

The Voice of Unity Part 3: Roots of Division

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This is the third of a series of talks delivered in 1991 by Muhammad Wa'iz-Zadeh Khurasani. The first two were printed in previous issues of the English Taqrib journal. The present article focuses on the issue of the division and its roots.

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The Voice Of Unity Part 3: Roots Of Division

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Abstract

As the third in a series of talks regarding the subject of unity, the present article focuses on its antonym – i.e., the issue of division. At the outset, two types of differences are mentioned: 1) differences that are condemned in the Qur'an and 2) those that are considered beneficial, or at the least, tolerated by the faith.

This talk focuses on the first of the two. Using the Qur'an as the underlying criteria to understand the issue, the author presents numerous verses from the sacred text in which the topic of division has been broached. His analysis results in the following conclusion: the issue of differences and falling into division is explicitly prohibited in the Qur'an and results in abasement in this world and retribution in the next.

Keywords: Islamic unity, Ummah, Muslim brotherhood, division, sectarianism, transgression, love of the world, partisanship.

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

In the name of Allah, the Compassionate, the Merciful

The topic of our discussion in this chain of speeches is the one single Islamic Ummah and sectarian division. A discussion about unity is naturally related to a discussion about the roots of division. How nice it would be if there were no differences, and the discussion was always about unity and brotherhood. But, the natural course of human life and the reality of the situation show that unity is coupled with differences and division.

The Qur'an discusses the issues of unity and differences together, and as such it would be right for us to do so as well. But, the organization of issues and the summary of them, with the purpose of clarity and explanation, present an obstacle for such a method of discussion.

In the previous two speeches, two particular topics were broached. On the first day, I spoke about the unified Islamic Ummah in an attempt to answer the questions: What is meant by a unified Ummah and what conditions does it have? In the next session, I discussed Islamic brotherhood. Brotherhood, in reality, is the foundation of Islamic unity. Today, our discussion will be about the differences within the Islamic Ummah.

Considering that a great amount of confusion has gradually penetrated the Islamic world over the last fourteen hundred years, and considering the fact that division has permeated Islamic society, it is natural for us to want to examine and find the source of it. The issue of division must be raised and attention must be paid to it, perhaps even more so than unity. It is noteworthy that the Qur'an also mentions this issue more than it speaks of unity, and as mentioned earlier, the two issues are often discussed together.

Two Types Of Differences

The discussion today will answer the following question: are differences always harmful, despicable, and to be avoided or is there such a thing as “beneficial differences”?

In reality, it must be stated that there are two types of differences. One type of difference pertains to beneficial differences, or at least differences that are not to be rejected or despised. There are also differences which are looked down upon and the Qur'an mentions them on the same level as disbelief, thereby prohibiting them.

Some people may surmise that Muslims must be unified in all respects – that all Islamic jurists must pass the same verdicts and that all Islamic thinkers must have the same opinion. But this notion is opposed to both human nature and the Islamic point of view. Often differences can be considered quite positive because they create the foundations for thought and the prelude to reaching the truth. An example of such a preliminary is prudent doubt, and it is often stated that in so far as doubt can be a precursor to knowledge, it is positive. A person would not raise doubt in regards to a particular issue unless he has general knowledge of it, which then becomes the catalyst for him to pursue it further. Doubt causes him to obtain the reality of the issue and to understand it fully.

Differences which act as the precursors to understanding and obtaining the truth are positive. But those that are motivated by evil and result in it are the ones that must be opposed; the misfortune of Muslims stem from this second type of differences.

The Qur'an has mentioned many types of differences. The main portion of my speech will be about the verses which discuss these differences as well as their sources. This will be followed by an analysis separating those differences that should be rejected from those that are beneficial. In general, the following conclusion will be elaborated on: if the differences in question stem from thought or the deep pondering over an issue, without any other factor influencing it – such as politics, carnal desires, rebelliousness, or conceit – religion can tolerate it. This is the principle found in the famous tradition related through both Sunni and Shia sources about Muslim jurists: “The religious authority (mujtahid) who makes a correct ruling receives two rewards and the religious authority who makes a mistake receives one reward.”

Therefore, if differences do not stem from socio-political factors, from love and hatred, from conceit, from rebelliousness (as rebelliousness is mentioned numerous times in the Qur'an), from the transgression of one person upon another, or from division into parties and groups, and instead, if it stems from individuals sincerely pondering about their faith in order to understand the truth and arrive at a conclusion with regard to it, such differences can be tolerated by religion. It would even be accepted if such individuals came to a false conclusion. Shias have been following grand religious authorities (maraji') for more than a thousand years. The grand religious authorities are in unison about universal principles, but they come to different conclusions about particulars.

