A Plea For Islamic Unity

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This brief article recognizes that currently the Islamic community (Ummah) is far from unity and urges all to strive and work hard to achieve the ideal unity as depicted in the Holy Qur'an

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"Surely, this Ummah of yours is a single Ummah, and I am your Lord, therefore worship Me (and no other)." (21:92)

The above verse points to an ideal, which is currently not being met. If we look at the current state of the ummah (the global Islamic community), we can clearly see that generally speaking, it is far from a "community". The disunity within the ummah is very apparent for all to see; Muslims are making false claims against one another, creating hostility, preaching hatred and even killing one another, as we can see from the ongoing sectarian violence in countries like Pakistan and Iraq. The ummah is in a desperate situation and in dire need of reform.

Defining Islamic Unity

It is essential that we define what is meant by "Islamic unity". There are various ideas and conceptions of Islamic unity. According to the highly intellectual scholar and prolific writer, Martyr Ayatullah Murtaza Mutahhari states that there are three definitions of what Islamic unity is. The first is that all Islamic schools of thought should come together, give up their differences and form a new single denomination. The second definition is that one school of thought should be followed and all the others forsaken. Both these ideas are incorrect, impractical and do not represent the true conception of Islamic unity.

The third idea is that Islamic unity is, as Ayatullah Mutahhari says, "*in no way related to the unity of the different schools of Fiqh (jurisprudence) but signifies the unity of the Muslims and the unity of the followers of different schools of Fiqh, with their different religious ideas and views.*"1

This is the correct definition of Islamic unity.

According to this definition of Islamic unity, we do not need to make any compromises on our principles, practices or beliefs for the sake of Islamic unity. Furthermore, we do not necessarily have to stop talking about the differences between the various Islamic schools of thought or avoid engaging in discussions and dialogue about them.

Some people believe that in order for us to unite with other schools of thought we must compromise some of our beliefs, otherwise the achievement of unity would not be possible, and therefore we cannot possibly unite if it entails compromising our beliefs. This belief is akin to the "all or nothing" principle. If we look at the example of Amir al-Mu'minin, Imam Ali ('a), who tried everything in his power to preserve the foundation of imamah and, at the same time, the unity of the ummah, we can see that he did not adhere to the idea of "all or nothing". Imam Ali ('a) did not ignore or deny the usurpation of his right to the khilafah but at the same time nor did he wage war against the unjust usurpers of the Divinely-appointed leadership.

In a letter to the Egyptians which Imam Ali ('a) sent through Maalik al-Ashtar when he was appointed as the Governor of the province, he ('a) says:

"When the Holy Prophet (S) passed away, the Muslims started a tug-of-war for the caliphate. I swear by Allah that at that juncture it could not even be imagined that the Arabs would snatch the seat of the caliphate from the family and descendants of the Holy Prophet (S) and that they would be swearing the oath of allegiance for the caliphate to a different person.

At every stage I kept myself aloof from that struggle of supremacy and power-politics till I found the heretics had openly taken to heresy and schism and were trying to undermine and ruin the religion preached by our Holy Prophet (S). I felt afraid that, even after seeing and recognizing the evil, if I did not stand up to help Islam and the Muslims it would be a worse calamity to me than my losing authority (i.e. his right to the khilafah) and power over you, which was only a transient and short-lived affair."[2]

In one of his recorded sermons, when the shura (consultative committee) decided to swear allegiance to Uthman, Imam Ali ('a) said:

"You have certainly known that I am the most rightful of all others for the Caliphate. By Allah, so long as the affairs of Muslims remain intact and there is no oppression in it except on myself, I shall keep quiet seeking reward for it (from Allah) and keeping aloof from its attractions and allurements for which you aspire". [3]

From the above we can see that Imam Ali ('a) was not one who held the idea of "all or nothing". He did not become disinterested in and indifferent to the affairs of the ummah due to differences such as the issue of khilafah. Rather, he saw it in the interest of Islam and the ummah to foster cohesion, cooperation and unity among the Muslims rather than revolting.

Difference, The Cause of Disunity?

Many think that it is impossible for such a large community with so many diverse schools of thought, each with their own ideologies and practices, to unite. Differences of opinion in matters of practice, jurisprudence and particularly doctrine and belief are regarded by many as the root cause of disunity in the ummah.

In answer to the above, we need to revisit our definition of Islamic unity. Islamic unity is not about forming one single uniform denomination with the same doctrines and practices. If Islamic unity is defined as such, this reality where Muslims will follow the same path will only be met upon the reappearance of our beloved awaited saviour, Imam al-Mahdi (aj).

