

Sunnis & Shi'is are Closer to Each Other than it Seems

When interacting and conversing with my Shi'i friends, students, colleagues, as well as mere acquaintances, one thing becomes crystal clear. We have no significant differences, nor disagreements, about the most fundamental and most consequential issues concerning both Islam and life.

It is no coincidence that Islam and life are bracketed here together, for Islam is an all-inclusive code of existence, while life, the way it has been created and is sustained by its Creator and Master, is what Islam universally stands for. The two are virtually synonymous.

Such existential issues are: the core precepts of Islamic *'aqidah* (faith or creed), principal worship rites, practices and services, general moral and ethical principles, family values, socio-economic justice and integrity, the inviolability and purity of human -- especially Muslim -- life, blood, property and dignity, architecture, urban planning and development, environmental protection, sustainability, safety, security, hygiene, and everything else that could be placed under the auspices of the notion of *maqasid al-shari'ah* (the purposes and objectives of Islamic *shari'ah*, namely, the preservation of religion or faith, life, lineage or future generations, intellect and property).

What normally transpires between us in the course of our routine interactions and dialogues seldom exceeds the level of ordinary and expected scholarly engagements. Though our discussions always take on a strong religious and philosophical penchant, our most profound disagreements normally do not.

It is only when we touch on certain highly sensitive and so, considerably overblown, misinterpreted and outright distorted historical episodes, political incidents and cases, military confrontations, as well as some sheer but overstated and rigid jurisprudential and minor ostensibly ideological and moral issues, which originated from, and feed on, the former, that our more serious disagreements start emerging and my being a Sunni, and theirs Shi'is, begin to show.

What does that mean?

That means, positively, that mainstream Sunnis and Shi'is (the latter's above all moderate branches such as Twelvers, *Imamiyyah* or *Ithna'ashariyyah*, concentrated chiefly in Iran, Iraq, Azerbaijan, Bahrain and Lebanon, and constituting about 85% of the world's Shi'ah population; and Zaydiyyah or Zaidism, found mainly in Yemen) are in principle all Muslims, together constituting the Muslim *ummah* (community). They are expected to enjoy all the basic rights, and discharge all the responsibilities, entailed in such an affiliation.

They are thus brothers and sisters, despite their plentiful political and religious differences and problems. They are to be *awliya'*, or friends, helpers, supporters and protectors of one another, as much, and as viably and reasonably, as possible because of the conditions. They are also to be hard and strong against their enemies and the enemies of their Islamic faith, while persisting as compassionate, kind and understanding among themselves.

Sunnis and Shi'is, by and large, agree on most fundamental Islamic doctrinal (faith or '*aqidah*-oriented) and practical devotional aspects,

which are underlined by both the Holy Qur'an and the Prophet Muhammad's (pbuh) *Sunnah* as common denominators of one's belonging to Islam and his or her being a Muslim.

They believe in the same God, Almighty Allah, His infinite Attributes and most beautiful Names, the same prophet(s), the same angels and the same Day of Judgment. They share the same Islamic worldview and ethical system. They read the same Qur'an, Allah's final testament to all humanity, regarding it as mercy, a guidance for the people, clear proofs or signs, and the criterion or judgment between right and wrong. They furthermore perform the same prayers, fast the same holy month of Ramadan, give away the same *zakat* and perform the same *hajj* (pilgrimage) to Makkah. They also face the same *qiblah*, that is, the Ka'bah or al-Masjid al-Haram in Makkah, and confront the same enemy, that is, Satan or Iblis and his large armies from the ranks of both the *jinn* and humans. They are all proponents of *Jihad* (an all-encompassing struggle to defend and promote Islamic beliefs and values) and the concept of *al-'amr bi-l-ma'ruf wa al-nahy 'ani-l-munkar* (enjoining good and forbidding evil). As they champion the notion of love for those who follow Allah's path and dissociation with those who oppose and work against it. Lastly, they all aspire and do their best to secure the accolade of being Allah's faithful and loyal servants, lavished in His love, gifted with His grace, showered with His immeasurable mercy, and, in the end, as a result, be admitted to His Paradise (*Jannah*).