In many verses of the Qur'an, the issue of differences has been examined as well as the source of these differences. These verses can be divided in the following manner:

1. Verses Which Prohibit Separation And The Formation Of Parties

يَا أَيُّهَا الرُّسُلُ كُلُّوْمِنَ الطَّيِّبَاتِ وَاعْمَلُوْمَا صَالِحًا إِنِّي بِمَا تَعْمَلُوْنَ عَلَيْمُ

“O apostles! Eat of the good things and act righteously. Indeed I know best what you do” (23:51).

وَإِنَّ هَذِهِ أُمَّتُكُمْ أُمَّةٌ وَاحِدَةٌ وَإِنَّا رَبُّكُمْ فَاتَّقُونَ

“Indeed this community of yours is one community, and I am your Lord, so be wary of Me” (23:52).

فَتَقَطَّعُوا أَمْرَهُمْ بَيْنَهُمْ زِبْرًا كُلُّ حِزْبٍ بِمَا لَدَيْهِمْ فَرَحُونَ

“But they fragmented their religion among themselves, each party exulting in what it had” (23:53).

Allah first addresses the messengers to eat of the good things (tayyibat) and to perform righteous deeds. He then states that their Ummah is a single ummah [of messengers] and that Allah is their Lord. Here, the unity of the Ummah is a necessity stemming from the oneness of the Lord.¹ Next, the messengers are ordered to have piety. This piety – which has been emphasized continuously in the Qur'an – is when one takes precaution from acting in accordance with one's carnal desires, ignorance, or conceitedness.

This means that the prerequisite for success in relation to forming a unified Ummah under a monotheistic world view is being firm in piety. One should not lose control of oneself. One should not subject oneself to that which the heart desires, that which the carnal soul dictates, or that which the material world demands. Rather, one should guard oneself and always keep oneself in check.

This part of the verse was about unity. As was mentioned, the Qur'an usually discusses the issue of fragmentation while discussing the issue of unity. Therefore, without delay it states: “But they fragmented their religion among themselves.” The Arabic phrase used is taqatta'u which means to tear something apart with force and persistence, implying that there was a clear division between them – that they broke up to such an extent that unity was not possible thereafter. Then it states: “each party exulting in what it had.”

Here, the “difference” in question pertains to the break-up of a society or the followers of a religion in

such a way that specific parties are formed. The formation of parties signifies that members of all sides are willing to lay their lives down to defend their particular groups' goals and intentions. One can say, therefore, that the form of division that is condemned by the Qur'an is the division that causes separation and the tearing of the Ummah into parties where each party is happy with its intent and with whatever it considers respectable. Each group considers itself to be correct and each group rejects the other groups' ideologies – in essence, "each party exulting in what it had."

Therefore, the type of differences that is condemned is the separation of the Ummah and the formation of parties – that which is in opposition to unity. These divisions have been prohibited in the Qur'an; they are strictly forbidden. In reality, this form of differences is a sickness which has infected the Muslims. Such a sickness must be cured before Muslims can be saved from separation and the formation of parties.

إِنَّ هَذِهِ أُمَّةٌ وَاحِدَةٌ وَأَنَا رَبُّكُمْ فَاعْبُدُونِ

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

وَتَقَطَّعُوا أَمْرُهُمْ بَيْنَهُمْ كُلُّ إِلَيْنَا رَاجِعُونَ

"They have fragmented their religion among themselves. Every one of them will return to Us" (21:93).

Allah ordered Muslims to hold fast to the cord of unity, to become one Ummah, and to worship only one God – Allah. But they destroyed the unity that they had amongst themselves. Allah then warns: "Every one of them will return to Us." In these verses pertaining to division, the Qur'an warns people that everyone will return to Allah and He will judge between them; he will inform them as to who was correct. When the divisions stem from the formation of parties, the establishment of sects, and general fragmentation, Allah states:

كُلُّ إِلَيْنَا رَاجِعُونَ

"Every one of them will return to Us" (21:93).

This expression will be explained more clearly later.

2. Verses Which Prohibit Division After Unity And Which

Command Holding Fast To The Divine Cord And Piety

يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا إِنَّمَا تَنْقُوا اللَّهَ حَقَّ تُقَاتِهِ وَلَا تَمُوتُنَّ إِلَّا وَأَنْتُمْ مُسْلِمُونَ

“O you who have faith! Be wary of Allah (i.e., have piety) with the wariness due to Him and do not die except as Muslims” (3: 102).

وَاعْتَصِمُوا بِحَبْلِ اللَّهِ جَمِيعًا وَلَا تَفَرُّوا وَإِذْكُرُوا نِعْمَتَ اللَّهِ عَلَيْكُمْ إِذْ كُنْتُمْ أَعْدَاءً فَالَّذِي بَيْنَ قُلُوبِكُمْ فَاصْبِحُتُمْ بِنِعْمَتِهِ
إِخْرَاجًا وَكُنْتُمْ عَلَى شَفَافِ حُفْرَةٍ مِنَ النَّارِ فَانْقَدَمْتُمْ مِنْهَا كَذَلِكَ يُبَيِّنُ اللَّهُ لَكُمْ آيَاتِهِ لَعَلَّكُمْ تَهَدُونَ

“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. And you were on the brink of a pit of Fire, whereat He saved you from it. Thus does Allah clarify His signs for you so that you may be guided” (3: 103).

