

Early Differences and Sects in Islam

Adapted largely from
Al-Farq bayn al-Firaq
(The Difference between the Sects)
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Inevitability of Differences

In the commonly-known hadith, it has been reported that the Prophet (may Allah bless him and grant him peace) said,

"The Children of Israel fragmented into seventy-two sects, and my ummah shall split into seventy-three sects, all of which shall be in the Fire save one sect." They asked, "What is that one, O Messenger of Allah?" He said, "That [way] which I and my companions are upon."

The hadith is narrated by Tirmidhi, who classified it as a fair, strange hadith, and by Abu Dawud. Some scholars have not accepted the hadith, because no single narration of it is authentic, while others have regarded the large number of narrations as sufficient evidence of the hadith correctness. In any case, its general meaning is borne out by authentic evidence:

"But they will not cease to differ, except those on whom your Lord has mercy." [Surah Hud]

"Whoever among you lives long shall see much difference of opinion. So, you must follow my sunnah, and the sunnah of the Rightly-Guided Caliphs after me. Hold on to them with your jaws, and beware of newly-invented affairs, for every innovation is a straying." [Nawawi's 40]

Differences in the ummah are thus blameworthy, and the differences here are differences in the essentials. There do exist legitimate differences of opinion, which are differences in the peripherals. Abundant examples of these can be found in the jurisprudential verdicts of the great scholars of Ahlus-Sunnah wal-Jama`ah. They all agreed on the fundamentals, but arrived at different verdicts on some finer issues. Such differences are not reprehensible, for the Prophet (may Allah bless him and grant him peace) has promised reward to those mujtahids who exert their utmost effort to arrive at a verdict. "When a judge gives a verdict, and tried his hardest (to find the truth), then if he is wrong, he gets a single reward, while if he is correct, he gets two rewards." [Riyad as-Salihin] The objectionable differences are thus those in matters such as Tawhid, reward and retribution, destiny and free-will, pre- ordainment, the names and attributes of Allah, prophethood,, justice and other such issues which the Saved Group, Ahlus-Sunnah wal-Jama`ah, have concurred upon.

Early Disagreements

Differences in the ummah arose very soon after the death of the Prophet (may Allah bless him and grant him peace). Upto that time, the ummah was united in both fundamentals and peripherals, for they had direct recourse to the Propeht (may Allah bless him and grant him peace) himself to resolve any disagreements which occurred. The first difference occurred at the time of the Prophet's (may Allah bless him and grant him peace) death. Some people thought that he had not died, but that Allah had raised him up, just as He raised up Jesus. The difference was allayed by Abu Bakr, who recited to people the verse (meaning), "You shall die, and they shall die." [Zumar:30] and told them, "Whoever was worshipping

Muhammad, then Muhammad has died, and whoever was worshipping the Lord of Muhammad, then He is living and does not die."

Then, they differed regarding where the Prophet (may Allah bless him and grant him peace) should be buried. The people of Makkah wanted to take him back to Makkah, since that had been the place of his birth and appointment to prophethood, as well the location of his ancestor Isma`il's grave, and the qiblah. The people of Madinah wanted to bury him in Madinah itself, since it was the destination of his migration and the home of his Helpers (the Ansar). Others thought he should be taken to Jerusalem and buried there next to his forefather Abraham (peace be upon him). Once more, it was Abu Bakr who solved the problem. He narrated the hadith, "The Prophets are buried where they die." Thus, they buried him in his room in Madinah.

The next difference was with regard to leadership. The Ansar wanted to pledge allegiance to Sa`d ibn `Ubadah al-Khazraji, while the Quraysh said that leadership must come from the Quraysh. The Ansar submitted when they were related the hadith, "The leaders are from Quraysh." Next, they differed regarding inheritance of the land of Fadak. This was a piece of land which the Prophet had acquired as a form of booty, and which he retained during his lifetime. When he passed away, `Ali (may Allah be pleased with him) said that the Prophet (may Allah bless him and grant him peace) had assigned it to Fatimah (may Allah be pleased with her) during his lifetime. Al-`Abbas denied this. Once more, it was Abu Bakr who passed judgement, ruling that it could not be inherited because of the hadith, "The Prophets do not leave behind inheritance." Later, after the death of Abu Bakr (may Allah be pleased with him), `Umar allowed al-`Abbas and `Ali to supervise the land, but not to own it.

