discriminates and favors certain families or clans above the rest of mankind. We, therefore, have no choice but to disregard any concept of discrimination and favoritism of this sort and consider it entirely alien to Islam. For this, the argument of relationship should be entirely disregarded.

The second argument for the Sunnis can be stated as follows: Islam respects and sanctifies the natural rights of every individual. The political freedom is one of these sacred rights. Every individual has the right to share in administering public affairs of his community, either directly or indirectly by authorizing and electing someone to represent him in such an administration. No one can be legally ruled against his will, and no man's freedom should be curtailed without his own permission. The establishment of any legal government can be achieved through the authorization of the individuals and by their own selection.

Abu-Bakr was elected by the majority of the companions of the Prophet. They elected him by their own choice and through the exercise of their natural right. His government, therefore, was legal and democratic.

Wilson: This argument seems to be very sound and based on the recognition of what we now call "inalienable rights." Now let us turn to the arguments of the Shi'ites.

Chirri: The Shi'ite as well as the Sunnite agree that a legal government can be established through election of the populace. The political freedom and the right of the individual in choosing his own government are recognized by all Muslims, including the Shi'ite. The Shi'ite, however, views (and the Sunnite does not deny) that election by populace is not the only way through which a legal government can be established. Omar was appointed by Abu–Bakr as his successor, and Uthman was elected by the majority of only six persons, and both are regarded by the Sunnites as legal Khalifs.

A respectable argument for the Shi'ite can be introduced by stating the following points:

- 1. Man's freedom can be legally curtailed and restricted by one of the two following ways:
- a) It may be restricted by his own permission and authorizing his elected government to enact rules that may limit his freedom or lead him to give up some of his rights.
- b) It may be restricted and curtailed by the Creator of the individual Who gave him his freedom and natural rights. He may impose on His servants rules which could curtail their freedom for their own interest. No one knows exactly what is good for him, but God knows what is good for us at present and in the future. We owe our freedom, our rights and our very existence to His generosity. If He chooses for us any type of government, that government will be legal.
- 2. A government established by a Divine appointment was possible at the time of the Prophet:

The Prophet, according to the Holy Qur'an, has the jurisdiction to appoint and select for the Muslims a

succeeding government. The Holy Qur'an vests in him the authority to choose for the Muslims whatever is in their interests. He is the guardian of the Muslims, and he has the right to administer their public affairs more than they have the right to do it on their own:

"The Prophet has the right over the believers more than they have the right over their own selves..." 33:6

The decision of the Prophet in all affairs of the Muslim State is binding on all Muslims. They have no right to reverse it or change it. From the Holy Qur'an:

"And it becometh not a believing man or a believing woman, when God and His Messenger have decided an affair (for them), that they should (after that) claim any say in their affairs; and whoever is rebellious to God and His Messenger, he verily goeth astray in error manifest." 33:36

Thus, when the Prophet appoints or nominates a successor to rule the Muslim State after him, his choice is to be followed and his decision is binding.

3. Since there were two legitimate ways to establish a succeeding government, the Prophet, the Shi'ite may contend, was expected to choose and appoint his successor and not to leave such an important matter to the Muslim community. Leaving it to the Muslim community in such an early stage of development could have been fraught with dangers.

The Muslim government was based on a set of reformatory principles aimed at changing people's belief and their way of life by introducing a new ideology which was accepted reluctantly by their majority.

To explain this: The government may be based on certain concepts and principles prevalent in the society and desirable to the majority of the people. The establishment of such a government should be left to the people and their choice. Such a government may have plans and programs, but none of its plans or programs would be legal unless it meets the approval of the majority. The people themselves are the highest authority to judge those plans and programs. Such a government can exist and remain in office legally only by the support of the majority, and it may legally fall when it is deprived of that support.

The Reformatory Principles

There is another type of government which is based on a set of reformatory principles aiming at changing the condition of the people and reforming their beliefs and characters.

Such principles are usually unpopular and undesirable to the people. The principles are usually introduced by an individual or a minority of people who are dissatisfied with the old ideology to which the majority subscribes. To apply the new ideology and make it work, a government based on the same principles must be established. The duty of such a government is to put the new ideology at work and to try to guard it against any possible danger.