وَلْتَكُنْ مِنْكُمْ أُمَّةٌ يَدْعُونَ إِلَى الْخَيْرِ وَيَأْمُرُونَ بِالْمَعْرُوفِ وَيَنْهَا عَنِ الْمُنْكَرِ وَأُولَئِكَ هُمُ الْمُفْلِحُونَ

“There has to be a nation among you summoning to the good, bidding what is right, and forbidding what is wrong. It is they who are the felicitous” (3: 104).

وَلَا تَكُونُوا كَالَّذِينَ تَفَرَّقُوا وَاحْتَلَفُوا مِنْ بَعْدِ مَا جَاءَهُمُ الْبَيِّنَاتُ وَأُولَئِكَ لَهُمْ عَذَابٌ عَظِيمٌ

“Do not be like those who became divided [into sects] and differed after manifest signs had come to them. For such there will be a great punishment” (3: 105).

يَوْمَ تَبَيَّنُ ظُجُوهُ وَتَسُودُ ظُجُوهُ فَأَمَّا الَّذِينَ اسْوَدَتْ ظُجُوهُهُمْ أَكَفَرُهُمْ بَعْدَ إِيمَانِكُمْ فَذُوقُوا الْعَذَابَ بِمَا كُنْتُمْ تَكْفُرُونَ

“On the day when [some] faces will turn white and [some] faces will turn black. As for those whose faces turn black [it will be said to them], ‘Did you disbelieve after your faith? So taste the punishment because of what you used to disbelieve’” (3: 106).

وَأَمَّا الَّذِينَ أَبْيَضَتْ ظُجُوهُهُمْ فَفِي رَحْمَةِ اللَّهِ هُمْ فِيهَا خَالِدُونَ

“But as for those whose faces become white, they shall dwell in Allah’s mercy, and they will remain in it [forever]” (3: 107).

تِلْكَ آيَاتُ اللَّهِ نَنْتُلُوهَا عَلَيْكَ بِالْحَقِّ وَمَا اللَّهُ يُرِيدُ ظُلْمًا لِلْعَالَمِينَ

“These are the signs of Allah which We recite to you in truth, and Allah does not desire any wrong for the creatures” (3: 108).

وَلِلَّهِ مَا فِي السَّمَاوَاتِ وَمَا فِي الْأَرْضِ ۖ وَإِلَى اللَّهِ تُرْجَعُ الْأُمُورُ

“To Allah belongs whatever is in the heavens and whatever is in the earth, and to Allah all matters are returned” (3: 109).

كُنْتُمْ خَيْرَ أُمَّةٍ أُخْرِجَتْ لِلنَّاسِ تَأْمُرُونَ بِالْمَعْرُوفِ وَتَنْهَوْنَ عَنِ الْمُنْكَرِ وَتُؤْمِنُونَ بِاللَّهِ وَلَوْ آمَنَ أَهْلُ الْكِتَابَ لَكَانَ خَيْرًا لَهُمْ مِنْهُمُ الْمُؤْمِنُونَ وَأَكْثُرُهُمُ الْفَاسِقُونَ

“You are the best nation [ever] brought forth for mankind: you bid what is right and forbid what is wrong, and have faith in Allah. And if the People of the Book had believed, it would have been better for them. Among them [some] are faithful, but most of them are transgressors” (3: 110).

لَنْ يَضْرُوكُمْ إِلَّا أَذْنِي وَإِنْ يُقَاتِلُوكُمْ يُوْلُو الْأَذَبَارَ ثُمَّ لَا يُنْصَرُونَ

“They will never do you any harm, except for some hurt; and if they fight you, they will turn their backs [to flee], then they will not be helped” (3: 111).

ضُرِبَتْ عَلَيْهِمُ الذِّلَّةُ أَيْنَ مَا تُقْفُوا إِلَّا يَحْبِلُ مِنَ النَّاسِ وَيَأْءُوا بِغَضَبٍ مِنَ اللَّهِ وَضُرِبَتْ عَلَيْهِمُ الْمَسْكَنَةُ ذَلِكَ بِأَنَّهُمْ كَانُوا يَكْفُرُونَ بِآيَاتِ اللَّهِ وَيَقْتُلُونَ الْأَنْبِيَاءَ بِغَيْرِ حَقٍّ ذَلِكَ بِمَا عَصَوْا وَكَانُوا يَعْتَدُونَ

“Abasement has been stamped upon them wherever they are confronted, except for an asylum from Allah and an asylum from the people; and they earned the wrath of Allah, and poverty was stamped upon them. That, because they would defy the signs of Allah and kill the prophets unjustly. That, because they would disobey and used to commit transgression” (3: 112).