What Sunnis and Shi'is generally disagree about, though often and in certain religious, historical and cultural contexts very important, is yet categorized as secondary, less significant and, at times, even utterly trivial subjects and problems.

The Role of Politics and Jurisprudence (*Fiqh*)

It all boils down to two major and broad components: politics and jurisprudence (*fiqh*).

The former signifies "the art or science concerned with winning and holding control over a government; or competition between competing interest groups or individuals for power and leadership, as in a government; and the total complex of relations between people living in society" (Merriam-Webster).

The latter is an Islamic science through which practical laws and religious duties of a person in this world are studied on the basis of the teachings of the Qur'an and the Prophet' *Sunnah*. There are some other secondary sources and principles of *fiqh*, however, they must not in any way whatsoever contradict, or deviate from, the spirit and content of the Qur'an and *Sunnah*. It is due to this that *fiqh* literally means "deep understanding" or "full comprehension"; that is to say, understanding and comprehending as much the message of Islam as life and its conditions for which it was meant, and applying effectively and agreeably the former within the requisite realms of the latter.

It goes without saying that in the spheres of both politics and *fiqh* differences of opinion, disagreements and even disputes of diverse kinds will always be the rule of the day. Achieving homogeneity, standardization and perfect harmony will always be impossible therein. Attempting to do so would go against the very nature of some elementary laws of existence and the evolution of human societies.

What is thus needed is a thorough ethics of disagreement and conflict resolution in Islam. At the core of such an ethical system should stand the fundamental values of the general Islamic ethics, beliefs and morals. Its guiding principle should be the notion of separation between the fallible and changeable, and the infallible and immutable, and between the human and mundane, and the religious and divine, never allowing the former to encroach on and influence the latter. It should always be the other way around.

In the case of the Sunni-Shi'ah differences and conflicts, the matter is rendered yet worse by numerous political and jurisprudential (religious) protagonists, both historically and at the present time.

As for politics, it was a journey from sheer political activism to complex ideologies on both sides. Consequently, numerous historical episodes and incidents have been embellished, exaggerated, manipulated and twisted, sometimes beyond recognition. The more people became detached intellectually and spiritually from the origins of the socio-political and religious occurrences and developments, which later became known as the standardized norms of Sunnism and Shi'ism, the more prone they became to misinterpreting and misrepresenting them, adding thus to their respective intricacies.

In such a difficult climate, raging emotions and sentiments gradually took over from reason and spiritual consciousness, completely shutting them and rendering them essentially ineffective and useless. Similarly, the roles and influences of good and virtuous people from all strata of society were steadily decreasing, with others taking over who, not only were poorly grounded in Islamic scholarship and spirituality, but also had vested interests in the existing challenging developments of Islamic culture and civilization.

A number of critical developments in the realms of *fiqh* and other Islamic sciences were no less different, often serving the interests of the prevalent politics and the agendas of the incumbent, or aspiring, rulers. It was typical that in such ubiquitous circumstances, such painful spiritual and intellectual diseases as deliberate mediocrity, fanaticism, zealotry, myopia, lethargy, narrow-mindedness and rigidity, frequently reared their ugly heads and reigned supreme in some of the most critical segments of the Muslim cultural and civilizational development, greatly hampering them.

Beset by the incessantly adverse sectarian happenings and experiences, many people could not see, nor understand, let alone act upon, the noble legacies of the great individuals from the first and at the same time best three generations in the history of Islamic community in relation to grasping, dealing with and overcoming the political and intellectual disagreements, differences and disputes of their eras. Most of those exemplary persons were among the most prominent political, religious and intellectual leaders of what is called today Sunnism and Shi'ism. However, none of them spoke either the Sunnism or Shi'ism "language".