Such a government is actually a government of minority, and it usually rises to power without being accepted by the majority. If such a government is to leave office, it is expected to appoint its successor and not to leave the establishment of the succeeding government to a free election.

To illustrate this: Suppose that a Capitalistic minority succeeds in taking over the government in a country where the Communistic system is established and genuinely accepted. When such a government replaces the old system by its own, it would be expected to try to perpetuate its ideology. What would be the duty of such a minority government when it is about to leave office?

Under the circumstances, the government would not be expected to leave the establishment of the next government to a free election. Since the new system is imposed on, or reluctantly accepted by the majority, a free election may lead to the destruction of the new system. When people are allowed to choose freely the government they desire, they would elect only the admirers of the old system. (The same will be true if a Communistic minority takes over the government of a Capitalistic country.)

The duty of the government, therefore, is to guard the new system and to trust and appoint only the most sincere supporter of its ideology as a head of the succeeding government.

The appointment of successors should continue until the new ideology is genuinely accepted by the people and its continuity is reasonably secured. The continuity of the new ideology can be secured only when it becomes a natural way of life to the community. This may not be accomplished until the ideology is received by the following generations as a part of their heritage.

Suppose the new system is seemingly adopted by the community in general and that the people have been converted to the new ideology. The duty of the government is still to be cautious and to take no risk that may jeopardize its achievement. The government will be duty-bound to trust in the administration of the state only those whose sincerity and efficiency are beyond any doubt. To leave the matter of establishment of a new government to the choice of the majority is to take a risk. A free election may bring to office the best or the worst. A wise guardian of a new ideology does not take such a risk at an early stage of development.

Islam is a Reformatory Ideology

4. The religion of Islam introduced a new ideology which was unpopular in the Arabian society. The new ideology aimed at changing people's belief and way of life. The idols which were endeared and worshipped by the people were to be destroyed. Only the One God, the Creator of the universe, is to be worshipped. The stubborn and the proud Arabs are to kneel and prostrate for God many times a day. The low desires of adultery, murder, plunder, gambling and drinking are no longer legitimate ways of life.

Lawlessness and anarchy are to be replaced by discipline and order. Selfishness and hatred are to be replaced by the hard and unselfish work and sacrifice for the welfare of the community. A portion of

every man's wealth is to be paid for supporting the poor and the programs which the government undertakes for improvement of the people's condition. The right side is to be supported and followed against the wrong side, even if it is your own relatives.

None of these reformatory principles were desirable to the society to which Islam was introduced. These principles were vehemently opposed by the overwhelming majority. The struggle was finally won by Islam only after a great deal of tears and blood.

We can hardly expect the Prophet who won the struggle after twenty-three years full of sacrifice, misery, and trouble, to depart from this world leaving the ideology of Islam unguarded by not appointing for administration the best fitting person among his followers.

5. The risk which would be taken in leaving the establishment of the succeeding government to the choice of the people can be underscored by stating the following facts: From among the masses of inhabitants of the Arabian peninsula, there were only a few scores of individuals who were capable of reading or writing. The masses of the people were totally uneducated. They joined Islam after the new faith had prevailed. As soon as they heard the news of the death of the Prophet, most of them rose in rebellion, and a great portion of the nation deserted the faith. The future of Islam was extremely darkened, and the true Muslims faced uncertainty.

The Prophet himself had foreseen this condition, and shortly before his death he declared:

"The faith-testing crises are closing in like pieces of a dark night..."

It is inconceivable that the Prophet, under such circumstances, would not try to secure the best possible leadership for his young Muslim State before he departs from this world.

Wilson: Granted that all these points are right, they do not necessarily lead to the drawn conclusion. It is true that the majority of the Muslims outside Madina were not dependable and sincere in their adoption of Islam. But the companions of the Prophet who supported the cause of Islam and offered so many sacrifices for its promotion were dependable and sincere. They accompanied the Prophet for years and became well–educated in the faith of Islam. The Prophet may have left the establishment of the succeeding government to these people. They belonged to the new ideology. They were its genuine supporters. There was no risk in trusting them.

