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## PLURALITY OF TRADITIONS AND UNITY IN ISLAM

Every revealed religion maintains a claim to absoluteness which is the result of combining its two attributes, namely, its being universal as well as unique. This assertion of universality and uniqueness makes a revealed religion to evaluate other religions negatively. Hence religious pluralism becomes a threat rather than a positive reality contributing towards a comprehensive vision. If religious pluralism is accepted as a fact there is no difficulty in finding unity in diversity.

Islam originated as the latest monotheistic religion in the seventh century. A.D. when Muhammad received the revelation from Allah. Certain tendencies became evident in Islam during the course of its growth and development that prevented it from recognizing other religions.

Since Muhammad claimed to be "the seal of the prophets," the Muslims considered Islam the final religion which the whole of mankind should embrace. What is implied is that Islam has the monopoly of all the revelations and guidance necessary for all till the end of the world. Hence the Ahamadiyya sect is considered to be outside the Islamic community because their founder Mirza Ghulam Ahmad claimed to be a prophet many years after the death of Muhammad who was "the seal of the prophets." Though the Qur'anic teaching is that Judaism and Christianity were in essentials the same, Islam has ignored it on the plea that later Jews and Christians have deviated from the original purity of their message. What follows from this is that the salvation of mankind rests on Islam alone. The claim to absoluteness and uniqueness is the natural consequence of this assertion.

Every revealed religion is *the* religion and *a* religion, *the* religion inasmuch as it contains within itself the Truth and means of Truth, *a* religion since it emphasizes a particular aspect of the Truth in conformity with the spiritual and psychological needs of the humanity for whom it is destined and to whom it is addressed.<sup>1</sup>

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1. Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Ideals and Realities of Islam*, (Boston : Beacon Press, 1972) p. 15.

The Qur'ān contains all truths and so Islam is self-sufficient and owes nothing to Judaism or Christianity or any other religion. Two important facts are ignored by this statement, namely, the human beings to whom the Qur'ān was first addressed had been influenced by Jewish and Christian ideas, and that the Qur'ān as an Arabic Qur'ān, was adapted to the mentality of the Arabs to whom it was addressed. Thus the conservative Muslim scholars are reluctant to study anything non-Islamic, and this has resulted in isolationism. They themselves have deliberately closed all the doors opening on to other religions and traditions.

Islam is held to be superior to all forms of Western thought. Hence it does not think that it has anything to learn from the West. On the contrary, they regarded the moral and spiritual crisis in Western society as the outcome of Jews and Christians corrupting their Scriptures and deviating from the truth.

When Islam made its beginnings there was no controversy, either doctrinal or theological, and perfect unity was the result. "Islam extended itself into the larger world by means of external power before its fundamental doctrines had crystalized and taken on definite form, before even the first lines of its practical life had been given definite shape".<sup>2</sup> Hence at this stage what united the early Muslims was not the Qur'ānic message or any related dogma or doctrine but the social, economic and political needs.

### The Khārijites

The khārijites are the earliest Islamic sect, who were known for their intolerance, fanaticism and exclusiveness. The immediate cause of the Khārijite split was the arbitration to which Ali, after being victorious against Muāwiya in the battle of Siffin in the year 648 A.D., submitted. The Khārijites denounced Ali for submitting to human arbitration, because God is sole judge and arbiter. These fanatic rebels fought against Ali, and after his assassination, against the Umayyads.

The Khārijites totally rejected the doctrine of justification by faith alone, without deeds. They emphasized the deeds as an essential part of faith. Anyone who has committed a mortal sin is an unbeliever, an apostate. All non-Khārijī Muslims are regarded as apostates by them.

2. Ignaz Goldziher, "Catholic Tendencies and Particularism in Islam", *Studies on Islam* trans. Merlin L. Swartz, (Oxford University Press, 1981) pp. 123-24.

These believers in their zeal to assert and emphasize their faith, lost sight of the need for actions or deeds which are essential for real faith. Hence the Khārijites considered that it was their duty to highlight the importance of deeds to make the faith living and meaningful. Thus the Khārijite's insistence on the need to combine deeds and faith in order to make faith alive, is a positive contribution to Islam in general.

