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Abstract: Muslim unity has been a key intellectual preoccupation of Muslim thinkers in recent decades. Among all types of convergence, religious ones based on commonalities is a fundamental strategy for Islamic unity and the proximity of Islamic denominations. Considering some Qur'anic references and hadiths, this article considers the commonalities of Islamic denominations as a strategic key to Islamic unity in all arenas.

Introduction

No doubt, achieving Islamic unity and convergence, creating a creative, effective, and lasting integrity, and eliminating various distances in the Islamic world nowadays require attention to common elements of Islamic denominations. Given the close and systematic relation among these elements, when each one is realized, it has a direct and similar effect on the others' realization as well. Hence, this article explores the commonalities agreed upon by all Islamic denominations.

The Qur'an

A main element in consensus among Islamic denominations is the eternal miracle of Prophet Muhammad: the Qur'an. All denominations and intellectual schools, despite all their minor disagreements, regard their beliefs as originated from the Qur'an, insisting on it and not tolerating any opposition to it in their thought system.

The unifying approach to the Qur'an can be examined in two ways:

The Qur'an And The Origin Of Islamic Denominations

The Qur'an is the last divine book sent down by God to Prophet Muhammad to guide mankind. The fact that all Islamic denominations consider all their beliefs and thoughts as derived from it is one of their common points. They believe that the Qur'an has expressed whatever necessary for man's eternal perfection and salvation, and that it is the divine word immune from any alteration because God considers Himself as its Protector.[1]

According to the Qur'an, monotheism brings all monotheists together and creates a unified, strong and grand ummah by placing each member in his appropriate place:

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

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

Thus, the Qur'an is the main commonality of all Islamic denominations whose followers can hold fast to it as "Allah's cord;" they interact with one another, and revolve around it in the cultural, political, and social arenas. God said in the Qur'an:

"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***).

Commentators of the Qur'an have unanimously considered *"Allah's cord"* to be God and the Qur'an. In addition to bringing up the issue of Islamic unity, Muslims are asked to hold fast to the Qur'an.

Interfaith Dialogue In The Qur'an

Given that the Qur'an emphasizes on Muslim unity, it presents Muslims with logical strategies for dialogue among Islamic denominations.

The Necessity Of Dialogue Among Islamic Denominations

According to the Qur'an, there is no obligation to accept Islamic beliefs. There is no compulsion in religion:

"Rectitude has become distinct from error" **(*2:256*).**

On the other hand, Islam is the accepted religion by God:

"For Allah, the religion is Islam" **(*3:19*).**

The most comprehensive and perfect religion:

"We prescribed for you the religion which We had enjoined upon Noah and which We have **[*also*]** ***revealed to you, and which We had enjoined upon Abraham, Moses, and Jesus"*** **(*42:13*).**

According to Sayyid Qutb, beliefs are not the matter of emulation; rather, one should strive for them – like the Imamites – who hold that principles of religion cannot be emulated although the branches of religion can.

Regarding compulsion in religion, Ayatullah Mutahhari said:

The gist of the Qur'anic logic is that there is no compulsion in Islam because the truth, and the path to guidance and growth is clearly distinguished from the path to error and deviation. Everyone is free to choose either one. There are some Qur'anic verses saying that religion is based on invitation not compulsion.[2]

Hence, the way to propagate Islam is through the dialogue emphasized by the Qur'an, which elaborates on both interfaith and intra-faith dialogue. The late Kashif al-Ghita, a forerunner of interfaith and intra-faith dialogue said, "Muslims have been invited to the firm hold, the inseparable link the Qur'an- and God advised the Islamic ummah to hold fast to "Allah's cord" because the eternal salvation of Muslim nations is not possible otherwise ..."[3]

The Methods Of Dialogue Between Islamic Denominations

In addition to emphasis on dialogue, the Qur'an draws attention to the psychological methods of dialogue.