Differences of opinion permeate all societies, nations and even families. People differ on social issues, political matters and even familial affairs. Difference and variety are intrinsic features of this world. Differences in opinions, views and thoughts in themselves are not bad and should not be the cause of disunity.

We must reflect upon why there is so much diversity in this world. We have been exposed such a wide range of religions, ideologies, sects and lifestyles. Such diversity in the world poses as a great challenge for humans to utilise their intellect which Allah (SWT) has granted them; our intellectual capabilities would not be maximised if we were exposed to only one path or religion. If there were only one religion in the world then people could choose to either follow that religion or not, there would only be two options to choose from. This would lead to intellectual stagnation which would be detrimental to our existence, for it is difference that leads to intellectual exploration, reasoning, dialogue and discussion.

Having said that, that is not to say that different opinions, beliefs and religions are all valid. There is a clear divide between truth and falsehood and it is differences in opinions and perceptions of what is the truth that drives us to search for the ultimate truth, and this can be seen as a test from Allah (SWT). Furthermore, it is when we start to search for the truth that we come to appreciate and understand other ideologies, a process which breeds tolerance and ultimately unity. Allah (SWT) says in the Holy Qur'an:

"…and if Allah had willed He would have made you a single community, but (His plan is) to test you in what He has given you, therefore strive with one another in good deeds; to Allah is your return, so He will then inform you in that which you differed." (5:48)

However, we often tend to talk about differences between the various Islamic schools of thought more so than we do about the similarities to the extent that we tend to forget those essential tenets that make us all Muslims. Muslims all believe in one God, Allah (SWT), follow the Last Messenger, Muhammad (S), read the same book, the Holy Qur'an, fast in the same month, Ramadhan, visit the house of Allah during Hajj and finally we all share one identity, we are all Muslims.

Ayatullah Amini, the distinguished compiler of "al-Ghadir", says in his famous compilation:

"People are free to express views and ideas on religion. These (views and ideas) will never tear apart the bond of Islamic brotherhood to which the Holy Qur'an has referred by stating that *"surely the believers are brothers…"* (*49:10*).

Notwithstanding all the differences that we have in the primary and secondary principles, we, the compilers and writers in nooks and corners of the world of Islam, share a common point and that is belief in the Almighty and His Prophet…We, the Muslim compilers, all live under the banner of truth and carry out our duties under the guidance of the Qur'an and the Prophetic Mission of the Holy Prophet (S). The message of all of us is *"Surely the (true) religion with Allah is Islam…"* (*3:18*) and the slogan of all of us is "There is no god but Allah and Muhammad is His Messenger." Indeed, we are (the members of) the party of Allah and the supporters of his religion."[4]

The division and disunity that exists in the ummah today is not due to the theological and jurisprudential differences between the different Islamic schools of thought, rather it is due to how we respond to such differences. The disunity that is so rampant within the ummah is due to our intolerance and ignorance. A major obstacle to uniting the ummah is the lack of a genuine desire to understand where the other party is coming from and why he or she holds certain beliefs and carries out certain practices.

Socio-Political Unity

The current state of disunity has weakened the ummah and left it in a vulnerable position. This is why we see Muslims under attack in their own countries across the globe. In the wake of the current global political climate Islam as an institution, an ideology and a way of life is being attacked. The incidence of Islamophobia is rising and Muslims are finding it hard to fight back due to the lack of a unified and cohesive Muslim front.

Talking about Islamic unity, Ayatullah Sayyid al-Khomeini once said:

"Today, world peace is such that all countries are under the political influence of the superpowers; they observe a control everywhere and have schemes for defeating every group. The most important of these is sowing discord among brothers.

Muslims should be awake, Muslims should be alert that if a dispute takes place among Sunni and Shi'ite brothers, it is harmful to all of us, it is harmful to all Muslims. Those who want to sow discord are neither Sunni nor Shi'ite, they are agents of the superpowers and work for them."[5]

The current situation of the Muslims is akin to that of a football team whose players are fighting amongst each other, leaving the goal unprotected, vulnerable to the strikers of the opposing team to score and defeat them. In order for us to wave off the attacks on Islam and Muslims we must unite on common grounds and similarities, which we have so many of.

Irrespective of the jurisprudential and theological differences, all Muslims can and should work towards similar socio–political aims. Such aims include protecting the ummah, creating a just society, working towards the welfare of Muslims and humanity at large, disseminating knowledge and educating people, and generally speaking providing for the needs of the Muslim community on all possible levels. The Holy Prophet (S) has said that "He who wakes up in the morning and does not think about and have concerns over the affairs of the Muslims is not one of us".6

Dialogue

One practical way in which the community could come together is through dialogue, which can be a very powerful tool if used appropriately. Sometimes debates can lead to arguments and polemical disputes causing more disunity. Rather, we should be holding discussions and dialogue with the sincere intention of understanding one another, to seek the truth and to unite under one banner and work together for a common cause.

