

FROM TOLERANCE TO DIGITAL SECTARIANISM: THE EVOLUTION OF ISLAMIC LEGAL TRADITION AND THE ROLE OF SOCIAL MEDIA

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Abstract

This research focuses on the theme of tolerance for the diversity of religious views in the Islamic academic tradition. It explores this theme by juxtaposing the tolerance of the Companions (may Allah be pleased with them), their successors, and the classical jurists with the insularity and impatience of modern sectarian scholars. It also examines the idea that our forebears upheld intellectual reverence and fostered coexistence despite theological differences. The study further explores the major factors that promote and fuel sectarian conflicts, including political motives, polemical writings, colonizers' pernicious designs, and the negative impact of rampant social media. This study argues that to curb sectarian rivalries, Muslims need to revive their old inclusive intellectual tradition by creating an atmosphere of respectful dialogue, cultivating intellectual humility, focusing on commonalities, and making Adab al-Ikhtilaf a compulsory subject in madrassah and university syllabi.

INTRODUCTION

The Holy Quran was not revealed in a single instance but was sent down gradually, according to the needs of society and the questions raised by the people. After its revelation, Allah assigned the responsibility of its interpretation to the Messenger (peace be upon him)

إِيَّاهُمْ نَزَّلَ مَا لِلنَّاسِ لِيُبَيِّنَ الذِّكْرَ إِلَيْكَ وَأَنْزَلْنَا ۖ وَالزُّبُرُ بِالْبَيِّنَاتِ
يَتَفَكَّرُونَ وَلَعَلَّهُمْ

"With clear proofs and scriptures. And We sent down to you the Reminder so that you may explain to the people what has been revealed to them, and so that they may reflect."ⁱ

So, when the verses of the Holy Quran were revealed to the Prophet (peace be upon him), he would explain them to the Companions. He had the exclusive prerogative to interpret the divinely revealed text. Independent legal reasoning was not required at the time of the Prophet in order to draw conclusions from the Qur'an. The Prophet (peace be upon him) would offer prompt advise to the Companions (may Allah be pleased with them) whenever they faced a new problem. The same was true for those who lived outside of Madinah; when confronted with a new issue, they would formulate their own initial ideas and stick to them until they were given the chance to argue their position in front of the Prophet. After hearing their points of view, he would either support one over the other or, in certain cases, concede the legitimacy of opposing views.

It is reported in *Sahih Bukhari* that one day Muhammad (peace be upon him) sent a military unit toward Banu Quraiza and told them at the time of departure not to offer *Asr* prayer before reaching Banu Quraiza. On their way, they differed in their view about offering the *Asr* prayer. One group thought that they should offer the prayer on the way as its time was getting late, while the other group argued that they would not offer *Asr* before reaching Banu Quraiza. Both adhered to their understanding of the Prophet's command and acted accordingly.ⁱⁱ

Here, we see that the difference occurred due to two distinct interpretive approaches. Group A chose the literal aspect, whereas Group B preferred the underlying wisdom of the command of the Messenger (peace be upon him). However, upon their arrival in *Madina*, they discussed the issue with

the Prophet (peace be upon him). He did not take exception to either position and endorsed both views.ⁱⁱⁱ

The jurists regard it as a matter of preference. Some jurists think that it is better to offer the prayer in its due time, while others believe that those who did not offer their prayer were also right.

During the lifetime of the Prophet (peace be upon him), everyone consulted him on legal and religious matters and followed his views on the issues at hand. He adjudicated their cases, and his verdict was regarded as final. He would commend every good deed and condemn every evil act.^{iv}

Islamic jurisprudence was not formally codified at the time, nor did they engage in juristic debates as contemporary scholars do. Modern jurists classify rulings into categories such as *adab*, *shart*, and *arkan*, whereas in those days, the Prophet would perform ablution, and the companions would observe and emulate the way he washed different parts of his body. He never explicitly stated that certain acts were *mustahab* (recommended) or *wajib* (obligatory).^v

The Prophet (peace be upon him) left the Holy Quran and Sunnah to guide the Ummah after him. He instructed his companions to hold fast to them so that they would not be misled in their social, political, and economic spheres of life.

