

The Basis of Unity in the Islamic Community

The true source of unity in the Islamic community is Islam itself indeed. This source has its root in the God-given human primordial nature. This heavenly informed nature is shared by all human individuals, regardless of their cultural and social discrepancies. The modifications and changes that this primordial religion has undergone in history have merely been concerned with secondary details of prescripts that have their origin in the diversity of the conditions of human life in various societies. The general foundations which the religion is built upon, however, have been always the same throughout history. Thus, the basis of unity in the Moslem community, in my view, lies in *the* humanistic primordial religion which has been preached by divine prophets and whose principles were articulated by Abraham, whom Judaism and Christianity see as their forefather.

The Demonstration of the Basic Elements of Primordial Religion

The basic elements of primordial religion, which must be lived according to by the Moslem community, could be demonstrated in a number of ways:

1- The Holy Quran as the manifest of pure monotheism, which consists of the belief in the uniqueness of God, the idea that Non is like him and the necessity of the ascription of the attributes of perfection to Divine Essence as well as the negation of the attributes of imperfection from him.

2- Resurrection and eternity, without which human life is not convincingly interpretable in this world. Some may argue that there are people who live their lives without believing in resurrection, like Buddhists and others. We can respond to such a critic as follows:

I) It is not intelligible indeed to acknowledge every commonplace routine of ordinary people. We are still witness to the dominance of destructive egotistic ideas and corruption in all scenes of human life. For instance, slavery was once a justified social phenomenon in many societies around the globe, but today it has proven to be wrong; likewise, many justifications may be found as being baseless in future.

II) No single one of moral principles and virtues is defensible forever upon social rules, since one cannot regard the morality and virtue only as a means for the "amendment of the mundane order of life" after utilitarianism, for that will make them arbitrary and relative that disappoints such great figures as Kant, who has a categorical understanding of these issues and believes that it is conscience that justifies obligation.

III) Those schools which do not speak of eternity in a clear voice, though satisfying the human primordial tendency toward the Absolute, they in fact approach eternity from their own respective vantage point. For example, the concept of Nirvana in Buddhism, which refers to a heavenly state that exists beyond the cycle of reincarnation and denotes human freedom from karmic suffering, does indeed feature the Buddhist notion of eternity. Even modern thinkers' impression of such concepts as human beings, development and progress is sometimes so imbued with the transcendent presence of the Absolute that not only does it temporarily satisfy the human sense of eternity, but at the same time it also promotes that [secular] absolute to some kind of deity.

IV) The observation of the rational connections of the elements and the relationships between the universe and man can lead to the conclusion that if there is no real eternity for the cosmos, these connections will not be understandable. It must be taken into consideration that every man who believes in God will certainly accept the idea of resurrection and eternity, since God, as an All-Wise Creator, would not create this world wantonly.

V) So many gifts that have been conferred upon man cannot be all for nothing and having occurred merely by chance, as no one of these gifts and their realization is conceivable without a law or a higher purpose. Furthermore, since only a poor number of these gifts can be realized in the short span of earthly life, an eternal life is thus needed so that all of these natural talents to be realized.

3- Human beings need Divine Prophets to teach man the super-sensible-rational truths which are necessary for achieving perfection as the goal of life. This need will be tackled only by the delegation of prophets and their successors.

4- Ritual services which are necessary for connecting oneself to Divine Essence like daily prays, fasting and others.

5- Charity services in general, the most significant of which is providing people's intelligible material and spiritual needs.¹

1- For the Quran's view on these quintuple cases, see: The Cow 2: 26, The Cattle 6: 79, Jonah 10:47, Abraham 14:40, The Bee 16:36, The Night Journey 17:15, The Prophets 21:73, The Pilgrimage 22:76, and Iron 57:26.