As for the role of the Qur'an in Islamic dialogue, Ayatullah Taskhiri said, "The Qur'an teaches Muslims the best method of dialogue. If the Qur'an serves as our eyes, tongue, and ears, we will engage in the real dialogue."[4] Also, according to researchers, "Dialogue enjoys so high a status and so much importance that after the word 'Allah', the word "dialogue" (i.e., *qawl* in Arabic and its derivations) is the most frequently used word.[5]

Religious Commonalities

An issue underlined by the Qur'an regarding dialogue is religious commonalities: religious dialogue should be held within the framework of religious commonalities:

"Say, 'O People of the Book! Come to a word common between us and you: that we will worship no one but Allah, and that we will not ascribe any partner to Him, and that we will not take each other as lords besides Allah.' But if they turn away, say, 'Be witnesses that we are Muslims'" (***3:64***).

With concern over hypocrisy and disagreement among Muslims, the Qur'an refers Muslims to the principles of monotheism and the prophethood of Prophet Muhammad, and the Qur'an as unifying factors. It also commands that aggressors be firmly confronted:

"O you who have faith! Obey Allah and obey the Apostle and those vested with authority among you. And if you dispute concerning anything, refer it to Allah and the Apostle, if you have faith in Allah and the Last Day. That is better and more favourable in outcome" (***4:59***).

The Logical And Scholarly Dialogue

The Qur'an reveals that Islam is the religion of intellect. It has defined the primary Islamic beliefs using logic and reason. It has also underlined this wise method in inter- and intra-religious dialogues of Muslims.

"Invite to the way of your Lord with wisdom and good advice and dispute with them in a manner that is best" (***16:125***).

According to this verse, three conditions of "wisdom", "preaching", and "dispute" concern the styles of speaking. The Prophet was assigned to invite people to Islam through one of these three styles, although "dispute" in its meaning is not considered an invitation.[6]

When religious discussions are held among thinkers of Islamic denominations, considering the above conditions when seeking the truth, it will lead to desirable outcomes and will pave the way for Muslims' coexistence, regardless of their inclinations.

In the Qur'anic commentary *Nemuneh*, we read about this verse:

The phrase "Invite to the way of your Lord with wisdom" refers to rational arguments; "and good advice" refers to emotional discussions with those not influenced by argumentation; and "and dispute with them in a manner that is best" refers to the emptying of minds of wrong ideas through correct debate so that they become ready to accept the truth."[7]

Given the above verse, Allah has explicitly forbidden Prophet Muhammad from illogical and non-scholarly discussions, and this ruling is not specific to him because, according to commentators, the time of its of revelation is not specified; it includes and addresses followers of all Islamic denominations in all eras.

Ethical Dialogue

According to the Qur'an, having discussions is the main strategy for exchanging ideas, opening avenues for creativity, spiritual growth, social interaction, and peaceful coexistence. The Qur'an emphasizes on modes of discussion and its content, and commands people to observe truthfulness:

"So, give good news to My servants who listen to the word [***of Allah***] ***and follow the best*** [***sense***] ***of it"*** (***39: 17***).

"They are the ones whom Allah has guided, and it is they who possess intellect" (***39: 18***).

In numerous verses, Muslims are told to engage in polite, amicable, and rational dialogue; without any traces of harshness, admonishment, or disrespect.

The Prophetic Sunnah

Another main source and a factor in proximity of Islamic denominations is the prophetic sunnah, or way of life. Ayatullah Mutahhari said, "A source of knowledge through which a Muslim should rectify and perfect his insight is the Prophet's *sirah*."[8] Indeed, two primary Islamic sources are the Qur'an and the Prophet's sunnah.

The Position Of Prophet Muhammad In The Qur'an

One factor in the universality of a school of thought to keep society united is its objectiveness and firmness, along with having role models. Islam introduces perfect role models along with these universal instructions and teachings. It couples speech with actions, with Prophet Muhammad as the exemplar for

mankind in noble qualities.

"Nor does he speak out of [***his own***] ***desire"*** (***53:3***).