Besides the Holy Quran and Sunnah, the companions had the advantage of having witnessed the Prophet (peace be upon him), his conduct, and his attitudes toward various ethical and legal matters. Moreover, they had heard his words and observed the occasions and reasons for the revelation of Quranic verses. As a result, they possessed a deep understanding of the Book and the Sunnah.

The author of *Tabaqāt al-Fuqahā'* remarks that most of the companions spent a long time with the Prophet (peace be upon him), which refined their juristic faculties. Since they were the direct addressees of the revelations and the words of the Prophet, they acquired a profound comprehension of the essence of his message.^{vi}

Methodology

This study employs a historical and analytical approach using secondary data. The historical approach involves analyzing past events and interpretations to understand their importance and impact over time.

Tolerance for the Diversity of Religious Views

This section discusses the tolerance of the companions (may Allah be pleased with them) and their successors for the diversity of religious views. Differences among the companions were not numerous during the reigns of Abu Bakr and Umar. Whenever they faced an issue, they convened a meeting of senior and scholarly companions to determine a ruling. Maimoon bin Mehran reports that when Abu Bakr encountered a new case, he would first seek its solution in the Holy Quran. If he did not find the requisite answer, he would turn to the Sunnah. If a solution was still not found, he would consult the companions (may Allah be pleased with them) for assistance. Finally, if neither the Quran nor the Sunnah provided a direct answer, he would establish a consensus with the senior companions.

Abu Bakr (may Allah be pleased with him) used to accompany the Prophet (peace be upon him) on virtually every occasion. They lived together and traveled together.

Despite being so close to the Prophet (peace be upon him), when the question of a grandmother's inheritance arose during his reign, he stated that there was no specified share for her in either the Quran or the Sunnah. As he had not found any legal guidance in the Quran or Sunnah regarding the issue, he sought the counsel of the companions. In response to his request for legal advice, Mughirah bin Shu'bah and Muhammad bin Salamah testified that the Prophet (peace be upon him) had assigned a one-sixth share of inheritance for the grandmother.^{vii} During the caliphate era, juristic differences were very limited, and such disagreements were handled with grace and mutual respect. Their differences never took an unpleasant turn, as they adhered to the sublime etiquettes of disagreement.

The first major issue on which they disagreed was the death of the Prophet (peace be upon him). Umar

(may Allah be pleased with him) initially declared that the Prophet had not passed away. However, Abu Bakr (may Allah be pleased with him) calmly assessed the situation and recited verse 3:144, which affirms that every soul must face death, and even the Prophet was no exception to this rule. Upon hearing the verse, "Indeed, you will die, and they will die as well," the sword fell from Umar's hand, and he became convinced that revelation had ended and that the Prophet (peace be upon him) had indeed passed away. Umar later remarked that the impact of the verse recited by Abu Bakr was so profound that it felt as if he had heard it for the first time.^{viii}

The second issue was the proper place for the burial of the Prophet (peace be upon him). Some suggested that he be buried in *Masjid Nabawi*, while others proposed that he should be laid to rest in the general graveyard alongside the other companions.^{ix}

Abu Bakr (may Allah be pleased with him) resolved the matter by recalling that he had heard the Prophet (peace be upon him) say that prophets are buried at the place where they pass away. Both issues had the potential to cause serious conflict among the companions (may Allah be pleased with them), but their swift recourse to the Quran and Sunnah prevented any possibility of discord.^x

Similarly, another serious issue that could have led to violence and bloodshed was the question of the Prophet's (peace be upon him) successor, as he passed away without nominating a leader for the Muslim *Ummah*. Thanks to the sagacity and wisdom of both the *Ansar* and *Muhajireen*, the crisis was swiftly resolved, preventing internecine war.^{xi}

After the demise of the Prophet (peace be upon him), some newly converted tribal groups refused to pay *zakat*. Abu Bakr (may Allah be pleased with him) firmly resolved to wage war against them. However, Umar and some other companions (may Allah be pleased with them) initially disagreed with the first caliph's decision to fight those who withheld *zakat*. Umar cited a hadith stating that those who testify that Allah is One and that Muhammad is His Prophet should not be fought.