6- These principles and elements of Primordial Religion have also been demonstrated through common sense and been extensively discussed in philosophical and theological books. These elements together enjoy a transcendent unity in realizing human gifts, which is indeed the very primordial religion that was revealed to Abraham:

And strive hard in (the way of) Allah, (such) a striving is due to him; he has chosen you and has not laid upon you hardship in religion; the faith of your father Ibrahim; he named you Muslims before. (The Pilgrimage 22:78)

There are other verses in the Quran which demonstrate that Abraham's religion is the very primordial religion that has been revealed to all divine prophets:

He has made plain to you of the religion which he enjoined upon Noah, and that which we have revealed to you, and that which we enjoined upon Abraham and Moses and Jesus, that keep to obedience and be not divided therein; hard to the unbelievers is that which you call them to; Allah chooses for Himself whom He pleases, and guides to Himself him who turns (to Him), frequently. And they did not become divided until after knowledge had come to them out of envy among themselves; and had not a word gone forth from your Lord till an appointed term, certainly judgment would have been given between them. And those who were made to inherit the book after them are most surely in disquieting doubt concerning it; to this, then go on inviting, and go on steadfastly on the right way as you are commanded, and do not follow their low desires, and say, "I believe in what Allah has revealed of the book, and I am commanded to do justice between you: Allah is our Lord and your Lord; we shall have our deeds and you shall have your deeds; no plea need there be (now) between us and you: Allah will gather us together, and to him is the return."¹

(The Consultation 42: 13-15)

It is certain that the human nature, in a normative sense, is an undeniable reality. It is also a fact that the human nature, in the positive sense, shall reach the threshold of the 'ideal personality' and 'self-actualized ego' as the disintegration of the primordial nature is a clear piece of evidence that one has not been able to emancipate oneself from the

1- Not only has God decided that Abraham's religion be regarded as people's primordial religion, but he also invites the followers of this religion to unity. As the Holy Quran has stated, "And do not dispute with the followers of the book except by what is best, except those of them who act unjustly, and say, 'We believe in that which has been revealed to us and revealed to you, and our Allah and your Allah is one, and to him do we submit.'" (The Spider 29:46)

chains of determinism. The more a character becomes sublimated, the more integrated it will be.

The Fulfillment of the Human Primordial Nature via Primordial Religion

It was Abraham's earnest attention to the integrity of these noble human truths that made him prone of being characterized by lofty human attributes. The attributes that God has ascribed to Abraham in the Holy Quran definitely show that it was his adherence to the primordial principles and elements of divine religion that made him qualified for the universal leadership of mankind. Thus, his religion has been considered as the building block of all revealed religions, as universal leadership is the highest degree of perfection and features the noblest integrity of human character. This integrity has its origin in such qualities as truthfulness:

And mention Abraham in the book; surely he was a truthful man, a prophet.
(Mary 19:41)

And determination for providing his people with their needs:

And when Abraham said, "My Lord, make it a secure town and provide its people with fruits, such of them as believe in Allah and the last day."
(The Cow 2: 126)

This verse reflects Abraham's serious will for providing his people, in that it depicts the prophet's intimate conversation with his Lord. Since a servant's dialogue with his Lord is undoubtedly serious and significant, as it is the greatest moment of a true believer's life, particularly when that believer is a prophet in Abraham's status. "Fruits" in this verse refers to all products that are necessary for human natural life. The Holy Quran also states:

Whoever disbelieves, I will grant him enjoyment for a short while, then I will drive him to the chastisement of the fire; and it is an evil destination.
(The Cow 2:126)

As you see, although Abraham only prays for the sustenance of believers due to his extreme avoidance from infidels, God reminds the prophet about the general rule of life in this world – "I even provide for those who do not believe in me but they will taste an evil destiny at last."

Moreover, the same goes for the repentant (The Cow 2:128), the expositor of wisdom (The Cow 2:129), battling with idolatry (The Cattle 6:74 and The Prophets 21:57); the wayfarer and provider of safe route (The Cattle 6:80-83); the fulfiller of covenant (Repentance 9:114); patient and prayer (Hud 11:75); forgiver (Abraham 14: 36); the worshiper (The Bee 16:120); the man of eternal bliss (The Prophets 26:85); relying on

God (The One to Be Examined 60:4); conscious of heavens and the earth (The Cattle 6:75); insisting on unity (The Consultation 42:13); enmity with the infidels (The One to Be Examined 60:4).

