

Elements of Unity

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Abstract:

Language, time and ethnicity engender differences among human beings, but none of these are essential to humanity. The ‘humanity’ of individuals springs from their human nature (*fiṭrah*), which is shared by all human beings equally. This is the inner unitive element. It is ever-active and enduring, for it is not the result of human convention. The article argues that the elements of unity are essential to the human condition and are aplenty. It enumerates these elements and elucidates the Qurānic basis for them.

Keywords: Muslim unity, elements of unity, human nature, goodness of differences, innate nature of unity, Shia-Sunni unity, Muslim-Kafir relations.

Sound Heart

God, the Immaculate, thus describes to the Noble Prophet how one should comport oneself in a scholarly or religious circle:

وَإِذَا جَاءَكَ الَّذِينَ يُؤْمِنُونَ بِآيَاتِنَا فَقُلْ سَلَامٌ عَلَيْكُمْ

When those who have faith in Our signs come to you, say, “Peace to You”.¹

The intermediate among those thus saluted by the Prophet simply hear his salutation, whereas the elite will hear God’s salutation through His Prophet. Thus God salutes the prophets, His friends, and the faithful.

God’s salutation is not verbal. This salutation is, rather, an effusion unto the sound heart. God’s word is His action; God’s salutation is His nurturing the sound heart. What is a sound heart? It is the heart that has unified its cognitive (*darkī*) and emotive (*tahrikī*) faculties. An unsound heart, on the other hand, is that which has lost control of these faculties.

One who fails to attain to inward unity will also fail in outward unity. If imagination roams unrestrained, lust and anger perpetrate what they will, and base faculties subjugate the intellect (“How many an intellect that is a slave to unruly desire”²), one is lost in confused thoughts, and one so lost cannot be a member of a unified community. One who fails to attain to unity is impotent: disorganized multiplicity is unprolific.

In this light, a sound heart is a heart that has unified its desires, impulses, and cognitions. And it is only after achieving this inward unity that one may legitimately advocate unity in the social sphere.

¹ Qur’ān 6:54.

² *Nahj al-Balāghah*, Sayings: 211.

The Possibility of Unity

In spite of our various cognitive and emotive faculties, we are duty-bound to strive for unity and to prevent disunity. That God has created us as a multiplicity but has ordered us to strive for unity and to shun disunity indicates that unity is attainable and disunity avoidable.

But what must we do to be in harmony with one another and to form a unit? As Muslims, there are many methods available to us for attaining to this end. Islam warns us of the dangers of disunity and informs us of the advantages of unity, the factors conducive thereto, and the obstacles that hinder the achievement of unity.

Islam teaches us that unity is not something that could be produced by such conventional means as economic and military treaties, which may one day be ratified and one day invalidated. The consolidation that unity engenders is one which transcends agreements and contracts. The unity to which God exhorts us is not contractual; it is, rather, a unity rooted in our very existence.

Language, time, and ethnicity engender difference among human beings, but none of these are essential to humanity. Humanity springs from human nature, which is shared by all human beings equally. This is the inner unitive element. It is ever-active and enduring, for it is not the result of human convention; it is God's creation:

لَا تَبْدِيلَ لِخَلْقِ اللَّهِ³

There is no altering God's creation.³

Human nature, which directs us from within, is unalterable:

ذَلِكَ الدِّينُ الْقَيِّمُ

that is the upright religion.⁴

It is human nature that defines humanity, not the colour of skin, not conventions, not habits. This inherent direction is so beautiful and effective that it remains unchanged; God leaves it unchanged, as it is the *best constitution* (95:4), and no other being is able to alter it. Hence, *There is no altering God's creation*. All human beings possess this unitive nature, and the mission of God's prophets has been to nurture it.

The unity engendered by human nature is so profound that it extends beyond religious boundaries. Islam teaches us that all human beings who submit to the guidance of a divine guide are our brothers, our equals, and our peers in faith.

God, the Immaculate, says,

يَتَأْتِيهَا الرُّسُلُ كُلُّوْا مِنَ الطَّيِّبَاتِ وَأَعْمَلُوا صَالِحًا إِنِّي بِمَا تَعْمَلُونَ عَلِيمٌ وَإِنَّ

هَذِهِ أُمَّتُكُمْ أُمَّةً وَاحِدَةً وَأَنَا رَبُّكُمْ فَاتَّقُونِ

O apostles! Eat of the good things and act righteously. Indeed I know best what you do. Indeed this community of yours is one community, and I am your Lord, so be wary of Me.⁵

³ Qur'an 30:30.