The Khārijites, in their over-enthusiasm and zeal to denounce the wretchedness and dreadfulness of mortal sin declared that any one who had committed a mortal sin was an unbeliever. By taking this extreme position the Khārijites were giving a strong moral warning to the Muslims not to commit any mortal sin.

Another area where the Khārijites differ from the non-Khārijites is the Imāmate. They held that the Imām should be elected and only the most excellent one in the community is entitled to the Imāmate. They rejected the idea that the office of the Caliph must be confined to a member of the tribe of Quraysh. Any Muslim whose character was unimpeachable was eligible for this office even if he was a black slave.

The unjust Imam and his supporters were considered infidels, until they repented. Thus both Uthmān and Ali became infidels, although their Imāmate had initially been legitimate. By making these statements the Khārijites were presenting a new value system in which human dignity and equality were well preserved. The Khārijites tried to convince the Muslims regarding the absurdity and the meaningless sentimentality involved in reserving the Imāmate or Caliphate for the family of the prophet. Hence they were bold enough to declare that even a black slave who had an excellent character was eligible to be elected as an Imam. By taking this stand the Khārijites were not breaking the unity of Islam but making it more logical and modern.

## The Shia

The Shia is regarded as the only important schism in Islam. The shias have, over the centuries, evolved a doctrine of 'Divine Right' that is not in conformity with the very spirit of *ijma* (general consensus).

The hostility between Ali, the fourth Caliph, and his opponents, the Umayyads, gave rise to the Shia split. After the murder of Ali his supporters demanded that the Caliphate be restored to the house of Ali who

had been assassinated. This claim for legitimacy marked the beginning of Shia doctrine. Some see political motivation behind this doctrine of legitimacy, namely, the headship of the Muslim community rightfully belongs to Ali and his descendants.

The fundamental religious impulse was derived from the violent and bloody death of Husayn, Ali's son from Fatima, at Karbala at the hands of government troops in the year 671 A.D., whence the passion motive was introduced. This passion motive combined with the belief in the 'return' of the Imam gives to Shiism its most characteristic ethos. Upon this were engrafted old oriental beliefs about Divine Light and the new metaphysical setting for this belief was provided by Christian Gnostic Neoplatonic ideas.<sup>3</sup>

Who should be the successor to the prophet was the question that divided the Muslims into Sunnis and Shias. For, the Sunnis believed that the Imamate was not restricted to the family of Muhammad. According to them the Imam need not be just, virtuous or irreproachable in his life, nor need he be the most excellent or eminent being of his time. It was sufficient if he was free, adult, sane and able to be capable of attending to the normal functions of the state. Hence the vices or tyranny of the Imam would not justify his deposition. The establishment of an Imam was permanently obligatory on the community on the basis of his functions under the revealed law and not on rational grounds. There could be only one Imam at a time.

The Sunnis held that a Caliph or Imam could be appointed by his predecessor. He could also be elected by the people. The main task of the Caliph was not to interpret the Divine Law and religious matters in general, but to administer the law and act as judge in accordance with the law. Maintenance of peace in the territory of Islam and its defence against external enemies were the important duties of the Caliph. The appointment of reliable and sincere men in delegating authority was also done by the Caliph. Besides, he had to guard the faith against heterodoxy and conduct  *Jihad*  against those resisting the supremacy of Islam.

For the Shias, the Imamate was necessary according to both Divine Law and reason. It was essential to have him so that he may clarify and

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3. Fazlur Rahman, *Islam*, (Chicago : University of Chicago Press, 1979) p. 172.

interpret the Qur'ān and Shariah. It was also necessary to have someone to enforce the laws, to safeguard man's just rights and to provide effective leadership.