In response to this argument, Abu Bakr (may Allah be pleased with him) recited verse 9:11 from the Holy Quran, successfully persuading Umar of the legitimacy and urgency of waging war against those who refused to pay *zakat*.

Umar (may Allah be pleased with him) had juristic differences with Abu Bakr on several issues. For instance, Abu Bakr thought that the conquered lands should be distributed among Muslim fighters as booty, as was practiced in the days of the Prophet (peace be upon him). However, when Umar (may Allah be pleased with him) conquered Iraq, he decided not to distribute the land among the soldiers. Instead, he chose to leave the land as a shared waqf, from which the needs of the local population and the Mujahideen would be fulfilled.^{xiii}

Similarly, during his reign, every Muslim resident of the state used to receive a stipend from the public treasury (Bayt al-Mal). However, he adjusted the amount of the stipend based on who embraced Islam first and whose contribution to Islam was greater.

Umar and Abdullah ibn Mas'ud also differed on many issues. The latter was a profound scholar and was so close to the Prophet that he was regarded as a family member. Hafiz Ibn Qayyim compiled about a hundred juristic issues on which they held different opinions.^{xiii}

For instance, when a man says to his wife, "Anti 'alayya haram" (You are unlawful for me), Umar held that it is tantamount to divorce. However, Abdullah ibn Mas'ud argued that pronouncing such a statement is an oath (yameen), and the oath-taker needs to pay kaffarah (expiation) for his words.

Abdullah ibn Mas'ud held that if a man divorced his wife once or twice and she subsequently married another man, the previous divorces would be rendered null and void. Consequently, if she later remarried her first husband, he would regain the right to issue three divorces. In contrast, Umar maintained that the previous divorces remained valid, meaning the ex-husband would have only one divorce left, as the first two had already been exhausted.

The Companions (may Allah be pleased with them) had basic principles and guidelines for handling disagreements on religious issues. They would do their best to resolve their differences peacefully to avoid conflicts. If a Companion's opinion differed from the rest due to being unaware of a hadith, the hadith having multiple meanings, or a different understanding of *Maqāsid al-Shari'ah* (the objectives of Islamic law), he would readily change his stance upon finding the relevant hadith, being persuaded

about its specific meaning in the given context, or gaining clarity on the objective of *Shari'ah* in that particular case.^{xiv}

According to them, the most paramount principle of an Islamic society was brotherhood and unity. These fundamental values always took precedence over juristic and intellectual disagreements. Their differences did not lead to conflict or discord; rather, they were limited to minor legal details.

Among the Companions, there were renowned legal scholars to whom people consistently turned for religious guidance on important matters. It is historically proven that they were so profoundly trained by the Prophet (peace be upon him) that the fear of God perpetually overshadowed intellectual arrogance, base desires, and selfish motives in their personalities.^{xv}

Madinah was the capital of the Caliphate during the reign of Umar (may Allah be pleased with him), though the Companions would often travel outside Madinah for *jihad* and *da'wah*. However, the scholarly Companions did not settle outside Madinah; they remained readily available for consultation and discussion on serious issues.

Things changed during the time of Uthman (may Allah be pleased with him), as he allowed scholars to settle elsewhere. Consequently, more than three hundred Companions moved to cities such as Basra, Kufa, Syria, and Egypt, where they laid the foundations of different schools of thought.

Shah Waliullah says that the different schools of thought founded by the Companions had an impact on their successors, who followed particular juristic positions propounded by them. The successors relied on their views regarding the authenticity or lack thereof of certain hadiths. Additionally, they cross-examined some of their views and privileged certain notions over others. In this process, they sometimes rejected the views of senior Companions.^{xvi}

For instance, when some successors received the views of Umar and Abdullah ibn Mas'ud that *tayammum* for *junābah* is not valid, Ammar and Imran ibn Husayn did not accept their stance. With their different interpretations and views, they established various academic centers. In Madinah, people followed the views of Sa'id ibn al-Musayyib and Salim ibn 'Abdullah. In Makkah, 'Atā' ibn Abī Rabāh held a similar intellectual status, whereas

people in Kufa followed the opinions of Ibrāhīm al-Nakha'ī and Sha'bī. The people of Yemen put their trust in Hasan al-Basri, and the Syrians followed the *ijtihād* of Makhūl.