⁴ Qur'an 30:30.

This verse clarifies that all divine religions are on the same path. But instead of heeding the inner guide—human nature—the believers of divine religions fragmented this cord of salvation, each grasping only a thin thread of it:

فَتَقَطَّعُوا أَمْرَهُمْ بَيْنَهُمْ زُبُرًا

But they fragmented their religion among themselves.⁶

This is contrary to God’s will; He furnished a single agent of salvation and thus commanded us:

وَأَعْتَصِمُوا بِحَبْلِ اللَّهِ جَمِيعًا وَلَا تَفَرَّقُوا

Hold fast, all together, to God’s cord, and do not be divided [into sects].⁷

There are numerous hadiths that express that Islam and the Qur’ān constitute “God’s cord.” One end of this cord is in the hands of God, and the other end is with us. We must hold this cord with a firm grip and use it to ascend. We must hold it all *together*, for otherwise we would be all holding it but in disunity. God, the Immaculate, exhorts us to think together and to keep together. This is the solution to many a theological, jurisprudential, and historical dispute, for the efforts of a circle worthy of God’s salutation⁸ are, without doubt, productive.

Distinguishing Between Enemy and Enmity

According to the Qur’ān, we are confronted by two enemies—internal and external. Our duty in respect to each is different. In confronting the external enemy—the army of unfaith, hypocrisy, and arrogance—the only way is war and resistance; we must defeat the enemy and exhaust its every resource:

فَأَضْرِبُوا فَوْقَ الْأَعْنَاقِ وَأَضْرِبُوا مِنْهُمْ كُلَّ بَنَانٍ

So strike [the] necks [of the faithless] and strike each of their fingertips.⁹

But what is our duty in dealing with those who pray toward the same *qiblah*, who believe in the same religion and scripture but with whom we disagree? God, the Immaculate, tells us that in such a situation, we must strive to wipe out enmity not the enemy. Infidels and hypocrites are our enemies, and so we must confront them harshly:

مُحَمَّدٌ رَسُولُ اللَّهِ وَالَّذِينَ مَعَهُ أَشِدَّاءُ عَلَى الْكُفَّارِ

Muhammad, the Apostle of Allah, and those who are with him are hard against the faithless.¹⁰

⁵ Qur’ān 23:51-52.

⁶ Qur’ān 23:53.

⁷ Qur’ān 3:103.

⁸ As the author mentions above, those who engage in peaceful relations with other human beings are worthy of God’s salutation. [Tr.]

⁹ Qur’ān 8:12.

¹⁰ Qur’ān 48:29.

When dealing with monotheists and Muslims, however, we must seek to destroy enmity not the enemy.

وَلَا تَسْتَوِي الْحَسَنَةُ وَلَا السَّيِّئَةُ ۚ ادْفَعْ بِالَّتِي هِيَ أَحْسَنُ فَإِذَا الَّذِي بَيْنَكَ
وَبَيْنَهُ عَدَاوَةٌ كَأَنَّهُ وَلِيٌّ حَمِيمٌ

Good and evil are not equal. Repel evil with what is best, for then he between whom and you was enmity, will be as though he were a sympathetic friend.¹¹

By erasing evil and enmity—not the evil-doer—we can make a friend out of a bloodthirsty enemy. Of course, only a very few can materialize this ideal:

وَمَا يُلْقَاهَا إِلَّا الَّذِينَ صَبَرُوا وَمَا يُلْقَاهَا إِلَّا ذُو حَظٍّ عَظِيمٍ

But none is granted it except those who are patient, and none is granted it except the greatly endowed.¹²

Nevertheless, if enmity is erased, unbiased dialogue can then solve many disputes, for only then can it bring home to us what is *good*. And once we know what is good, we strive for it without hesitation.

The Qur'an and the Question of Good

But what is *good*? The Qur'an has the answer to this question. The Qur'an tells us that it contains truths that are beyond human ken, and if it wasn't for revelation, mankind would never comprehend them. Fundamentally speaking, the task of God's prophets is not merely to recite scripture to their people, to establish certain regulations, or to offer some superficial admonition. If it were such, it could have been argued that human intellect could supersede divine revelation. But the Qur'an states,

كَمَا أَرْسَلْنَا فِيكُمْ رَسُولًا مِّنكُمْ يَتْلُوا عَلَيْكُمْ آيَاتِنَا وَيُزَكِّيكُمْ
وَيُعَلِّمُكُمُ الْكِتَابَ وَالْحِكْمَةَ وَيُعَلِّمُكُم مَّا لَمْ تَكُونُوا تَعْلَمُونَ

As We sent to you an apostle from among yourselves, who recites to you Our signs, and purifies you, and teaches you the Book and wisdom, and teaches you what you could not have known.¹³

It says "what you could not have known," not "what you did not know." That is, the apostle teaches human beings what they cannot learn on their own, what defies technology and natural science.