Every quality of this sort that has been attributed to Abraham represents a perfection that is the result of his struggle in the path of noble human virtues, which have been enjoined either by God or by his conscience, a radiation itself of Divine Essence.

As we mentioned earlier, all virtuous attributes that have been ascribed to Abraham (PBUH) are integrative constituents of his character, which has transcended disintegrating material facts and achieved a transcendent unity. Thus, what Moslems will get through following Abraham's primordial religion is the necessity of making such a character as far as one can, since:

Allah does not impose upon any soul a duty but to the extent of its ability.
(The Cow 2:286)

The Unity of the Islamic Community and How to Achieve It

Regarding the taproot of unity in the Islamic community and the common ground that not only is the integrating factor of unity in the Islamic denominations and factions, but it in fact must bring together all monotheistic religions that belong to Abrahamic tradition in an intelligible fashion.

In the Holy Quran, regardless of the verses that invite people to Abraham's religion, there are some verses that have been devoted to the stipulation of common grounds of revealed religions such as:

Say: O followers of the book! Come to an equitable proposition between us and you that we shall not serve any but Allah and (that) we shall not associate aught with him, and (that) some of us shall not take others for lords besides Allah. But if they turn back, then say, "Bear witness that we are Muslims."
(The House of Imran 3:64)

However, as you know, despite these shared bases of revealed religions, they now suffer serious conflicts and antagonisms. Of course, difference of opinion as regards to theoretical issues is a necessary phenomenon, since it guarantees the dynamicity of intellectual debates. The denial of this type of difference is either rooted in ignorance or in one's inability of facing intellectual challenges. This phenomenon is widespread to the extent that no one could ever find two theoreticians in one field who are thoroughly agreed upon all definitions, arguments and methods.

Nevertheless, even in theoretical issues, whether in experimental sciences or in philosophy, ethics, law, economy, politics, art, literature and the like, we have a number

of general principles that are taken for granted by all theoreticians.¹ This type of difference of opinion concerning the applications of universal principles can further our knowledge of reality if delivers itself from biases and pretensions.

The history of Islam has been witness to difference of opinion in every theoretical issue of its own. This difference has even been promoted as a necessary item as far as it has not disordered the common universal principles. Even some debates have been triggered around universal principles like monotheism, prophecy, Imamate, resurrection, divine attributes and the Quran, which not only have not incited Islamic scholars to excommunicate each other, but have in fact expanded and deepened philosophical and theological ideas. Nonetheless, scholarly disagreements on secondary issues like judiciary conundrums which exceed the universal principles in number are too evident to need any further elaboration.²

Therefore, we can divide scholarly differences into two general kinds:

I) Intelligible Difference

Intelligible difference is a difference that arises out of data discrepancy of a given issue as well as individual gifts, particularly genius, and covers most of natural opinions of realities like theoretical sciences and philosophical disagreements over the configuration of reality. This is the very "intelligible difference" that not only should not be resisted or denied, but it can in fact expand and deepen our knowledge of issues.³

The renowned hadith from the Holy Prophet (PBUH) that reads, "My nation's difference is a divine blessing",⁴ refers to this intelligible difference. Thus, we see that

1- Every self-evident proposition is surrounded with a number of theoretical propositions, as every theoretical proposition is preceded by some particular self-evident propositions. For example, "the whole is larger than its parts" is surrounded with the following propositions:

- Can we declare an infinite series as being a "whole"?
- If we can, is this concept a subjective notion or an objective fact?
- Will the whole disappear with the disappearance of a part?

On the other hand, when we turn to such a theoretical issue as "Do all human individuals have artistic sense or not?" it is also preceded by self-evident propositions like "Man has particular gifts", "Man enjoys art", and "Some human individuals are artists".

2- Of course, since the general principles of religion and main branches, or in jurisprudential parlance, categorical prescripts, are grounded in human primordial nature, common sense, and revelation in a way that no doubt could ever be casted on them, we can consider them the very essence of Islam, which is accepted by all Moslems regardless of their respective denominations. Thus, any doubt concerning these basic principles can expulse the doubter from Islam.