The spiritual heritage bequeathed by Muhammad and the right of succession to the Prophet belongs solely to the Prophet's family and those who follow the family of the prophet, as their source of inspiration and guidance for the understanding of the Qur'ānic revelation brought by the prophet. Hence the Shiites believed that the members of the Prophet's family were the channel through whom the teachings and the grace of the revelation reached the Shias. Thus the Imamate descends by divine appointment in the Apostolic line. According to the Shias, therefore, the Imam cannot be elected in view of his triple functions, namely, to rule over the Islamic community, to explain the religious sciences and the law, to be a spiritual guide to lead man to an understanding of the inner meaning of things. A spiritual guide can receive his authority only from on high. Hence appointment by designation of the previous Imam by Divine Command was necessary. The hidden Imam is the continuation of the personality of the prophet. If the choice of an Imam were left to the community, it would be subversive of all morality.

An Imam was capable of performing the above-mentioned triple functions because of the presence of the Light within him. The very foundation of the doctrine of Imam was the permanent need of mankind for a divinely guided, infallible leader and authoritative teacher of religion. The only difference between the messenger prophet (*rasūl*) and the Imam was that the Imam did not transmit a divine scripture. To ignore or disobey the divinely guided Imam was infidelity amounting to ignoring or disobeying the Prophet.

Revelation according to the Shias has an exoteric and esoteric aspect, both possessed in their fullness by the Prophet, who is at once *nabi* and *wali*, the *nubuwwa* being connected with his exoteric function of bringing a Divine Law and the *walaya* with his esoteric function of revealing the inner meaning of religion. Ali, the first Imam is called *waliyallah*. Hence Imam for Shiism is that person who is the real ruler of the community and especially the inheritor of the esoteric teachings of the Prophet. He is the one who carries "Muhammad's light" within himself, and who fulfils the function of *wilayah*. The earth can never be devoid of the presence of the Imam even if he be hidden or unknown.

We have seen that the Shiites believe in the presence of Divine Light in the Imam. The result of the presence of the Divine Light in him is inerrancy (*ismah*) in spiritual and religious matters. He is in his inner nature as pure as the Prophet who is the source of this Light. The relation between the Imams is not only a physical one but a spiritual connection based on the passing of this Light from one Imam to another.

The Imams according to the Shias are the intermediaries between man and God. To ask their help in life was to appeal to the channel God has placed before men so as to enable man to return to him. They are the extensions of the personality of the Prophet. The majority of the Shias reject the official Sunnī predestinarianism and believe in the freedom of human choice.

Since in Shiism the Imam is alive, the possibility of applying the Divine Law to new situation is always present. The *mujtahid* (he who can exercise his opinion) who is in inner contact with the Imam is required in each generation to apply the law to the new conditions which that generation faces. It is the duty of each Shiite to follow the rulings of a living *mujtahid*.

The exoteric and esoteric aspects of the function of the Imam are based on Prophet Muhammad who was the exoteric and esoteric source of revelation. After Muhammad the Imams inherited his esoteric functions and it is their duty to expound the inner meaning of the Divine Law. The principle of esotericism admits multiple interpretations of the Qur'ānic text.

After having dealt with the major differences, especially doctrinal, between Shiism and Sunnism, let us now examine whether these differences are divisive forces or complements aiming at unity and solidarity.

Both the Sunnis and the Shias agree on the need to have successors to Prophet Muhammad. Now with regard to the eligibility of succession there is no argement. For the Sunnis this succession is mainly for purposes of secular administration, someone who can be a guardian of the Shariah in the community. On this point the Shias too agree. But they demand much more than this. They demanded spiritual functions connected with the esoteric interpretation of the revelation and the inheritance of the Prophet's esoteric teachings. Since many of the Qur'ānic verses are ambiguous they need to be interpreted by a competent authority for a better understanding of them. During the time of the Prophet he himself could do this for the

people. After his death the need for someone to continue this task was a felt need. For the Shias, the Imams have to continue to perform this function of the Prophet.

In fact Sunnism and Shiism, belonging both to the total orthodoxy of Islam, do not in any way destroy its unity. The unity of a tradition is not destroyed by different applications of its principles and forms.<sup>4</sup>

Sunni theology is more concerned with 'rational' aspects of the faith whereas the Shiite theology has to do more with the 'mystical' and both are essential for comprehensive growth and progress.