Through the examination of these verses, the forms of divisions and differences that the Qur'an prohibits will be recognized as well as the methods of curing them. The series of verses begins with the following: **“O you who have faith! Be wary of Allah (i.e., have piety) with the wariness due to Him” (3: 102).** Undoubtedly this is a difficult obligation. Nevertheless, before the Qur'an commands unity, it cites piety – a piety that is due to Allah.

This means that as long as the hearts are not purified and the insubordinate soul is not controlled, unity

will not be reached. It is like a so-called “scholar” who wants to establish his superiority over others and insists on the validity of his speech, though it be incorrect; this will only cause division. Piety must be obtained first. Then, the Qur'an states: “**and do not die except as Muslims [i.e., those who submit]**” (3: 102).

In other words, one must submit to Allah till the end of his life. The person who surrenders to his carnal desires does not have piety and has not submitted to Allah. Rather, he has surrendered to his own soul, his wealth, his position – such a person will not achieve unity nor will he taste the oneness of Allah (tawhid). Therefore, the prerequisite for achieving unity, articulated in this verse and the previous verse, is piety.

وَاعْتَصِمُوا بِحَبْلِ اللَّهِ جَمِيعًا وَلَا تَفَرُّقُوا وَإِنْ كُرُوا نَعْمَتَ اللَّهِ عَلَيْكُمْ إِذْ كُنْتُمْ أَعْدَاءً فَأَلَّفَ بَيْنَ قُلُوبِكُمْ فَأَصْبَحْتُمْ بِنِعْمَتِهِ
إِخْوَانًا وَكُنْتُمْ عَلَى شَفَا حُفْرَةٍ مِنَ النَّارِ فَأَنْقَذْتُكُمْ مِنْهَا كَذَلِكَ يُبَيِّنُ اللَّهُ لَكُمْ آيَاتِهِ لَعَلَّكُمْ تَهَدُونَ

“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. And you were on the brink of a pit of Fire, whereat He saved you from it. Thus does Allah clarify His signs for you so that you may be guided” (3: 103).

The above verse speaks of tafarruq, which in Arabic means “dividing into sects.” The term taqattu' [in previously mentioned verses such as 21:93 and 23:53 for example] means “being torn apart,” while the term tahazzub means “dividing into parties.” All three terms share the same verb form² and usually indicate emphasis or severity.

The series of verses continues with, **“And remember Allah's blessing upon you when you were enemies, then He brought your hearts together, so you became brothers with His blessing”** (3: 103). Brotherhood between the believers and their hearts being brought together is one of the biggest blessings from God. The next verse states: “And you were on the brink of a pit of Fire ...” This is because of the divisions and differences that they had in the Age of Ignorance. The Qur'an continues, “whereat He saved you from it.” Allah saved the Muslims from the sea of fire through unity. The Arabic term inqadh al-ghariq means to save someone from drowning. Then, Allah states: “Thus does Allah clarify His signs for you so that you may be guided.”

Consider the following concepts: piety, surrendering to Allah, holding fast to Allah's cord, bringing together of hearts, brotherhood, divine blessing, and guidance. These divine terms are corollaries of one another (lazim and malzum). On the other hand, enmity in the hearts is similar to fire – i.e, it is a punishment, not a mercy; it is misguidance, not guidance; it is surrendering to one's carnal desires, not submitting to Allah.

Now that we have examined the content of the first set of verses, we must inspect and understand the

next set. Allah immediately states:

وَلَتَكُنْ مِنْكُمْ أُمَّةٌ يَدْعُونَ إِلَى الْخَيْرِ وَيَأْمُرُونَ بِالْمَعْرُوفِ وَيَنْهَا عَنِ الْمُنْكَرِ وَأُولَئِكَ هُمُ الْمُفْلِحُونَ

“There has to be a nation among you summoning to the good, bidding what is right, and forbidding what is wrong. It is they who are the felicitous” (3: 104).

The prerequisite for success in achieving these grand concepts – i.e., in unifying the Ummah, in holding fast to Allah’s cord, in attaining piety, and in submitting to Allah – is that a group of people bid towards the good and forbid the wrong. Immediately after inviting people to that which is right, the Qur'an mentions the issue of bidding what is right and forbidding what is wrong. Without a group of spiritual reformists amongst the Muslims who bid towards the good and forbid the wrong, people will naturally tend towards dividing into sects and parties; they will undoubtedly lose their piety.