In passing, in the early days of Islam and its embryonic culture and civilization, there were no such things as the concepts of Sunnism and Shi'ism. Religious sectarianism did not exist, and there was neither Shi'ism and Shi'i Islam, nor Sunnism and Sunni Islam. There were only Islam in its original and purest form, the first and best generation of Muslims (*sahabah* or the companions), and the most exemplary Muslim community which was conceived and molded by the heavenly vision of Prophet Muhammad (pbuh).

Of course -- in addition -- as time passed, there quickly emerged all those intrinsic and somewhat foreseeable issues and challenges that the people were confronted with and had to come to terms with if they wished to succeed in making any global civilizational impact. The concepts of Sunnism (*ahl al-sunnah wa al-jama'ah*) and Shi'ism (*shi'ah*) were the products of subsequent times and subsequent generations that were characterized by people's different mindsets, spiritual dispositions and socio-political ambitions.

The Painful Consequences of Religious Sectarianism

Indeed, religious sectarianism, coupled with relentless political disputes and fights, as well as intellectual stupor, was the *raison d'etre* for the Muslim cultural and civilization degeneration and fall.

So long as Muslims remained weak, disoriented and placid under the yoke of Western imperialism -- such denoting an effect so favorable to the West and its expansionist ambitions -- nobody really cared about the causes most responsible for the creation of the former. And why anybody should, potentially creating unnecessary troubles and stirring up a hornet's nest in the process, for hostilities and violence would have never begotten peace and progress under the circumstances, neither for the Western imperialists and colonizers, nor for their Muslim victims.

However, as Muslims started showing some serious and so, worrisome signs of a cultural and civilizational regeneration and rebirth, turning the tables on their subjugators and other out-and-out enemies, the most devastating weapon against Muslims had to be resurrected and optimally used. That weapon was intense religious sectarianism in general, and Sunni-Shi'ah fallings-out and conflicts in particular.

As a result of this, mainly, today's Muslims are so weakened and torn apart that they dwell on the verge of a total civilizational collapse.

Most of us are victims of that ungodly conspiracy. Without realizing, many of us nonetheless actively participate in the suicidal crusade. Just examine your views, statements and, if necessary, actions as regards someone from "the other side" of Islam's wide spectrum.

We have fallen into a trap set by Islam's and Muslims' enemies, failing to leap out and think as well as act freely and objectively. How we treat each other through thick and thin is not what Islam and its Prophet, Muhammad (pbuh), teach us. Deliberately compromising and jeopardizing in any way - even by a word, or silent approval -- the most invaluable Islamic principles and values, such as brotherhood, unity, justice, compassion, forgiveness, kindness, safety, security, a culture of spiritual and intellectual excellence, the sacredness of human -- especially Muslim -- life, blood, property

and dignity, is not to be associated with a nominal, much less honorable and righteous, Muslim.

While the modern Sunni-Shi'ah conflicts rage, threatening to consume us all, many Muslim governments -- principally in the Middle East -- are proving utterly debilitated and hopeless, which hardly spells a surprise when everything is taken into consideration. So appalling are their decisions and actions that one often wonders if they are there to serve, or destroy, the interests of Islam and Muslims. Over and over again, such people of power and influence generate as much damage to the wellbeing of Muslims as their Western and even Israeli counterparts do; yet sometimes maybe more.

That is why, by the letter of the Qur'an and *Sunnah*, hypocrites and traitors are the worst categories of people, capable of causing most damage to the community as they act from within. Their moves are hardly predictable and hence, difficult to counter.

This Muslim governmental and institutional disgraceful ineptness notwithstanding, the ordinary Muslims and Muslim silent majorities ought to do something. Silence and inaction are no longer an option. We must bear in mind that one day we will all have to stand alone in front of Almighty Allah and answer to Him what we in our diverse capacities have done during these perhaps most testing, painful and frustrating times. It might not be much, but doing nothing should not be considered acceptable anymore, for it plays into the hands of evil protagonists.