3- It is self-evident, both philosophically and scientifically, that realities – whatever they may be – cannot be perceived as being independent of the subjective and objective conditions of the perceiver. This is why thinkers have different conceptions of reality and this difference does not result in any conflict.

4- Muhadith Qumi, *Safinat ul-Bihar ("The Ark of Seas")*, Vol. 2.

the majority of Moslem thinkers, whether in jurisprudence, rational debates of juristic precepts, philosophy, theology, literature and other fields of study, contently exchange their critical views of different issues without excommunicating each other.

A cursory view of history of Islam shows that there were many distinguished figures that have studied under scholars with different intellectual attitudes and glossed and reviewed their works. For example, The Book of Catharsis by Khajeh Nasiruddin Tusi, a famous Shi'ah scholar, has been glossed by Mullah Ali Qushchi, a Sunnite thinker, and Mullah Muhsen Feydh's Glorious Destination is an interpretation of Ghazali's magnum opus The Revival of Religious Sciences. I have also devoted myself for several years to the interpretation of ideas of Mowlana Jalaluddin Rumi.

II) Unintelligible Difference

Unintelligible difference features a disagreement stemming from unauthorized and aberrant factors like following carnal whims, say via ostentation and reputationism.

There have always been some people throughout history who sought to show off by such pretensions as freedom of thought, freedom of will, freedom of expression and so on and so forth, while their love was power indeed! This love demonstrates the ultimate extent of human weakness. As we see in the founders of fake religions in history, the major motive had been power, even at the expense of social divides.

Not only does this lead to the disintegration of ideas, beliefs and unifying ideals of a society, but it also sometimes triggers devastating conflicts between peoples of one or several societies which have in fact many ideas and beliefs in common. While beliefs and ideals are the interpreters of the goal and philosophy of human life, it is totally inhuman to abuse or scapegoat them for power through creating unintelligible disagreements.

Another example of unintelligible differences is those dissensions that have their origin in mental chess games in theoretical sciences, which are merely to satisfy the imagination and sense of getting the upper hand in intellectual matters.

Thus, one can openly say that the difference in the course of constructive competitions is the most desirable factor of progress in knowledge and practice, without which any single step forward would ever be possible. Islam does not order its believers to think alike. On the other hand, Islam strongly insists on continuous intellectual debate. It is needless to argue that such an engagement will not be possible without difference of opinion.

Therefore, difference of opinion must be accepted as a natural phenomenon which is an effect of the essential dynamism of Islamic teachings. However, this difference should unleash constructive competitions, not destructive conflicts. Of course, sometimes these positive and dynamic engagements and contests are metamorphosed by fanatic votaries of power into fatal conflicts and inertia.

The irrational differences that are provoked for purposes of seeking power and domination are shallow, temporal and mostly recurring, like the books that are written

today to create division between Shi'ahs and Sunnis. This kind of works shall either be scorned or regretted by intellectuals and scholars and have a temporary impression on shallow minds.

On the other hand, wherever a fire of division has been triggered, though it has claimed some saplings of the Divine Garden, at the same time it has nonetheless brought about enlightenments for intellectuals which reveal some hidden advantages of religion as well as the diabolic intensions of disuniter. Reality never becomes defeated or chanced by biased attacks, but its potentials find opportunity to show up.

Types of Unity

As we have mentioned earlier, the common ground of Abrahamic religions is the belief in a unique God Who is the Origin and Destination of the human universal movement toward perfection, the Endower of reason and conscience upon human individuals and the Delegator of divine prophets to human communities. This latter belief contains all of the elements of the united identity of the Islamic community, on which stands the total harmony of Islamic character.