Therefore, one of the conditions of moving towards piety and unity is that a group of individuals take the responsibility to ensure that Muslims do not leave the boundaries of righteousness and move towards evil. They must be attentive to where the division into sects is taking place and where unity is dissolving. They must warn the Muslims of its dangers. Such a congregation must exist among the Muslims. If they do exist, then “It is they who are the felicitous.” It is when we take their heed in navigating through the intricate path of Islam and Islamic unity that we too can become felicitous.

The next two verses return to the discussion of dividing into sects:

وَلَا تَكُونُوا كَالَّذِينَ تَفَرَّقُوا وَاحْتَلَّوْا مِنْ بَعْدِ مَا جَاءَهُمُ الْبَيِّنَاتُ وَأُولَئِكَ لَهُمْ عَذَابٌ عَظِيمٌ

“Do not be like those who became divided [into sects] and differed after manifest signs had come to them. For such there will be a great punishment” (3: 105).

يَوْمَ تَبْيَضُّ وُجُوهٌ وَتَسْوُدُ وُجُوهٌ فَمَّا الَّذِينَ اسْوَدَتْ وُجُوهُهُمْ أَكَرَّتُمْ بَعْدَ إِيمَانِكُمْ فَذُوقُوا الْعَذَابَ بِمَا كُنْتُمْ تَكْفُرُونَ

“On the day when [some] faces will turn white and [some] faces will turn black. As for those whose faces turn black [it will be said to them], ‘Did you disbelieve after your faith? So taste the punishment because of what you used to disbelieve” (3: 106).

What does Allah say to those whose faces turned dark? He asks them: “Did you disbelieve after your faith?” Did you divide after you unified? Did you turn to the path of evil after you treading the path of righteousness? Division after unity, in reality, is disbelief after faith. Then He continues:

وَأَمَّا الَّذِينَ أَبْيَضَتْ وُجُوهُهُمْ فَفِي رَحْمَةِ اللَّهِ هُمْ فِيهَا خَالِدُونَ

“But as for those whose faces become white, they shall dwell in Allah’s mercy, and they will remain in it [forever]” (3: 107).

Pay attention here for it is understood from the sequence of verses that the supporters of unity will have bright faces in this world and will be felicitous in the next. The supporters of division are the opposite – they will be punished in this world and the next; their faces will be dark.

Islamic unity and brotherhood are blessings of Allah in this world and will cause comfort in the next. On the other hand, division in this world causes punishment in the hereafter. Having a bright face in this world causes the possession of a bright face in the next; having a dark face in this world causes the possession of a dark face in the hereafter. The Qur'an portrays the conditions of fortunate and unfortunate people by these two material terms: bright faces and dark faces.

It is interesting that after discussing this subject – that of unity and division – the Qur'an returns to the issue of bidding the right and forbidding the wrong. Therefore, first the discussion was about unity and division. Then the issue of bidding the right and forbidding the wrong was raised. The discussion then returned back to unity and division, only to be followed once again by the concept of bidding the right and forbidding the wrong:

كُنْتُمْ خَيْرَ أُمَّةٍ أَخْرَجْتُ لِلنَّاسِ تَأْمُرُونَ بِالْمَعْرُوفِ وَتَنْهَوْنَ عَنِ الْمُنْكَرِ

“You are the best nation [ever] brought forth for mankind: you bid what is right and forbid what is wrong” (3: 110).

As explained, “right” (ma'ruf) in the context of this verse means unity and brotherhood; “wrong” (munkar) means division into sects and parties, causing differences, and moving towards disbelief from faith. Therefore, the issue of unity and division is completely connected to the issue of bidding the good and forbidding the wrong.

At the end of this set of verses, the People of the Scripture are made as examples for us to take admonition from. The verse states:

ضُرِبَتْ عَلَيْهِمُ الذَّلَّةُ أَيْنَ مَا ثُقِفُوا

“Abasement has been stamped upon them wherever they are confronted...” (3: 112).

The conclusion is clear: if Muslims disregard unity and divide up into sects and parties, they will have the same destiny. Looking at the situation today, one can ask the following: Why are Muslims more abased

and subjugated than others? Why have others progressed and taken control of Muslims? Before, there were two super-powers in the world; now there is one; in the future, who knows how many super-powers there will be? The point is that all of them are non-Muslim and wield considerable authority over Muslims. Why? The reason is that Muslims have traversed the path of division – the necessary outcome of dividing into sects and parties is abasement.

3. Verses Which Prohibit Heated Debates, Becoming Weak In Religion, Worshiping The World, The Decree Of Obedience, And The Decree Of Patience

وَأَطِيعُوا اللَّهَ وَرَسُولَهُ وَلَا تَنَازَعُوا فَتَفْشِلُوا وَتَذَهَّبَ رِيحُكُمْ وَاصْبِرُوا إِنَّ اللَّهَ مَعَ الصَّابِرِينَ

“And obey Allah and His Apostle, and do not dispute, or you will lose heart and your power will be gone. And be patient; indeed Allah is with the patient” (8:46).