Chirri: The sincerity of many of the companions of the Prophet is beyond any reasonable doubt. It would only be fair to assume that men like Ali, Abu–Bakr, Omar, Uthman, Salman the Persian, Abu–Dharr and so many others from the immigrants and Madinites were genuine supporters of the cause of Islam. They had offered for its promotion many sacrifices for a long period of time. They were also well educated in the Islamic teaching, and they were good students and disciples of the Prophet. The fact remained, the Shi'ites say, that the majority of the companions were not purified completely from their old clannish attachments.

Islam aimed at replacing the narrow bond of blood relation by a general brotherhood and feeling of equality among the Muslims. But the period was too short for these people to forget the past and live up to the ideal teaching of their faith. The influence of tribal ties on their thinking was obvious. The conference which was held by the Madinites has shown a great deal of tribal prejudice. Their aim was to select one of the Madinites as a ruler and to prevent the Meccans from assuming the leadership. The Meccans, on the other hand, were determined to keep the leadership of the state in their hand.

Both sides overlooked the principle of equality and universal brotherhood which the Prophet endeavored to establish. None of them was looking for the fittest person in the Muslim community for the leadership in such a critical period. Had all of them been true adherents to the Islamic teaching, they would have searched their conscience and looked for the best possible leader, disregarding all regional and tribal ties. This important aspect was entirely forgotten or overlooked. Merely being a Meccan companion was good enough for the Meccans, and merely being a Madinite companion was good enough for the Madinites.

Suppose that they all were free of clannish prejudice. This does not mean that those companions were equally knowledgeable in Islam. Nor would it mean that the majority of them were wise enough to select the proper leadership for that critical period. There were many outstanding persons in the community, and probably the majority of the companions considered them all potential leaders. Their knowledge about these persons was limited, and none of them knew enough about them to select their best. Only the Prophet was able to classify them and choose the most fitting for leadership in that period.

The Muslims, however, were fortunate enough to select a man like Abu–Bakr. What would have happened if they had chosen a good companion but unfitting leader such as Uthman? It may have led to the destruction of the Muslim State. Foreseeing the forthcoming crises, the Prophet was expected to avoid the Muslims any such consequences by selecting the best leader to succeed him in the dangerous period.

Wilson: Granted that all the advanced points are logical, this may only prove the need for the appointment of a leader on the part of the Prophet. This, however, does not prove that the Prophet had actually appointed a successor. The argument is telling us that the Prophet was expected to provide the proper leadership for all the Muslims, and that he ought to have done what was expected. It does not tell us that he actually did so. There is a clear difference between what ought to be done and what actually was done.

Furthermore, if the argument is entirely sound, it does not tell us who was appointed by the Prophet. It might have been Ali or Abu–Bakr or anyone else.

Chirri: The Shi'ites say that the Prophet had actually appointed Ali to the high post, by declaring him the "Moula" (guardian) of the believers. While returning from his Valedictory Pilgrimage, the Prophet, according to many authentic hadiths (related statements), called the multitude of pilgrims who were

accompanying him, to hear an important declaration. (This declaration was delivered at a place called "Ghadir Khumm."):

"O People," the Prophet exclaimed, "The time is drawing nigh when I receive a Divine call to which I will respond (by departing from this world); I shall be questioned, and ye will be questioned. What will be your answer?" The multitude replied: We bear witness that you have conveyed the message (of God) and endeavored (in His way) and that your endeavor was sincere, unselfish. The Prophet said: "Is it not true that you bear witness that there is no god but the Almighty; that Muhammad is His servant and messenger; that His paradise is a reality; that His hell is reality; that death is right; that resurrection after death is truth; that the Day of Judgment is truth; and that God shall bring back to life those who are in the graves?"

The multitude replied: "Yea, we bear witness unto that."

The Prophet said: "O God, bear witness."

Following this, the Prophet announced the appointment of Ali for the high office. Such an appointment on his part requires a constitutional authority. Therefore, he reminded them of the fact that the Holy Qur'an vested in him this authority by declaring him the guardian of the believers:

"O people," he said, "God is my 'Moula' (guardian), and I am the Moula of the believers, and I have the right over the believers more than they have the right over their own selves.

Whoever I am his Moula, this Ali (He was holding Ali's hand) is his Moula.

O God, befriend his friend and cast out of Thy favor his enemy."

Wilson: If the Prophet had actually selected Ali for the leadership of the Muslims, he should have tried to prepare the Muslims, not only by words, but also by deeds for the acceptance of his decision. He should have made the atmosphere suitable for implementing such an important plan. Had the Prophet done anything of this sort?