However, there are three conceivable types of unity for the Islamic community:

- 1- **Absolute Unity:** This type of unity comprises a thorough consensus of all basic and secondary doctrines of Islam. The latter utopian kind of unity seems impossible in view of different individual exercises of freedom of thought as to the aforementioned doctrines, intellectual differences, the availability of sources both in terms of the perceiver and the perceived and individual differences regarding genius, intelligence and memory which are undoubtedly determining in one's conception of the doctrines and their respective arguments. As long as these differences are allied with the genuine pursuit of the truth as well as sufficient knowledge of sources and principles, not only will they do no harm to the unity of the Islamic community, but they are in fact necessary for the cultivation of Islamic teachings.
- 2- **Temporary Pragmatic Unity:** This type of unity has its roots in the coercion of exogenous factors that do not belong to the very fabric of religion. This unity is necessary when the factors stated before threaten the order of the Islamic community. Generally speaking, when a community is being exposed to malignant and lethal factors, the routine differences and quarrels between factions are temporarily discarded and a kind of harmony or unity takes their place. Since this unity is an effect of extra-religious factors, it fades away when these factors disappear or corresponding to the increase or decrease of the power of the factors, the rhythm of the temporary *pragmatic* unity gets either intensified or diminished. As it is irrational to expect an "absolute unity" among the intellectuals and the people of an Islamic community despite so many matters of intelligible difference, by the same token it is also illogical to expect "temporary pragmatic unity" to sustain the cohesion of Islamic factions and denominations forever.
- 3- **Intelligible Unity:** Regarding the universal principles of religion, as mentioned earlier,

the individual right of freedom of thought and intellectual divisions on the quality and elements of basic and secondary doctrines of Islam, the desirable form of unity among Islamic community will be "intelligible unity".

Therefore, one can define intelligible unity as holding the universal principles of Islam as a pattern for all Moslem societies and leaving all personal, factional, local and regional ideas of the religion.

There is no canonical or rational obstacle in the path of the realization of this type of unity and every thinker who is well introduced into the primordial sources of Islam and Sunnah knows that following the universal principles of Islam along with intellectual effort for understanding the arguments and reason is necessary. It is needless to argue that the unity and harmony that has been spotlighted by the primordial sources of Islam (the Quran, Sunnah, sane sense and intellectual consensus) as well as ingenious Islamic figures like Ayatollah Hajj Sayyed Hasan Tabatabaei Borujerdi, the jurisprudential authority of Shi'ites worldwide, and Sheikh Muhammad Shaltut, the most respected leader of Sunnites, is neither a temporary pragmatistic unity – as no single one of the Islamic factions chooses it as the ideal form of unity for Islamic community – and nor a utopian comprehensive unity which is not applicable; in fact, it is an intelligible unity based on the universal principles of Islam which govern the social and religious life of all Islamic denominations.

To achieve intelligible unity, the intellectuals and influential figures of the Islamic community must firstly broaden their perspectives. The basic factor in this intellectual broadening is deliverance from narrow and dark frames of illogical bigotries. Due to its majesty and infinity, Islam has succeeded in raising such figures as Muhammad ibn Tarkhan Farabi, Avicenna, Averroes, Ibn Meskawayh, Abu Rayhan Biruni, Hasan ibn Haytham, Jalaluddin Muhammad Rumi, Mir Damad and Sadrilmute'allehin with various range of ideas in different areas of knowledge such as ontology, cosmology and theology as well as hundreds of distinguished Sunnite and Shi'ite jurists who have their own particular jurisprudential frame of reference. They have had both critical and dialogical encounters with each other without getting involved in any counterproductive conflict. As Abu Al-Hasan Ali ibn Ismaeil Asha'ri (died 3 A. H.) notes in his *Believers Discord*, "There are more than a hundred Islamic denominations, including Shi'ite, Mu'tazilite, Ammeh, Bakryyah, Kalbyyah and others, but their differences have never breached the primordial contours of Islam, unless in few cases.

It needs to be mentioned that the existence of various Islamic denominations does not necessary imply that Islam has been really divided into different factions, since if we consider every thinker's view in the history of Islamic doctrines as a denomination, we shall then have thousands of Islamic factions.

On the other hand, no Moslem thinker has ever excommunicated his fellow thinkers. Of course, this is not to say that there were no intellectual engagements whatsoever. Now there are spirited philosophical, theological, literary, juristic and historical debates going on in Islamic countries. If a positive step is taken in a Moslem country, other

countries will also benefit from it. For example, today Allameh Tabatabaei's *Al-Mizan* is widely used in Egypt, Lebanon, Syria and other Moslem countries and on the other hand, Sayyed Qutb's *Fi Zelal al-Quran* has been translated into Persian.

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