Now let us see what the Qur'an teaches us. The Qur'an explains that human good lies beyond this material world, beyond worldly positions and wealth. To restrict one's

¹¹ Qur'an 41:34.

¹² Qur'an 41:35.

¹³ Qur'an 2:151.

purview to these worldly matters is to sell one's soul in return for nothing. Those content with this world will have only this world.

There is a beautiful analogy in Surahs Yūnus and Ḥadīd regarding the state of this world. The Qur'an likens this world to a lush garden in spring that receives abundant rainfall. This wonderful state, however, is short-lived; autumn arrives and withers the plants and scatters the flowers. This is the reality of the material world.

Of course, the blessings of this world are divine signs. Rivers, plants, seasons: these do not constitute the base world. It is our desires that are base, not what exists in the real world, to which God refers as His signs. It is the shattering of our dreams and desires that God thus depicts:

فَأَصْبَحَ هَشِيمًا تَذْرُوهُ الرِّيحُ

Then it becomes chaff, scattered by the wind.¹⁴

ثُمَّ يَبْهِيحُ فَتَرْتَهُ مُصْفَرًّا ثُمَّ يَكُونُ حُطَمًا

then it withers and you see it turn yellow, then it becomes chaff.¹⁵

The end of the base world is like chaff, scattered by the wind.

But what about the end of those content with the base world? The Qur'an says that their end is similar to the end of the base world:

فَجَعَلَهُمْ كَعَصْفٍ مَّأْكُولٍ

thus making them like chewed-up straw.¹⁶

Regarding the calamitous end of the people of Thamūd, the Qur'an says,

إِنَّا أَرْسَلْنَا عَلَيْهِمْ صَيْحَةً وَاحِدَةً فَكَانُوا كَهَشِيمِ الْمُحْتَظِرِ

We sent against them a single cry, and they became like the dry sticks of a corral builder.¹⁷

They enjoy the pleasures of this world, which is its spring, only to be separated by death from what they cherished. The end of the base world and its admirers is turning into chaff. The end of the base world and its admirers is one and the same, for they are in essence one thing.

Those content with the base world are perpetually in conflict; they vacillate for trivial reasons: "followers of every caller, bending with every wind."¹⁸ They quarrel as long as they are in this world, and when they enter Hell, they continue their quarrel:

كَلَّمَا دَخَلَتْ أُمَّةٌ لَعَنَتْ أُخْتَهَا

¹⁴ Qur'an 18:45.

¹⁵ Qur'an 57:20.

¹⁶ Qur'an 105:5.

¹⁷ Qur'an 54:31.

¹⁸ *Nahj al-Balāghah*, Sayings: 147.

Every time that a nation enters [Hell], it will curse its sister [nation].¹⁹

But those who succeed in attaining to inner unity—by bringing all their faculties under the guidance of the soul—and who live in a unified Islamic state lead a heavenly life. Even as those residing in heaven hold no grudges against one another, there are no conflicts among true believers in this world.

Describing people in heaven, God says,

وَنَزَعْنَا مَا فِي صُدُورِهِمْ مِّنْ غِلٍّ إِخْوَانًا عَلَىٰ سُرُرٍ مُّتَقَابِلِينَ

We will remove whatever rancour there is in their breasts; as brothers, [they will recline] on couches, facing one another.²⁰

People in heaven harbour no rancour in their hearts. Residents of heaven see one another at all times. It is not that they see one another only while reclining on couches; rather, they are always together. This is the spirit of those residing in heaven.

True believers ask God to give them this spirit in this world:

يَقُولُونَ رَبَّنَا اغْفِرْ لَنَا وَلِإِخْوَانِنَا الَّذِينَ سَبَقُونَا بِالْإِيمَانِ وَلَا تَجْعَلْ فِي قُلُوبِنَا غِلًّا لِلَّذِينَ آمَنُوا

[They] say, “Our Lord, forgive us and our brethren who were our forerunners in faith, and do not put any rancour in our hearts toward the faithful.”²¹

Not only do true believers wish to remove rancour from their own hearts, they wish to see all conflicts among believers disappear.