The obedience of Allah and His Apostle is holding fast to Allah's cord and piety, which, as was previously stated, is the source of unity and the source of goodness. Here dispute means fighting one another; differences must not present themselves in the form of dispute. What would happen if the differences do reach a state of dispute? You will lose heart. The Arabic term fashal (the verbal noun for tafshalu in the verse) means to lose courage. The Ummah will become a defective and weak ummah which can quickly become abased. Then it states: ***“And be patient; indeed, Allah is with the patient” (8:46).*** If you want to prevent these disputes and fashal you must be patient. Patience has a close relationship with piety because piety cannot occur without patience. If man desires a thing and a satanic thought crosses his mind, he has to be patient and control himself.

There are many types of patience, one of which is patience in the face of sin, and this is the patience implied here. If the source of division is rooted in carnal desires or a spiritual sickness then one must learn to be patient. For example, if two Muslims have different opinions about an intellectual issue (and Islam does not necessarily look down upon this), then one must not let one's ego take a path that leads towards the division into parties and sects, or separation. If they have a difference of opinion, they must accept each other and tolerate the difference. They must bear the opposing view – i.e., they must be patient. Therefore, the method of keeping disputes from causing separation and the division into sects is piety and patience.

وَلَقَدْ صَدَقُكُمُ اللَّهُ وَعْدُهُ إِذْ تَحْسُنُونَهُمْ يَإِذْنِهِ حَتَّىٰ إِذَا فَشَلْتُمْ وَتَنَازَعْتُمْ فِي الْأَمْرِ وَعَصَيْتُمْ مِنْ بَعْدِ مَا أَرَأَكُمْ مَا تُحِبُّونَ مِنْكُمْ مَنْ يُرِيدُ الدُّنْيَا وَمِنْكُمْ مَنْ يُرِيدُ الْآخِرَةَ ثُمَّ صَرَفَكُمْ عَنْهُمْ لِيَبْتَأِكُمْ وَلَقَدْ عَفَا عَنْكُمْ وَاللَّهُ ذُو فَضْلٍ عَلَى الْمُؤْمِنِينَ

“Allah certainly fulfilled His promise to you when you were slaying them with His leave, until you lost courage, disputed about the matter, and disobeyed after He showed you what you loved. Some of you desire this world, and some of you desire the Hereafter. Then He turned you away from them so that He might test you. Certainly, He has excused you, for Allah is gracious to the faithful” (3: 152).

In this verse, Allah states his support for the Muslims up until “**you lost courage, disputed about the matter...**” – i.e., until their unified and strong society became weak and they fell into dispute with one another. They fell into sin after victory was granted to them. Here, Allah does not promise to continue supporting them. His promise of assistance is only as long as they protect their brotherhood and help Him:

إِنْ تَتَّصُّرُوا اللَّهُ يَنْتَصِرُكُمْ...

“If you help Allah, He will help you.” (47:7)

It is clear that divine aid has conditions, but when you have become weak, when you have walked away from your revolution or have become weak with regard to it, when excuses start to appear, and when sins become prevalent, divine help will not be heard of anymore.

Why have divisions and disputes arisen? Why did people turn towards sin after obedience? The answer lies in the verse: “Some of you desire this world, and some of you desire the Hereafter.” Your differences are in this world; your disputes are regarding this world. All differences have roots in the love of this world for “the love of the world is the root of all evil.” This is the truth. Even intellectual and political differences have roots in the love of this world. Moreover, your paths and destinations were different. Some sought after the world and some sought after the Hereafter. The differences rooted in the love of this world are the differences condemned by the Qur'an.

There are other differences opposed to these differences. A person seeking the truth studies, discusses, and inquires. But, as long as he has not reached the truth, he will undoubtedly have differences with other people who are also seeking the truth. But, these differences do not stem from carnal desires, seeking worldly benefits, seeking position, seeking division into parties, or seeking division into sects – rather, it is a difference of opinion. Since reality has yet to be discovered for such seekers, there is no escaping such differences. This type of difference will be discussed in the next discussion about ijtihad.

4. Prohibition Of Division After The Truth Is Known With The Purpose Of Transgression Against Others

A few verses will be mentioned where people divided after clear knowledge was given to them. The Qur'an prohibits such division, even mentioning that it reaches the border of disbelief:

وَلَا تَكُونُوا كَالَّذِينَ تَفَرَّقُوا وَاحْتَلَفُوا مِنْ بَعْدِ مَا جَاءَهُمُ الْبَيِّنَاتُ ۝ وَأُولُوْنِكَ لَهُمْ عَذَابٌ عَظِيمٌ

“Do not be like those who became divided [into sects] and differed after manifest signs had come to them. For such there will be a great punishment” (3: 105).