Both Sunnis and Shias are prepared to give special respect and consideration to the members of the family of the Prophet. When the Shias exaggerate and go to extremes the Sunnis play it down.

To have a spiritual guide is the desire of all Muslims, Sunnis as well as Shias, but the way it is worked out is not the same. The Shiites attributed unlimited virtues and sanctity and other perfections to the Imam while the Sunnis looked upon the Caliphs or Imams as ordinary human beings without any superhuman powers. Hence they did not assign any spiritual duties or responsibilities to the Imams. They were not made responsible for the spiritual guidance of the subjects.

The esoteric function of revealing the inner meaning of religion which the Shiites attributed to the Imam was also exercised by both Sunnis and Shias through the Sufis. Thus we see unity in the esoteric function through the instrumentality of the Sufis.

In what sense can Islam be said to have this unity? The Muslims who lived under the first four rightly guided Caliphs had no set of credal beliefs such as the one later formulated by al-Ashari in the tenth century A.D. Yet it could be maintained that this was not a change in substance, but that the creed merely made explicit what had hitherto been implicitly believed. Alternatively, one could say that the essential vision is the same. The essence or kernel of Islam which is unchanging, cannot be adequately expressed in words, but is called 'the Islamic Vision'.

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4. Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Ideals and Realities of Islam*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1972) p. 148.

In a way both Sunnism and Shiism are expressions of the Islamic vision but it is difficult, if not impossible, even for the impartial observer, to put into words what they have in common. In the case of those whose lives have been largely influenced by the Islamic Vision there is no difficulty in seeing this unity of the religion of Islam. All of them would publicly profess that they accept the Vision which came with the Qur'ān, that is, that is, that they accept the *shahada*, *La ilaha ill' Allah, Muhammadun rasul Allah*: There is no god but God, Muhammad is the messenger of God.<sup>5</sup> The most fundamental formula of the Qur'ān is the *shahada*, which is the fountain head of all Islamic doctrine, the alpha and omega of the Islamic message. Underlying this Islamic Vision we can see perfect unity in the religion of Islam.

### Conclusion

There was perfect unity and solidarity in Islam when it originated in Arabia as the latest monotheistic religion which created tremendous impact on Arabs socially, economically and politically. The Khārijites contributed positively towards the unity of Islam by making Islam doctrinal and rational. If we study the impact and influence of the doctrinal approach of the Khārijites on the religion of Islam we find that the minor differences and extreme positions taken by them are negligible.

The Shia sect, whose origin was either politically or theologically motivated, could be treated under the orthodoxy of Islam. Since man is a spirit in matter his religion also has to be shaped to satisfy this need, namely, his rational as well as emotional needs. By emphasizing the mystical aspect of their religion Shias are complementing Islam bringing it to the level of experience.

Islam manifests more homogeneity and less religious diversity compared to several other world religions. Sunnism and Shiism are two forms in Islam which are not in opposition to destroy each other but to enable a larger humanity of different cultures and spiritual attitudes to participate in it.

In spite of the apparent diversity there is an underlying unity in the religion of Islam which Muslims have to discover. Modernization and inculturation are the two preoccupations of the leaders of all religions. The

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5. W. Montgomery Watt, *What is Islam?*, (London and New York : Longman Group Limited, 1979) pp. 52-54.



message of the Qur'ân should be presented to the people of different cultures in their own respective cultures. The mistake the Muslims of early times made was identifying the message of the Qur'ân with Arab culture and presenting the message through and in that culture.

Fundamentalism contributes a basic point of reference in the process of this modernization. Fundamentalism is not only a point of reference but also the content and morphology for modern thinkers. Those who are engaged in this noble task of modernizing religion have a wonderful opportunity to work towards unity by eliminating all the un-Islamic elements which crept into Islam during the course of history; due to power politics, communalism, nationalism, racism and other selfish motives. When Muslims sincerely endeavour to discover the positive features in all the sects and denominations, to their great surprise, they will find tremendous unity in diversity.