Elements of Unity

On the outside, we are confronted by imperialist powers; on the inside, by our rebellious ego. So by what ways can we secure the unity of the world of Islam? What are the obstacles? These are questions we must clarify.

We must bear in mind that from disbelievers, we will receive no gain. More fundamentally, unity is not a quality that the material world could cultivate. Only God, the creator of hearts, holds the keys to rapport. Addressing his Noble Prophet, God says,

لَوْ أَنفَقْتَ مَا فِي الْأَرْضِ جَمِيعًا مَّا أَلْفَتْ بِينَ قُلُوبِهِمْ وَلَكِنَّ اللَّهَ أَلْفَ بَيْنَهُمْ

Had you spent all that is in the earth you could not have united their hearts, but God united them together.²²

¹⁹ Qur'an 7:38.

²⁰ Qur'an 15:47.

²¹ Qur'an 59:10.

²² Qur'an 8:63.

Materiality is unable to bring hearts together; materiality is incompatible with the soul. Should the authorities of the Islamic Republic of Iran convert the entire Alborz Mountains to gem and distribute it among the people in order to please and unify them, that would only be the beginning of conflict. Material resources can never serve as a unifying element.

In an Islamic state, injustice to our private rights is sufferable. We must, however, prevent at all costs any harm to the state itself. In a letter addressed to Abū Mūsā, the Master of the Faithful writes, “There is not a man—heed this—more anxious to preserve the integrity and union of the community of Muḥammad (may God’s peace and blessings be upon him and his household) than I.”²³ Imām ‘Alī asserted the truth—that his rights had been violated—with reasoning but was, nevertheless, careful to prevent faction within the community of Muslims.

فَتَقَطَّعُوا أَمْرَهُمْ بَيْنَهُمْ زُبُرًا كُلُّ حِزْبٍ بِمَا لَدَيْهِمْ فَرِحُونَ

But they fragmented their religion among themselves, each party exulting in what it had.²⁴

Imām ‘Alī strove to prevent such a conclusion.

“Verily, you are brothers in faith. Nothing can separate you but the wickedness of your intentions and the evil of your hearts.”²⁵ For identifying the cause of disunity, we must introspect, and on introspection we will realize that the cause of disunity is our evil-naturedness, which consumes our hearts:

نَارٌ... الَّتِي تَطَّلُعُ عَلَى الْأَفْئِدَةِ

the fire...which overspreads the hearts.²⁶

Our religion is one; our book is one; our qiblah is one; our prophet is one; the heaven and hell we strive for are the same. So it is our inner evil that instigates conflict and splits the community of the faithful into factions. We must reform ourselves in order to bring about unity: neither submission to the West nor invoking the East could unite us. (And most certainly it would be useless to work with a regime that slaughters several hundred *hajj* pilgrims without second thoughts.) It is only through heeding the directions of Islam that we can secure unity.

Imām ‘Alī says, “Beware of subjecting God’s religion to vagaries. Indeed unity in regard to a just cause you dislike is better than disunity in an unjust cause you like.”²⁷ Obviously for group work to succeed, one must humble oneself. This may be unpleasant, but it is necessary. Coming together in a group may be disagreeable, but its collective reward is worthwhile.

“Conform to the great majority, for indeed God’s hand is with the community.”²⁸ “Great majority” doesn’t mean merely a big city; it, rather, refers to manifestations of brotherhood in the Islamic community, such as the elections.²⁹ We must adhere to the

²³ *Nahj al-Balāghah*, Letters: 78.

²⁴ Qur’an 23:53.

²⁵ *Nahj al-Balāghah*, Sermons: 113.

²⁶ Qur’an 104:6-7.

²⁷ *Nahj al-Balāghah*, Sermons: 176.

²⁸ *Nahj al-Balāghah*, Sermons: 127.

²⁹ Please note that this example holds only where the government is Islamic. The author makes this statement with a reference to the Islamic Republic of Iran. [Tr.]

Islamic community, “for indeed God’s hand is with the community.” Just as the sheep that stray away from the flock are prey to wolves, so those who distance themselves from the community of Muslims for preserving their status are prey to satanic deceptions.³⁰ It is folly to think that solitary action could produce any good: “Verily God (immaculate is He) does not grant any good to anyone, from nations past or nations to come, through disunity.”³¹

Imām ‘Alī informs us of this truth not as a historian who has studied the annals of history but as God’s viceroy with knowledge of Divine Norms. He tells us that this truth holds not only for nations past but also for nations that are yet to come. “God does not grant any good” means that He has ordained it such that a disunited nation should not receive any good. If we desire to secure any good, even personal good, we have no choice other than unity.