"It is just a revelation that is revealed [***to him***]***"*** (***53:4***).

"Take whatever the Apostle gives you, and relinquish whatever he forbids you, and be wary of Allah" (***59:7***).

The above verses convey the Prophet's role and position in all respects, and God's expectations of Muslims originate from his roles as a guide and a leader. The Prophet's words are revelations from God: his personal inclinations and socio-political presumptions do not affect or change them. God expects every Muslim to obey the Prophet's instructions and abstain from what he prohibited.

"In the Apostle of Allah there is certainly for you a good exemplar, for those who look forward to Allah and the Last Day and remember Allah greatly" (***33:21***).

According to the Qur'an, Prophet Muhammad was the absolute role model; he set an example in all aspects of man's perfection.

The Ahl Al-Bayt

Despite all scientific disagreements and various theological, juridical, and traditional tendencies, many Muslims sincerely heed the Prophet's Ahl Al-Bayt; they are considered superior to other companions, successors, and jurists of various Islamic denominations.

The Referents Of The Ahl Al-Bayt

A main discussion on the Ahl Al-Bayt among Muslims is the referents of Ahl Al-Bayt. Shi'as and a group of Sunnis believe that the Ahl Al-Bayt refers to Imam Ali, Lady Fatimah, Imam Hasan, Imam Husayn, and the Imams after them. However, some Sunnis maintain that it also includes the Prophet's wives.

The Shi'as and some Sunnis cited some verses and hadiths (from both Shi'a and Sunni sources) to make a case for their argument.

In the commentary on the verse:

"Indeed, Allah desires to repel all impurity from you, O People of the Household, and purify you with a thorough purification" (***33:33***).

There are many Shi'a and Sunni narrations to introduce the People of the Cloak as the Ahl Al-Bayt.

For example, when the verse of Tathir[9] was revealed to Prophet Muhammad in Umma Salamah's house, the Prophet summoned Lady Fatimah, Imam Hasan and Imam Husayn, and covered them and

Imam Ali behind him with a cloak. Then he said, *"O' Allah! These are my Ahl Al-Bayt, keep away impurity from them!'* Umma Salamah asked, *"O' the Messenger of Allah! Am I included as well?"* The Prophet answered, "You have your own status."[10]

Regarding the verse of Mubahalah, which reads:

"Come! Let us call our sons and your sons, our women and your women, our souls and your souls, then let us pray earnestly and call down Allah's curse upon the liars" **(*3:61*).**

Prophet Muhammad introduced the Ahl Al-Bayt. Sa'd in Abi Waqqas reported, "When the verse of Mubahalah was revealed, the Prophet called Imam Ali, Lady Fatimah, Imam Hasan and Imam Husayn and said, 'O' Allah! These are my Ahl Al-Bayt.'"[11]

Likewise, on the commentary on the verse of Mawaddat, which reads:

"Say, 'I do not ask you any reward for it except love of* [*my*] *relatives'" **(*42:23*).**

There are many hadiths narrated from Prophet Muhammad in which the referents of the Ahl Al-Bayt are clearly mentioned. For example, ibn Abbas said, "When the verse was revealed, the Prophet was asked, 'O' the Messenger of Allah! Who are those whom we are ordered to love?' The Prophet said, "Ali, Fatimah, and their offspring, Hasan and Husayn.'"[12]

The Religious Authority Of The Ahl Al-Bayt

"Religious authority" refers to that which all Muslims agree upon, and what they refer to in their disagreements. Religious authority uncovers the truths of the Qur'an and sunnah in theology and legal issues.[13]

God said in the Qur'an,

"We did not send down the Book to you except* [*for the purpose*] *that you may clarify for them what they differ about" **(*16:64*).**

The Qur'an And The Religious Authority Of Ahl Al-Bayt

The school of the Ahl Al-Bayt's is more prominent than those of other denominations in Qur'anic commentary and its esoteric exegesis. This prominence results from their connection to the Prophet and revelation: "They know Qur'anic commentary and esoteric exegesis of the Qur'an."[14]