...أَقِيمُوا الدِّينَ وَلَا تَتَفَرَّقُوا فِيهِ ...

“...Maintain the religion, and do not be divided in it...” (42: 13).

... وَمَا تَفَرَّقُوا إِلَّا مِنْ بَعْدِ مَا جَاءَهُمُ الْعِلْمُ بَغْيًا بَيْنَهُمْ

“They did not divide [into sects] except after the knowledge had come to them out of transgression with one another...” (42: 14).

The Arabic term baghy means transgression and oppression. For instance, when a leader is delinquent, another will take over leadership. A fight will occur between them and this is how division occurs. They do not only have a difference in an intellectual issue; rather, one of them wants to rule over the other and the other wants the same.

This usually happens after knowledge. They do not seek knowledge in order to find the truth, for they have already found the truth. Rather, each of them has impure intentions and wants to actualize them. The way that they can achieve this is through separation and division.

...وَمَا اخْتَلَفَ فِيهِ إِلَّا الَّذِينَ أُوتُوا مِنْ بَعْدِ مَا جَاءَهُمُ الْبَيِّنَاتُ بَغْيًا بَيْنَهُمْ...

... and none differed in it except those who had been given it, after the manifest proofs had come to them, out of transgression with one another... (2:213)

Most of these verses are about the Israelites. They are explicitly identified in some places of the Qur'an:

وَمَا اخْتَلَفَ الَّذِينَ أُوتُوا الْكِتَابَ إِلَّا مِنْ بَعْدِ مَا جَاءَهُمُ الْعِلْمُ بَغْيًا بَيْنَهُمْ

“... and those who were given the Book did not differ except after knowledge had come to them, out of transgression with one another...” (3: 19).

In another verse it states:

وَلَقَدْ بَوْأْنَا بَنِي إِسْرَائِيلَ مُبْوَأً صِدْقٍ وَرَزَقْنَاهُمْ مِنَ الطَّيِّبَاتِ فَمَا اخْتَلَفُوا حَتَّىٰ جَاءَهُمُ الْعِلْمُ إِنَّ رَبَّكَ يَقْضِي بَيْنَهُمْ يَوْمَ الْقِيَامَةِ فِيمَا كَانُوا فِيهِ يَخْتَلِفُونَ

“Certainly, We settled the Children of Israel in a worthy settlement and We provided them with all the good things, and they did not differ until [after] the knowledge had come to them. Your Lord will indeed judge between them on the Day of Resurrection concerning that about which they used to differ” (10:93).

The Israelites were given the good things in life (tayyibat) as well as position [as seen in the next verse mentioned]:

وَفَضَّلْنَاهُمْ عَلَى الْعَالَمِينَ...

“I gave you an advantage over all the nations” (45: 16).

But after all of these blessings were given to them, after scripture and clear knowledge was given to them, they still divided into sects. It is clear that such people do not have piety; that they did not practice patience against their lower self.

Another verse:

وَلَقَدْ آتَيْنَا بَنِي إِسْرَائِيلَ الْكِتَابَ وَالْحُكْمَ وَالنُّبُوَّةَ وَرَزَقْنَاهُمْ مِنَ الطَّيِّبَاتِ وَفَضَّلْنَاهُمْ عَلَى الْعَالَمِينَ

“Certainly, We gave the Children of Israel the Book, judgment and prophethood and We provided them with all the good things, and We gave them an advantage over all the nations” (45: 16).

وَآتَيْنَاهُمْ بَيَّنَاتٍ مِنَ الْأَمْرِ فَمَا اخْتَلَفُوا إِلَّا مِنْ بَعْدِ مَا جَاءَهُمُ الْعِلْمُ بَغْيًا بَيْنَهُمْ إِنَّ رَبَّكَ يَقْضِي بَيْنَهُمْ يَوْمَ الْقِيَامَةِ فِيمَا كَانُوا فِيهِ يَخْتَلِفُونَ

“And We gave them manifest precepts. But they did not differ except after knowledge had come to them, out of transgression with one another. Indeed, your Lord will judge between them on the Day of Resurrection concerning that about which they used to differ” (45: 17).

The Qur'an narrates many stories of the Israelites for the Muslims so that the Muslims can take admonition. The Israelites attained success, overpowered the Pharaoh, and established a government. They were superior to other nations in their own time. Some historians said that the flag of monotheism, during the period of their reign, was in their hands. Other nations were not monotheistic. After this, they lost all their fortune at once. Why? “But they did not differ except after knowledge had come to them, out

of transgression with one another” – because they wanted to transgress against others.

If you read the existent Torah (which, in reality, is a history of the Israelites clearly written after Moses, and not a heavenly scripture) you will find many passages pointing to the competition between the tribes of Israel. Their competition reached such a level that two governments were established in the tiny country of Palestine: in the north there was a government called the Kingdom of Israel, and in the south, there was a government called the Kingdom of Judah.