And it is no excuse to claim that elements of unity are lacking. Elements of unity are aplenty. Elements of unity are *essential*, whereas those of disunity are *accidental*. The principle that preserves the individual and the society alike exists within us, and it is so firm that it withstands any attempt at bending it. It is neither alterable nor bendable.

In describing the “upright” book (the Qur’ān), God says,

وَلَمْ يَجْعَلْ لَهُ عِوَجًا

[He] did not let any crookedness be in it.³²

Only a book thus “upright” can serve to guide mankind to the right path. The human being’s spiritual nature (*fiṭrah*) is likewise upright and a source of guidance. As such, these two are unalterable elements of unity. So where conflict in words and deeds arises, we should know that it is in violation of our spiritual nature and on account of our evil intentions.³³

We should recognize that we reside in the Islamic Republic as guests. Our hosts are those pure souls who sacrificed themselves to safeguard this nation from the assaults of the West and the East. Bearing this in mind, we must strive to purge our evil intentions and purify our soul so as to pave the way for unity.

(Before the Islamic Revolution in Iran, we had difficulty understanding a good number of Qur’ānic verses and hadiths. This revolution, however, served as a practical interpretation of these instances. One such instance is this saying by Imām ‘Alī: “One who is pleased with the action of a people is as if though he shared in it with them.”³⁴ After the Islamic Revolution succeeded, we encountered situations where two qualified individuals were candidates for a position. The position would be granted to one of the two. If the other whom was denied the position was pleased with the first’s office and activities, he would share in with the spiritual rewards that the first official would procure by fulfilling the needs of the people. And this would naturally produce a harmonious environment. If, however, he protested the appointment of the first on account of evil and selfish intentions, he would be instigating conflict.)

³⁰ *Nahj al-Balāghah*, Sermons: 127.

³¹ *Nahj al-Balāghah*, Sermons: 176.

³² Qur’ān 18:1.

³³ See *Nahj al-Balāghah*, Sermons: 113.

³⁴ *Nahj al-Balāghah*, Sayings: 154.

By traversing this inner path of unity, we will succeed in resolving many a theological and jurisprudential problem. There are naturally certain differences among various groups. The Asharites (*ashā'irah*) have differences among themselves, and so do the Mutazilites (*mu'tazilah*) and the Adliites (*'adliyyah*). Just as there are external differences that define the boundaries of a group, so there are also internal differences within a group. But such differences are a potential source of blessing. (Although, it should be pointed out that the laudable difference is that which is prior to knowledge.)³⁵

These differences are like the imbalance between the two trays of a balance, both of which work together to yield just apportionment. When the weight of a weighed item differs from that of the weights, the two trays do not meet; one is higher and the other lower; they disagree but the purpose of each one is right and towards the establishment of a balance. Thus disparity before the final levelling out is sacred. The differences that God—immaculate is He—has imbedded in human nature are of this sort. Such differences are inevitable.

But it is those differences that remain after one gains knowledge that are nothing but the fruits of egotism:

وَمَا اخْتَلَفَ فِيهِ إِلَّا الَّذِينَ أُوتُوهُ مِنْ بَعْدِ مَا جَاءَتْهُمْ الْبَيِّنَاتُ بَغْيًا بَيْنَهُمْ

and none differed in [the Book] except those who had been given it, after the manifest proofs had come to them, out of a desire to violate [the rights of] one another.³⁶

فَمَا اخْتَلَفُوا إِلَّا مِنْ بَعْدِ مَا جَاءَهُمُ الْعِلْمُ بَغْيًا بَيْنَهُمْ

But they did not differ except after knowledge had come to them, out of a desire to violate [the rights of] one another.³⁷

God warns us that this desire to violate the rights of others harms, first and foremost, ourselves:

يَتَأْتِيهَا النَّاسُ إِنَّمَا بَغْيِكُمْ عَلَىٰ أَنْفُسِكُمْ

O mankind! Your violations are only to your own detriment.³⁸

We beseech God that He purify our soul and restore it to its pristine state and grant us a firm faith: with a pure soul and a firm faith, we can achieve unity in all spheres.

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³⁵ That is, differences that encourage debate and thus enlighten us are laudable. Those differences, however, that rise from acrimony and bigotry can only produce contention. [Tr.]

³⁶ Qur'an 2:213.

³⁷ Qur'an 45:17.

³⁸ Qur'an 10:23.