The early Muslims differed also over the course of action against those people who refused to pay Zakat. Abu Bakr was in favor of fighting them until they paid it. `Umar disagreed, citing the hadith, "I have been ordered to fight people until they testify that there is no god but Allah, and that Muhammad is the Messenger of Allah, and [until] they establish salah and give zakat. Then, if they do that, they have secured their lives and their property from me, except in the cause of Islamic justice, and their reckoning is with Allah, the Mighty, the Majestic." He proposed that these people's lives were sacrosanct because they had said "La ilaha illallah." Abu Bakr responded, "I will surely fight against those who make a distinction between salah and zakat." Eventually, `Umar also came around to see the truth in Abu Bakr's position.

After this, the Companions were busy fighting Tulayhah ibn Khuwaylid al-Asadi, who had apostasized, but who later returned to Islam in the time of `Umar. He repented, and witnessed the battles of Qadisiyyah, and of Nahawand, where he was martyred, may Allah be pleased with him. They also fought Musaylimah, the Liar, Sajah bint al-Harith and Aswad ibn Zayd al-`Ansi, who all laid claim to Prophethood, as well as all the rest of the Arabs who apostasized after the Prophet's (may Allah bless him and grant him peace) death.

The Great Fitnah

After this, they fought the Romans and the Persians. They won these conquests, and at this time were still united in issues of `aqidah. They differed only in peripheral issues of fiqh, such as the inheritance of a

grandmother. Matters continued in this manner throughout the reigns of Abu Bakr and `Umar, and for six years of `Uthman's reign. At this point, some people disagreed with some aspects of `Uthman, on account of which they came to murder him. After his assassination, they disagreed over what should be the fate of his murderers. `Ali (may Allah be pleased with him) was of the opinion that the Caliphate should be re-established before bringing the murderers to justice, since law and order and stability have a higher priority. Mu`awiyah (may Allah be pleased with him) thought that the people who had committed such a heinous crime as murdering the Caliph should be brought to justice immediately, and that the current Caliph's (i.e. Ali's) permission was not needed, because Allah has said, (meaning), "Whoever is killed unjustly, We have given authority to his representative." Both of them were qualified mujtahids, and they were fighting on the basis of the resulting disagreement, and so we do not criticize either of them, although Ali was correct. Several prominent Sahabah were on both sides. For example, `A'ishah, Talhah and Zubayr were initially on the side of Mu`awiyah. Others, such as `Abdullah ibn `Umar, chose to remain neutral. Some people at the time condemned one or both groups. Two battles, the Battle of the Camel and the Battle of Siffin were fought. Abu Musa al-Ash`ari and `Amr ibn al-`As were then appointed as judges, and people differed in their position towards them also. The **Khawarij** believed that Mu`awiyah (may Allah be pleased with him) had committed kufr by fighting against the Caliph, and that `Ali (may Allah be pleased with him) had also committed kufr by agreeing to an arbitration. They were a strictly religious group who believed that any sin was kufr. They eventually fragmented into around twenty sects, each accusing the others of kufr. The Ibadiyah is one of these sects, and remnants of them can be found to this day in Oman and North Africa.

The Qadariyyah

Then, in the latter days of the Sahabah, there emerged the despicable sect of the Qadariyyah, of whom it is reported in one narration (whose authenticity is debatable) that the Prophet had warned, saying, "the Qadariyyah are the Magians of this ummah." The sect was initiated at the hands of Ma`bad al-Juhani, and they denied destiny. Ja`d ibn Dirham, another pioneer of the sect, was the first to claim the Qur'an ins created. The remaining Sahabah, among them `Abdullah ibn `Umar, Jabir ibn `Abdullah, Abu Hurayrah, `Abullah ibn `Abbas and Anas ibn Malik, abjured the Qadariyyah. They instructed people not to greet them with salam, nor to pray over their dead, nor even to visit their sick.