Some people will have to be held accountable on the Day of Judgment for shedding endlessly innocent Muslim blood, for continuous brutal confiscation and destruction of Muslim properties, lives and dreams, and for ceaselessly humiliating and disgracing Muslim honor, dignity, character and all their consecrated principles, practices, institutions, places and symbols. Make certain you are not one of them. Start doing something and be prepared to give answers

to Allah, your Master, about your ideas, initiatives, words and actions amid this unprecedented *fitnah* (trial and a state of trouble or chaos). Any direct or indirect, major or minor involvement and contribution, and in any manner whatsoever, will be bitterly regretted.

Suggestions for Bringing Sunnis and Shi'is Closer to Each Other

The following are simple, but useful, suggestions for making a contribution to the prospect of improving Sunni-Shi'ah relations.

Do not generalize any group of people. Neither Sunnis nor Shi'is are angels -- including yourself. But neither are they devils. Almighty Allah is the only Judge.

Learn about true Islam based on its most authentic sources: the Qur'an and authentic *Sunnah*. Everything else is either understanding, internalization, explanation, commentary, or the implementation of those heavenly sources. For example, neither Muslim politics, nor jurisprudence (*fiqh*), nor Islamic culture, nor civilization, is Islam. Islam and Muslims are to be kept apart most of the time -- unfortunately. Correspondingly, neither Sunnism nor Shi'ism is Islam's perfect epitome.

The designations of Sunnism and Shi'ism, though in some contexts meaningful, are artificial. A person will never enter Allah's Paradise (*Jannah*) on the strength of his being a Sunni, Shi'i, Sufi, Salafi, Ibadi, Wahhabi, Hanafi, Shafi'i, Maliki, Hanbali, etc. Only those whom Allah has categorized for the purpose will enter *Jannah*, such as believers, the righteous, the virtuous, the God-fearing, doers of good, martyrs, etc. Never compromise the essential for the unessential, and the fundamental for the secondary.

Learn about Muslim history, but only from as authentic and reliable sources as possible, for there is no man-created historical source that is completely sound and foolproof. Always view particularly

dramatic and consequential historical episodes against the backdrop of the message and spirit of the Qur'an and *Sunnah*.

Let the revealed knowledge and your sound reason and logic lead you throughout, rather than fluctuating emotions and passions. This is so because emotions in certain critical situations could be dangerous and could lead astray. Vital civilizational constituents are not thus built. People might be willing, ready and excited, but mere willingness, readiness and excitement are never enough. They follow their emotional impulses, but what is definitely needed most are the internalization and rationalization of those emotions. Many people simply think with their hearts, not their heads. Whereas civilizations are constructed mainly with, and of, inclusive ideas, knowledge and value systems, coupled with strategized programs and plans. Sentiments and emotions will bring a person, or a nation, only as far as they can go.

Moreover, make sure you do not fall prey to the temptation of precast ideas, speculations and assumptions, nor to the menace of bias, fanaticism and intolerance. Promise yourself and Almighty Allah that you will be as committed and honest in your pursuits as possible.

Remember, likewise, that Islam does not entertain myths, legends, fictions and any unfounded and irrational tales. So genuine, actual and sensible is Islam to do so.

When reading, discussing, writing about, or dealing directly or indirectly with any of the Sunni-Shi'ah problems and issues, remember that you cannot stop the waves, but can learn to surf and swim. Keep in mind that most Sunni-Shi'ah questions are not of a black-and-white nature because they do not deal with the pillars, or fundamentals, of religion. Therefore, you will barely come across two persons who think the same, no matter how much they have in common. That applies to Sunnis, too, and indeed to any other religious or political group.

Rise somewhat to an extreme vantage point and wonder if it is possible to stop seeing Sunni-Shi'ah disagreements and disputes as a threat, seeing them, instead, as an opportunity for mutual understanding, enrichment and cooperation in certain neutral life segments. Everyone needs friends and allies, and in today's exceptionally turbulent times for Islam and Muslims, the best allies for any Muslim group will be the other fellow Muslims.