Tolerance and understanding can be achieved through dialogue and discussion. After dispelling the myths and misconceptions about one another, and either agreeing on issues of difference or agreeing to disagree on such issues, Muslims can then come together and constructively discuss the socio–political problems of the ummah and society in general and set aims and objectives as to how to tackle such problems.

In his refreshing book, "Doctrines of Shi'i Islam", Ayatullah Ja'far Sobhani says the following:

"The Imami Shi'a do not regard differences in juristic details as undermining Islamic brotherhood or as precluding the solidarity of the Muslims as a unified community. They believe that by engaging in scholarly debate, in a calm atmosphere, many of the intellectual and jurisprudential differences and difficulties can be resolved. In principle, human society is charaterised by the fact that there will always be differences of opinion. Closing the door of intellectual debate and enquiry to the intelligentsia causes the swift demise of knowledge and learning, for it cannot but erode intellectual thought and reflection."7

Furthermore, dialogue can be an opportunity to spread the truth to Muslims of other schools of thought. If we believe that we are on the right path then surely it is our duty to invite people to that path. Allah (SWT) says:

"Invite (all) to the way of your Lord with wisdom and beautiful preaching; and argue with them in the best manner: for your Lord knows best who have strayed from His Path, and those who follow the right way." (16:125).

How can we refuse to share the blessing and the mercy that has been bestowed upon us by Allah (SWT) with others, especially so considering that Islam is a universal religion, open to all people. As such we must make it accessible to everyone, through various means such as dialogue. In a hadith,

Imam Ja'far as-Sadiq ('a) says:

"Isa ibn Maryam (Jesus) ('a) stood up to address the children of Israel (bani Israel), he said: 'O children of Israel! Never reveal wisdom to the ignorant since this is tyranny on wisdom (itself), and never conceal it from those worthy of it since this will be tyranny on the worthy.' " 8

Conclusion

A few days before he was murdered, one of the most outstanding Islamic scholars of the last century, Martyr Ayatullah Sayyid Muhmmad Baqir as-Sadr, has been quoted to have said:

"...from the time I was able to recognise my existence and realise my duty in this community I have considered my existence dedicated equally to the Shias and Sunnis. I spread the message of unity and the belief that unites the people. I have lived my life solely for Islam; the path to salvation and the goal of all Muslims. Thus my dear Sunni brothers I am with you, just in the same way as I am with the Shia brothers. I have regard for you in the same proportion you have regard for Islam."9

We must all work towards uniting our ummah and begin to realise that we are all one. Any differences of opinion should be a cause for constructive dialogue rather than destructive debate, fostering intellectual inquiry rather than mutual sectarian denigration. If we remain disunited then we will be punished by Allah (SWT) like those nations who were divided amongst themselves.

"Be not like those who are divided amongst themselves and fall into disputations after receiving clear signs: for them is a dreadful penalty..." (3:105).

We must pay heed to Allah's (SWT) message and become united so that our calls and cries of "La ilaha illa Allah" (There is no God but Allah (SWT)) can be heard all over the world and so that we can prepare the ummah for the reappearance of our awaited saviour, Imam al-Mahdi (aj).

"And hold fast, all together, by the rope of Allah, and be not divided among yourselves; and remember with gratitude Allah's favour on you; for you were enemies and He joined your hearts in love, so that by His Grace, you became brothers; and you were on the brink of the pit of Fire, and He saved you from it. Thus does Allah make His Signs clear to you: That you may be guided." (3:103).

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1. Ayatullah Murtaza Mutahhari. (1996). Al-Ghadir and its Relevance to Islamic Unity. Message of Thaqalayn, Vol. 3, No. 1 & 2.

https://www.al-islam.org/message-thaqalayn/vol3-n1-and-2-1996/al-ghadir-... [3]

2. Nahj al-Balagha, Letter 62.

3. Nahj al-Balagha, sometimes recorded as Sermon 73 or 74.

4. Ayatullah Amini. al-Ghadir, in the preface to volume 5, under title of "Nazariyah Karimah".

5. https://www.al-islam.org/articles/imam-khomeini-on-islamic-unity-imam-kh... [4]

6. Al-Kulayni, Usul al-Kafi.

7. Ayatullah Ja'far Sobhani, Doctrines of Shi'i Islam, article 150, page 200.

8. Al-Kulayni, Usul al-Kafi. Vol. 1, Part 1, The Book of excellence of Knowledge.

9. http://www.1ummah.org/understand/dedication.htm [5]

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