The Mu`tazilah

In the time of the tabi`in, in the days of Hasan al-Basri in particular, Wasil ibn `Ata' emerged with his concept of "the station between the two stations." He claimed that a Muslim who commits a major sin is no longer a believer, nor is he a kafir, but that he is in an intermediate station between kufr and iman - that of fisq (transgression) and will remain eternally in Hell. Imam Hasan expelled them from his circle (halaqah), and they isolated themselves near one of the pillars of the mosque. As a result, they became known as "Al-Mu`tazilah", meaning : the Isolated Ones. The Mu`tazilah eventually fragmneted into twenty separate sects, each pronouncing kufr on the rest, and whose common ground was an over-emphasis on the use of the mind. They tried to interpret Islam in the light of first-order logic. Their other beliefs included:

- That it is permissible, lexically, to ascribe creation of deeds to human beings.
- That the Qur'an is created.

- That the attributes of Allah are not eternal.
- Interpretation of allegorical verses without exception, so that they denied that the believers will see Allah in the Hereafter.

Although they were a deviant sect, this does not diminish from the value of all of their work, for some of them were accomplished in some branches of Islamic sciences. e.g. Zamakhshari, the author of the renowned exegesis (tafsir) "Al-Kashshaf", was a Mu`tazili, although it has been reported that he repented and joined Ahlus- Sunnah close to his death, as is to be expected for a scholar of his calibre.

The Jahmiyyah

Also around this time, there emerged the Jahmites, who are named after Jahm ibn Safwan. Their beliefs included:

- That Hell is not eternal
- That human beings are under compulsion
- Negation of divine attributes.

The Ash`arah and Maturidiyyah

The Ash`aris are a doctrinal school of thought named after Imam Abul-Hasan Ash`ari. Some latter Ash`aris resorted to interpretation of some of the allegorical attributes, initially in an effort to curb the waves of anthropomorphism which were raging in their time. They based these interpretations on the Arabic language and the contexts of the verses. Anything whose interpretation was not abundantly clear to them (such as the Vision of Allah for the believers in the Hereafter), they deferred to Allah. Also, it should be noted that not all Ash`aris resorted to interpretation. It is important to make a distinction between the Ash`aris, on the one hand, and the Jahmiyyah and Mu`tazilah on the other. Many prominent scholars of Ahlus-Sunnah were Ash`aris, e.g. Qadi Abu Bakr al-Baqillani, Imam Yahya ibn Sharaf al-Nawawi, Imam Ibn Hajar al-`Asqalani. In fact, most Malikis, Shafi`is and Hanbalis have been Ash`ari in doctrine.

The Hanafis have been largely Maturidi, the ascription coming from Imam Abu Mansur al-Maturidi, a prominent Sunni scholar who, like al-Ash`ari, set about formalizing the Islamic doctrine. Although both al-Ash`ari and al-Maturidi were Hanafi in jurisprudence, the latter was more affected by the doctrinal heritage of Imam Abu Hanifah. The differences between the Ash`aris and Maturidis are minor, numbering around a couple of dozen points, many of which are merely differences in terminology.

The Batiniyyah

The Batinis emerged at the time of the Caliph Ma'mun, with Hamdan ibn Qiramat and `Abdullah ibn Maymun al-Qaddah at their head. They are also not Muslims. They try to build good relations with everyone, pretending to agree with them. When they find potential in someone, they invite him to their religion. They believe that punishment in this world is when the Muslims busy themselves with prayer, fasting, Hajj and Jihad. They believe that prayer means following their leader, fasting is visiting him and adultery is disclosing his secret. They allow incest and homosexuality, and in fact dismiss the entire

shari`ah. They came to power and caused harm to the muslims until the time of the `Abbasid caliph, al-Muktafi, in around 300AH.