Chirri: The Prophet, say the Shi'ites, not only appointed Ali by words but also tried to secure this position for him by deed.

The Muslim historians agree that when the Prophet was seriously ill, he sensed the approach of his death. At that time he ordered the Muslim army to leave Madina to the borders of Syria under the leadership of Usama, the son of Zayd. Abu–Bakr and Omar were ordered to leave with the army. Of the outstanding companions, only Ali was to stay in Madina.

While his condition was growing critical, the Prophet repeatedly urged the army to leave Madina. But Abu–Bakr, Omar, and many other companions remained in Madina, saying that they hate to leave while the Prophet is so ill. As a result, the whole army remained camping in the vicinity of the city until Abu–

Bakr was elected after the death of the Prophet. To sum up:

The Prophet knew the approach of his death. He ordered the ambitious companions to take a long journey, and wanted Ali to stay beside him. Putting these together makes it obvious that the Prophet wanted Ali to take over after him, unchallenged.

Wilson: The plan, however, did not materialize. Ali did not rule, Abu-Bakr did. He not only ruled, but also appointed Omar as his successor. Omar, in turn, indirectly appointed Uthman to succeed him. Shall we infer from this that the companions of the Prophet ignored the Prophet's order and disobeyed him deliberately?

Chirri: The answer is "no." If the will of the Prophet were to secure the leadership for Ali, and if he had made it clear to his companions, we ought to assume that the companions had unwittingly underestimated the seriousness of the matter. They thought that the leadership is only a temporal issue, in which they have the choice to follow the Prophet's recommendation or to make their own decision. As a result, they chose to decide for themselves.

To think that they deliberately chose to disobey the Prophet in such an important matter does not seem to be logical. We owe it to the companions of the Prophet to think good of them and not to doubt their good intentions when they make a wrong decision. They were good Muslims, and the Holy Qur'an recommends that we pray God to forgive our brothers who preceded us in embracing the faith, let alone the companions who were the first Muslim community that ever existed in the world.

Our attitude now towards the issue ought to be far from being emotional. We ought not to weep over the spilled milk. Nothing can be retrieved by taking sides on the issue. Both Ali and Abu–Bakr died and met the Lord, and the time of the caliphate has entirely elapsed. Any discussion about it should be no more than a discussion of a certain period of the Islamic history. Such a discussion can be conducted by non–Muslims as well as by Muslims. The purpose of such a discussion is not to support a particular side, but to reach or form an impartial conclusion or opinion.

Holding a negative attitude towards either side would only generate hatred and division among the Muslims. This, no doubt, is a displeasure to Ali who gave up his claim and supported Abu–Bakr to avoid any division among the Muslims. To cause a division for the sake of Ali is to be kingly more than the king himself.

The Sunnis, on the other hand, have no right to be disturbed by the attitude of the Shi'ites towards the first three Khalifs. Nothing in the Islamic teaching prohibits a negative attitude towards any of the three. The legality of their rule is not an article of the faith, and their rightfulness is a political, and not a religious, issue. In such a political issue, every Muslim has the right to form his own opinion without violating any Islamic instruction.

To have an unfriendly attitude towards scores of millions of Muslims because of their negative attitude

towards three outstanding Muslims does not seem to be logical. Nor is it warranted by the teaching of Islam.

Wilson: The issue of the succession in ruling the Muslim State may have caused a good deal of dispute among the Muslims throughout the centuries, but it does not seem to be important enough to divide the Muslims into sects today. The whole issue seems to be political rather than religious. It may become religious when it causes the Muslims to dispute in the areas of the articles of the faith or the Islamic laws. Do the Sunnis and the Shi'ites disagree with each other in these religious areas? And is their disagreement in these areas related to their political views?

Chirri: There is no disagreement between the Shi'ites and the Sunnis on the articles of the faith. They all agree on the truthfulness of the Qur'an and the statements of the Prophet without any exception. Both sides derive their views and conclusions in the religious matters from these two important sources.

There are, however, disagreements on some of the details of the Islamic laws. These disagreements are due, partly, to the difference in understanding and interpreting some of the verses of the Holy Qur'an and some of the statements of the Prophet.