Aren't believing in One Allah, following the same Prophet (pbuh), reading the same Qur'an and facing the same *qiblah*, sufficient for creating a common ground for any sort of dialogue and any degree of partnership against the avowed enemies of everything that both Sunnis and Shi'is live for? In so doing, all parties can gradually come closer to each other in other more sensitive and difficult areas as well. Besides, it is an irony that some Sunnis can easily find a common ground with the same self-confessed enemies of the truth against some Shi'is, and as such wage wars against the latter, and *vice versa*.

Furthermore, when dealing or conversing with someone who you disagree with, prioritize issues and your responses to them. Do not make a mountain out of a molehill; that is, do not have recourse to over-reactive and histrionic behaviors, making too much of minor issues. Every disagreement need not morph into an issue or a hindrance. Exercise patience in the process, lower your expectations and call to mind that both Sunnis and Shi'is need each other. They are closer to one another than it seems, certainly much closer than to any of their actual and potential enemies who, having mastered the art of deceit, tend to hypocritically present themselves as allies.

Always separate between a person's opinions, perceptions and interpretations, and his or her self, personality and character. The latter deserves perennial respect. Remember that what you think about and how you comprehend and explain a person's words, ideas and actions, is not always what that person exactly means by them. Learn to listen more, and more meticulously and wisely. Stay positive

and always have good and positive thoughts about basically everything. "Attack" only disagreements, not persons. Knowledge, good communication skills, appropriate methods and channels, and humble attitudes signify the key to any success.

Learn to accept the truth and wisdom whenever and wherever they might come from. Constantly remind yourself that your aim is to become an asset rather than a liability in the whole scheme of things. Your objective is to help, be useful and perhaps contribute to solving a problem. Do not exacerbate the situation by trying only to defeat and triumph over others, impressing your own views and wisdom on them. Do not become part of the problem. Your intention should never be to win debates and arguments, for many of them are exceptionally complex and so, unwinnable. It follows that some of the most sensitive and convoluted subjects should be declared undebatable, and should be accepted as such by all.

Rather, learn how to be shrewd enough and circumnavigate around such conundrums for the sake of realizing a higher and more consequential order of things and meanings. In doing so, always be guided by heavenly directives to call to the path of Allah "...with wisdom and beautiful preaching; and argue with them in ways that are best and most gracious..." (al-Nahl, 125); to "...speak to people only good (words)..." (al-Baqarah, 83); and to "...repel the evil deed with one which is better, thereupon the one between whom and you was enmity, will become like a close friend" (Fussilat, 34).

That said, for Sunnis and Shi'is to try to proselytize one another will bring them nowhere. It will only consume further their dwindling resources, time and energy. To a great many observers, rigorous proselytization efforts, both at individual and institutional levels, and with myriads of unfair and partisan tenets, procedures and methods in the process, denote one of the main obstacles to building bridges between the Sunni and Shi'i divides, and to forging inclusive and genuine dialogue. It is a worry that of late, this proselytization

war has taken on some unprecedented proportions and has assumed a global character.

Thus, a series of unconditional, earnest and sincere Sunni-Shi'ah dialogues is a must. Yet, such could be regarded as a collective religious obligation. The sooner the matter kicks off, the better. Obviously, such is the current Muslim situation that both mainstream Sunnis and Shi'is are set to lose nothing thereby, gaining almost everything.

It is startling that many Muslims proudly call for and actively participate in dialogues with Christians, Jews, Buddhists, Hindus, etc., establishing numerous bodies and institutions, and spending a fortune worldwide for the purpose - which is downright appropriate and praiseworthy - but spurn the prospect of doing the same with their coreligionists.

Again, Sunnis and Shi'is have more in common than what appears to casual observers. What can genuinely unite or bring them closer to one another greatly outweighs that which at present painfully alienates and separates them. The latter must be meticulously reviewed and re-evaluated against the backdrop of the former.