2. The Ahl Al-Bayt are the People of the Reminder: the Qur'an says,

"Ask the People of the Reminder if you do not know" **(*16:43*).**

According to the Tabari Qur'anic commentary, "When this verse was revealed, Ali said, 'We are the

People of the Reminder.'"[15]

2. The Ahl Al-Bayt are firmly grounded in knowledge:

"But no one knows its interpretation except Allah and those firmly grounded in knowledge; they say, 'We believe in it; all of it is from our Lord. ' And none takes admonition except those who possess intellect" **(*3:7*).**

Imam Ali (ʿa) said about those who are firmly grounded in knowledge:

Where are those who assumed that they – not we – know the Qur'anic knowledge and science? They attribute lies to us and wrong us. God has elevated us and made them inferior; He has granted us [His favour], and deprived them of [it], and He has included us in His grace and excluded them from it. The path of guidance is trodden through our guidance, and the light is sought from us for the blind hearts.[16]

The Prophetic Sunna And The Religious Authority Of The Ahl Al-Bayt

Because the Ahl Al-Bayt are firmly grounded in knowledge since they have been trained in the house of revelation, they are qualified enough to master esoteric exegesis and reach an exclusive position that ordinary people do not have access to. Since the first days of his public invitation to Islam, the Prophet spoke to the Muslims about the religious authority of the Ahl Al-Bayt on many occasions.

1. The Ahl Al-Bayt are parallel to the Qur'an:

In the Hadith of Thaqalayn, Prophet Muhammad said, "I will leave you something so that you may not go astray after me. Each of them is weightier than the other; one is the Book of Allah, the rope drawn from the heaven to the earth, and the other is my Ahl Al-Bayt. These two will not separate until they come to me at the pond [of Kawthar]. So be careful about how you treat them after me."[17]

2. The Ahl Al-Bayt are the basis for the Ummah's security:

Prophet Muhammad said, "The stars protect the earth dwellers from being drowned, and my Ahl Al-Bayt safeguard my Ummah from disagreement."[18]

3. The Ahl Al-Bayt are the most knowledgeable about the Qur'an and the prophetic sunnah:

Imam Ali said, "We, Ahl Al-Bayt, know about what Allah and His Prophet said."[19]

The Religious Authority Of The Ahl Al-Bayt And The Ummah

No fair-minded Muslim who knows the least about Islamic teachings and history can deny the prominent and matchless role of the Ahl Al-Bayt in spreading Islamic teachings, particularly Qur'anic analysis and prophetic sunnah. Acknowledgements of companions and leaders of Islamic denominations, as well as Sunni scholars about the Ahl Al-Bayt's religious authority and scientific position are mentioned below.

On various instances, Umar referred to Imam Ali's vital role in his life: "Were it not for Ali, Umar would perish,"[20] and "O' Ali! You are the best of youths."[21]

Ibn Asakir said, "I have found no Hashimite man better than Ali ibn Husayn [Imam Sajjad] and no more knowledgeable jurist than him."[22] Abdullah ibn Ata also said, "All the scholars and scientists were less scientifically powerful than Imam al-Baqir."[23] Likewise, Fakhr Razi wrote in his commentary, "We never forget that Ali's word is prior and superior to that of other companions, because the Prophet said, 'Ali is with the truth, and the truth is with Ali.'"[24]

On the one hand, there is Qur'anic and traditional evidence for the scientific status of the Ahl Al-Bayt, and on the other, several Sunni caliphs and scholars acknowledged this. Now there is a question as to why throughout the history of Islam, Shi'as hardly looked at the Ahl Al-Bayt from this perspective and have emphasised Imamate more in the sense of leadership. This is perhaps partly because the first disagreement between Shi'as and Sunnis is the issue of leadership.