Through their actions, they wrote their history. The Qur'an instructs Muslims to take admonition from it, to open their eyes, and to see that after the Israelites reached the height of power, they were abased, and as the Qur'an states, their abasement will last until the Day of Judgment. The root of this calamity was the fact that they fell into division. Hopefully Muslims will not suffer a similar fate though, unfortunately, they have already set foot on that path.

The verse then warns: “Indeed your Lord will judge between them on the Day of Resurrection concerning that about which they used to differ.” He will say that their differences and divisions were invalid. Despite having the Torah in their hands, despite possessing clear knowledge, they still went off track. All of them were in the wrong; it is not the case where one of them is correct and the other is wrong. All of them are in the wrong. This is a promise of punishment dished out by Allah for people who, after clear knowledge has come to them, move towards division into parties, the seeking of position, and the seeking of this world because of their lower self. They move towards paths which have nothing in them except mistakes and misguidance.

In another place the Qur'an states:

لَمْ جَعَلْنَاكَ عَلَى شَرِيعَةٍ مِنَ الْأَمْرِ فَاتَّبِعْهَا وَلَا تَتَّبِعْ أَهْوَاءَ الَّذِينَ لَا يَعْلَمُونَ

“Then We set you upon a clear course of the Law; so follow it, and do not follow the desires of those who do not know” (45: 18).

Paraphrased, this verse states: “O Prophet. We showed you a path of religion, so resort to it. Do not follow the desires of ignorant people – which is the path of mistakes, disputes, divisions, and carnal desires.” The Commander of the Faithful states in one of his speeches: “Your biggest fears are two: following your carnal desires and having unreachable hopes.”³ Carnal desires means the disregard for piety which is the source of unity. Unreachable hopes are desires which one would not be able to obtain even if he lived for more than a century.

These two issues cause man to disregard the truth resulting in dispute and division.

وَلَقَدْ آتَيْنَا مُوسَى الْكِتَابَ فَاخْتَلَفَ فِيهِ وَلَوْلَا كَلِمَةً سَبَقَتْ مِنْ رَبِّكَ لَعُصِيَ بَيْنَهُمْ وَإِنَّهُمْ لَفِي شَكٍ مِنْهُ مُرِيبٌ

“Certainly, We gave Moses the Book, but differences arose about it, and were it not for a prior decree of your Lord, a decision would have been made between them; indeed, they are in grave doubt concerning it” (11:110).

They disputed about the book itself. In another verse it states:

وَإِنَّ الَّذِينَ اخْتَلَفُوا فِي الْكِتَابِ لَفِي شِقَاقٍ بَعِيدٍ ...

“...and those who differ about the Book are surely in extreme defiance” (2:176).

In the previous verses, disputes about the truth after it was known were mentioned. But, in these two verses, disputes about the divine book are mentioned. These disputes would definitely become the source of future disputes.

5. Verses Mentioning The Differences Amongst Parties

The differences of parties are mentioned in a few verses of the Qur'an. For instance:

فَاخْتَلَفَ الْأَحْزَابُ مِنْ بَيْنِهِمْ ...

“But the factions differed among themselves” (19:37).

If a nation divides into parties, it implies that there are differences between themselves; in the absence of such differences, they would not have become divided. The issue of dividing into parties is an important issue in the Qur'an. It is necessary to deliver an entire speech about this issue. Whenever the Qur'an wants to speak negatively, it uses the term 'parties' (ahzab). Whenever it uses the term 'party' (hizb) it is describing the party of Allah. This means that the party of Allah, amongst the Muslims, is only one party; if it is divided into parties then a tragedy has occurred.

Initially, I had wished to end this speech with a discussion regarding the differences which are acceptable and termed ijihad. Although it is an interesting discussion, it is quite lengthy and I will leave it for the next talk. In that talk, we shall differentiate between the two types of differences in Islam:

- 1) That which has been rejected by the Qur'an and have even been described as being on the brink of disbelief, and
- 2) That which is acceptable according to the Qur'an and Islam – i.e., those differences that are in the fields of science and religion such as differences within Islamic jurisprudence and theology.

It is imperative to clearly demarcate the line between these two types of differences – that which is rejected and that which is praised – in order to avoid confusing the issue.

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1. Refer to the first speech. This verse was explained in two different ways: one of them was the unity of religions in so far as all the messengers belong to one Ummah, which is how it is explained here, and the other is the unity of the Islamic Ummah.
 2. In Arabic morphology, the form is called ‘Bab al-taffa’ul.’ Hans Wehr has listed it as the sixth verb form. [tr.]
 3. Nahj al-Balaghah, speech 28.

[1] [1]

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