The imams of the four famous schools of jurisprudence not only held different juristic views but also employed distinct jurisprudential methodologies. However, they did not allow their intellectual disagreements to escalate into sectarian conflicts. Unlike Imam Abu Hanifa, who placed greater emphasis on *qiyās* (analogical reasoning), Imam Ahmad ibn Hanbal gave more weight to hadith, yet they never anathematized one another.

Similarly, Imam Shafī'i adhered firmly to his juristic views, asserting that his opinion was correct. However, he would hasten to add that his viewpoint might be wrong, while his opponent's could be right. Such a spirit of humility and a modest attitude helped prevent sectarian discord among these prominent scholars of Islam

Over time, tolerance dwindled, and intellectual disagreements escalated into social and political divisions. Several factors contributed to such discord. Firstly, political exploitation sowed the seeds of sectarianism. Rulers used political identities to strengthen their positions. For instance, the Abbasid caliphs privileged the Hanafi school over the rest, and later, the Ottomans institutionalized it, sidelining other jurisprudential schools. Similarly, some Abbasid caliphs advocated the Mu'tazila school in *kalām* and persecuted those who did not subscribe to their theological positions.

In addition to political reasons, polemics and polemical treatises also added fuel to the fire. Unlike the eminent scholars of the past, they produced polemical discourse, and in response to their views, counter-polemics were written, leading to serious sectarian discord. For example, Ibn Taymiyyah wrote *Minhāj al-Sunnah*, in which he criticized Shia doctrines.^{xvii} Such treatises broadened and deepened the gulf between the two major denominations of Islam, Sunni and Shia.

Coupled with the above-mentioned reasons is the adverse role of colonialism. Western colonial powers, especially the British colonizers in India, stirred up sectarian sentiments among the natives and estranged Muslims from their brethren. The British in India shattered Muslim unity and created bad

blood between Shias and Sunnis.^{xviii} Under their auspices, several polemical books were published, containing rigid religious ideas that led to opponents being declared *kāfir* (disbelievers).

Digital Sectarianism

Besides the historical reasons outlined above, sectarian fire has been immensely fueled by modern social media platforms. Social media is amplifying sectarian divides in the following manner. The most vital role that social media plays in creating sectarian sentiment is the rapidity of communication: it spreads unverified religious ideas very quickly. Secondly, people use distorted videos and posts that have nothing to do with the ideas of the supposed original scholars, thus generating unnecessary tensions.

Since modern media consumers cannot afford much time, they prefer to watch short-form content. The downside of such a format is that it lacks necessary intellectual context, leading to negative interpretations. In contemporary Muslim society, myriads of people consume short-form content available on TikTok and Twitter, which reinforces their biases and prejudices. In addition, people follow pages of scholars whose ideas they find synonymous with their own, reinforcing their bigoted positions. Other platforms, such as YouTube, also broadcast extremist content, pushing the masses toward intellectual rigidity and sectarian divides. Similarly, social media platforms allow untrained pseudo-scholars to post their fatwas on the internet. Such fatwas, stemming from a superficial understanding of Islam, create sectarian conflict over petty issues.^{xix}

Conclusion

In order to counter the nefarious impact of sectarianism, we must draw on the pristine and glorious past of Islam and act like the pious scholars of the early centuries. We need to revive the classical tradition of deferential dialogue and promote *adab al-ikhtilaf* by including books on the ethics of disagreement in both madrassah and university syllabi. Secondly, it is the primary responsibility of madrassah and university teachers to encourage intellectual humility among their students and to practice it themselves. Scholars, both in universities

and madrassahs, have a moral responsibility to persuade their students that neither a single person nor a single group has a monopoly on the truth. Whether someone reads a book or watches religious content on the internet, they are ethically bound to follow the important principle laid down in the Quran: "O you who believe, if a wicked person comes to you with misinformation, verify it." ^{xx}

Finally, we need to concentrate on what unifies us rather than what creates theological rifts. We must realize that the early Muslim communities had differences, but they focused on commonalities and resolved their disputes with great reverence and wisdom.

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