The Love For Ahl Al-Bayt

Love for the Ahl Al-Bayt is an Islamic principle and a common point of all Islamic denominations, resulting in their proximity and underlined in the Qur'an and hadiths; all Islamic denominations love the Ahl Al-Bayt. The Qur'an refer to the love for Ahl Al-Bayt as the reward for prophetic mission:

"Say, 'I do not ask you any reward for it except love of [***my***] ***relatives'"*** (***42:23***).

Hasakani narrated from ibn Abbas, "When the verse of Mawaddat (love) was revealed, the Prophet was asked, 'Who are those whom we are ordered to love?' The Prophet answered, 'Ali, Fatimah and their two sons.'"[25]

Prominent Qur'anic commentators, hadith scholars, literary figures and poets inferred one single meaning from this verse: that the Prophet asked us to love "his relatives."[26]

Love For The Ahl Al-Bayt From Sunni Scholars' Point Of View

References to the virtues and excellence of the Ahl Al-Bayt in hadiths, historical, and theological texts are not specific to Shi'as. For centuries, authors from other Islamic denominations have also addressed this issue:

Speaking of the Sunni writings about the Ahl Al-Bayt and their virtues, other than witnessing Sunni scholars' works on the excellence of Ahl Al-Bayt and the Imams, and their books on the Qur'anic commentary, hadiths, theology, history, ethics, and so forth, covering the excellence of the Ahl Al-Bayt, they have also referred to Imam Ali and his offspring's virtues on many various occasions. For instance, there are more than 150 Sunni books on Imam Mahdi's virtues and issues related to him and his government ...[27]

The Iranian Supreme Leader, Ayatullah Khamenei, said about the role of love for Ahl Al-Bayt in unifying Muslims in the international conference on Ahl Al-Bayt:

The issue of the Ahl Al-Bayt is one of the most important ones in Islam. The love for Ahl Al-Bayt is an obligation which all Muslims world-wide – regardless of their denominations, affiliations, and inclinations – have accepted and are proud of... We must not suppose that love for the Ahl Al-Bayt is exclusive to us [Shi'as], and we should not be mistaken and think that the Ahl Al-Bayt belong only to us. The Ahl Al-Bayt belong to Islam, as their forefather – the Prophet of Islam – has belonged to Islam. The Ahl Al-Bayt belong to the world and history, as their forefather has belonged to mankind and history.[28]

Conclusion

Islamic denominations enjoy commonalities, such as the Qur'an, the Prophetic Sunna, the scientific authority of Ahl Al-Bayt, and the love for them. The Qur'an and the prophetic Sunna are considered two main sources of Shari'ah (Islamic law) and the common points of all Islamic denominations; the authority of other sources depend on them. The scientific authority of Ahl Al-Bayt is, in fact, the continuation of the prophetic Sunna. The Qur'an specified the necessity of all Muslims' love for Ahl Al-Bayt, all Islamic denominations have accepted this, and the historical experience has proved it.

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1. Refer to verse 15:9.
2. Mutahhari, p. 33.
3. Kheirkhah, no. 8, p. 50.
4. Taskhiri, vol. 51, 52, p. 22.
5. Qadrdan, p.1.
6. Allamah Tabataba'i, 1374 SAH, col. 12, p, 534.
7. Makarim Shirazi, 1373 SAH, vol. 10, p. 393.
8. Mutahhari, 1377 SAH, p. 37.
9. Verse 33:33.
10. Tirmidhi, 1403 AH, vol. S, p. 351.
11. Neyshahuri, vol. 3, p. 162.
12. Hasakani, 1411 AH, vol. 2, p. 130.
13. Bi-Azar Shirazi, 184, 14.
14. Kulayni, 1388 AH, vol. 1, p. 213; Majlisi, 1360 SAH, pp. 89-99.
15. Tabari, 1421 AH, vol. 17, p. 5.
16. Nahj-ul-Balagh, sermon no. 144.
17. Muslim, vol.4, p. 1873.
18. Neishaburi, op. cit., vol. 3, p. 162.
19. Ibn Sa'd, vol. 6, p. 240.

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