(See also :

"The Batinis"

"The Druze")

The Rafidah

Rawafid is a term often used to denote those who show great love for the Household of the Prophet, and in this light Imam Shafi`i said, "If being Rafidi is loving the Household of Muhammad Then let all mankind and jinn testify that I am Rafidi." However, it is usually used with negative connotations. The Saba'iyyah, a sect of the Rawafid, emerged in the time of `Ali and told `Ali he was God. `Ali (may Allah be pleased with him) burned some of them to death as a result. Later, the Rawafid split into four groups: The Zaydis, Imamis, Kisanis and Exaggerators (Ghulah). Some people asked Imam Zayd ibn `Ali to disavow Abu Bakr and `Umar. He would not do so, and some people refused his decision, and deserted him, thereby becoming known as Rawafid, which means : the Refusers. Those who stayed with him became known as the Zaydis, and so they are technically not of the Rawafid. The exaggerators are not Muslims.

The Zaydis, Imamis and exaggerators split up further, with each group accusing the other of kufr. The Zaydis split into three groups : Jarudis, Sulaymanis and Butris. They all agreed on the leadership of Imam Zayd ibn `Ali ibn al-Husayn when he revolted at the time of Hisham ibn `Abdul-Malik. They are the closest of the Shi`ah to Ahlus-Sunnah; they merely maintain that `Ali had more right to the Caliphate, but they do not claim that he was explicitly appointed as Caliph by the Prophet (may Allah bless him and his Household and grant them peace), and hence they accept the Caliphates of Abu Bakr, `Umar and `Uthman.

The Kisanis split into two groups : one claimed that Muhammad ibn Hanafiyyah, a son of `Ali, is still alive and that he is the Mahdi; the other group say he died and passed on the leadership.

The Imamis and exaggerators split into fifteen groups, among which are the Ja`faris/Ithna `Asharis (Twelvers) and the Isma`ilis. The exaggerators claimed divinity for their Imams, permitted all sorts of haram things, and in short dismissed the obligations of shari`ah.

The Murji'ah

The Murji`ah are those who said that sin is of no detriment to soemone who has iman. The most extreme sect among them believed that anyone who says "la ilaha illallah" is guaranteed entry into heaven, even if he does not believe in what he is saying. Some of them also denied destiny, and are therefore considered a sect of the Qadariyyah; while others inclined to the views of Jahm ibn Safwan, in that human beings are under compulsion, and these are therefore considered a sect of the Jahomites. Others stood alone in their belief, and these sects were five in number.

The Mujassimah

The Mujassimah are the corporealists or anthropomorphists; those who took the literal meanings of words

mentioned in allegorical verses and ahadith, and thus likened Allah to His creation, attributing to Him a body, face, limbs, location, direction, etc. Some of them tried to profess Transcendence by saying that Allah is 'a body not like (created) bodies', while others committed blatant kufr, picturing their Lord as a man.

The Saved Sect

As for the sevnty-third sect, which is the Saved Sect and the Victorious Group, they are Ahlus-Sunnah wal-Jama`ah. They include Ashab ar-Ra'y (The People of Deliberation, such as the Hanafis) and Ashab al-Hadith (The People of Hadith, such as the Shafi`is). They all agree on the oneness of the Creator, His attributes, His justice, wisdom, names and attributes. They agree:

- That the universe is created.
- That Allah is one and eternal.
- That Allah will be seen in the Hereafter, without any specification, direction or resemblance to creation.
- That Muhammad (may Allah bless him and grant him peace) is the Final Prophet, and that he is sent to all of mankind.
- That the Qur'an and authentic Sunnah are the primary sources of shari`ah.
- That the Ka`bah is the qiblah.
- That the Questioning in the Grave is true.
- That Resurrection, the Pond (Hawd) and Balance are all true.

This group includes the famous Imams, Abu Hanifah, Malik, al-Shafi`i Ahmad, Awza`i, Sufyan ath-Thawri, Dawud Zahiri and their companions.