Some of the disagreements on the details of the Islamic rules are due to the following reasons:

- 1. Absence of specific instructions in both the Qur'an and the statements of the Prophet.
- 2. Lack of clarity in some of these statements and the capability of being interpreted in more than one way.
- 3. The existence of two opposite statements, both attributed to the Prophet.

One of the examples of disagreement caused by difference in interpretation of the Holy Qur'an is the following:

All Muslims agree that ablution is a requirement for a sound prayer, and that ablution would be undone by intercourse. They disagree on whether mere physical contact between man and woman, such as shaking hands, would undo the ablution of both of them. The reason is the difference in interpreting the following verse:

"And if ye be ill, or on a journey, or one of you cometh from the toilet, or ye have touched women, and ye find no water, then go to high clean soil and rub your faces..." 4:43

Some schools take the word "touch" literally and think that touch in any way would undo the ablution. Other schools understand from the word touch the intercourse.

Disagreements on the details of the Islamic rules exist not only between the Shi'ites and the Sunnis; they exist among the Sunnis themselves and among the Shi'ites themselves. With little exceptions, there is

not any Shi'a's view or verdict that disagrees with all the Sunnis' views, and there is not any Sunni's view that is opposed to all Shi'ites' views. You can almost pick up any Sunni's verdict or interpretation, and you are bound to find the same view shared by some Shi'ites; and vice versa.

Disagreement on the details of some of the Islamic rules did not cause the Muslims to be divided into sects. It, however, caused the formation of many schools of thoughts which are called "Madhhabs." (Madhhab is a set of opinions or verdicts attributed to an outstanding imam who is considered, at least by his followers, as the prime authority in jurisprudence and Islamic law). Among these Madhhabs are the following living schools: Maliki, Hanafi, Shafi'i, Hanbali, Ja'fari, and Zaydi.

All these schools rely, and draw on, the Qur'an and the hadiths of the Prophet. But the first four are called Sunni, and the last two are called Shi'i.

The difference between the Shi'ite and the Sunnite schools is not greater than the difference among the Sunnite schools themselves. The political affiliation, however, made the followers of the Sunni schools frown upon the Shi'ite schools, and vice versa.

Wilson: Your explanation shows that the difference between the two sides is very small and negligible. Some efforts should have been made by some scholars to bring the two sides together and to bring about a good understanding and reconciliation.

Chirri: Many efforts had been made throughout the history of Islam to heal the rift, but they did not meet a tangible success. The failure may be attributed to many factors. Among them are: the intolerant spirit of the ages; the presence of tyrant khalifs who sought the support of one side by persecution of another side which holds unfavorable opinion towards them; and the wrong approach to the issue.

Our age has a different spirit, and the caliphate was buried at the beginning of this century. What we need is to have a solemn thinking and a new evaluation of the whole matter.

The Endeavor of the Author for Islamic Unity

Wilson: I heard that you travelled to the Middle East and met the late Sheikh El-Azhar in 1959 and tried to iron out the difference between the two sides. I would like you to tell me more about this important event.

Chirri: On the first of July, 1959, I met the late Sheikh Al–Azhar, Sheikh Mahmoud Shaltute (may God bless his soul). The purpose of the meeting was to discuss the problem of division between the followers of the various Islamic schools whose difference, until that time, was conceived as an outstanding problem in the Muslim world. I wanted to know his opinion about the Ja'fari Madhhab to which he does not belong. I thought that a favorable attitude on his part toward this Madhhab might be a uniting point between the two sides, since most of the Shi'ites belong to the Ja'fari school.

I asked him if he believes in the soundness of the Ja'fari teaching and its equality to his own Madhhab. His answer was in the affirmative. Upon this, I requested him to state to the Muslim World his view on the important issue, in a clear verdict. A declaration of equality between the Ja'fari and the Sunni Madhhabs from Sheikh Al–Azhar would, to my estimation, be a sound solution to the problem, at least in theory. Such a declaration, I told him, would bring the Sunni side to moderation because you are their highest authority. And the Shi'ites will rejoice at such a declaration. The Shi'ites do not seek privilege or superiority. All what they seek is equality.

The declaration was the first of its kind in the history of Islam. It was issued as an answer to a question submitted to him, and announced on the sixth of July, 1959. The declaration was joyfully received in many Muslim countries.

The following is a translation of the declaration which was published in the Egyptian and Lebanese press:1

His eminence (Sheikh Al-Azhar, Sheikh Mahmoud Shaltute) was asked: Some people view that in order to have religiously sound devotions and transactions, the Muslim has to follow one of the four known (Islamic) Madhhabs: Hanafi, Shafi'i, Hanbali, and Maliki. This excludes the two Shi'i Madhhabs: Imami (Ja'fari) and Zaydi. Do you agree with this view without qualification and advise the Muslims not to follow the Ithna-Ashari Imami (Ja'fari) school for example?

His eminence answered (by setting forth the following points as an introduction to his verdict which is the last part of his answer):

1. It is permissible to the "non-Mujtahid" (the one who is not qualified to give his own opinion or verdict in the Islamic law) to follow the opinion of any of the "Ulama" (Muslim scholars), whose knowledge and piety are believed, provided such an opinion reaches its follower in a correct and nearly certain way, directly or indirectly. We should not be concerned with a view expressed in some books which claims that the four Madhhabs are the only ones to follow or that it is not permissible for a person to change from one Madhhab to another.

Sheikh Izzuddeen, the son of Abdulsalam said: The Muslims used to seek information about the Islamic laws, from any "alim" (Muslim Scholar) they happened to meet, regardless of the school to which he belonged. And such a way of obtaining information never was disapproved (by the Muslim Scholars) until these schools (the four appeared with their followers who became so bigoted that the follower of a Madhhab would follow his "imam" (leader) even if his opinion was supportable by no evidence. He followed him as if he were a messenger prophet. This is a shyness from the truth and soundness; it should not be accepted by the people of understanding.

2. The word "Shi'a," by which the followers of Ali (the son of Abu-Talib) are known, is derived from the word "Mushaya'ah" which means to follow. So the Shi'a of a person are his companions and followers. The name (Shi'a) has been given to many groups who disagree with Islam in many basic beliefs and

laws. It is not permissible to follow the teaching of such groups because they are out of the circle of Islam.

- 3. There are other groups related to "Ali," and they are his well-guided Shi'a who oppose and condemn the misguided ones. Of these good Shi'a is the group which is known by the name of "Ja'fari" or "Imami Ithna-Ashari."
- 4. This well–known group follows principles that are taken from the Book of God and the teaching of His Messenger which reached them through their imams in both fundamental belief and Islamic law. The difference between the Ja'fari and Sunni schools is not greater than the difference among the Sunni schools themselves. They (the Ja'faris) believe in the fundamental principles of Islam as they are stated in the Glorious Qur'an and the certain teaching of the Prophet. They also believe in all the rules whose inclusion in the religion of Islam is self–evident and whose recognition is required for being a Muslim and the denial of which excludes the person from Islam .
- 5. The Madhhab of these Ja'fari Shi'ites in the Islamic laws is completely recorded and well-known. It has its own books, conveyers (who related the statements of the Prophet and the imams) and the supporting evidence. The authors of these books and those from whom these authors had received the (hadiths) are well-known, and their scholarly and jurisprudential ranks are respected among the Muslim scholars.

The Declaration

From this explanation, it becomes evident that:

- 1. Islam does not command any of its followers to follow a particular Islamic Madhhab. On the contrary, it establishes for every Muslim the right to follow, at the beginning, any one of the correctly conveyed Madhhabs, whose verdicts are recorded in their respective books. It is permissible also for any one that follows one of these schools to change to another one any other school and he is not sinning by doing that.
- 2. The Ja'fari school which is known as "the Madhhab of the Ithna-Ashari, Imami Shi'i" is a sound Madhhab. It is permissible to worship God according to its teaching, like the rest of the Sunni Madhhabs.
- 3. The Muslims ought to know this and get rid of their undue bigotry for particular Madhhabs. The religion of God and His law do not follow, nor are they bound to, a particular Madhhab. All (the founders of these Madhhabs) are Mujtahid (qualified to give verdict), reward–deserving from God, and acceptable to Him. It is permissible to the "non–Mujtahid" to follow them and to accord with their teaching, whether in devotions or transactions.
 - 1. This is the translation of what appeared in Al-Kifah (a Lebanese newspaper), issue of July 8, 1959.

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