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Sectarianism and Difference of Opinion: An Islamic Perspective

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Abstract

The modern world has witnessed its fair share of war and bloodshed due to supremacist ideas and intolerance of diversity, where the greatest of loss is incurred upon the common man. Perhaps, as a lesson learnt from these atrocities, there are numerous multi-national organizations that have come out of their self-created cocoons and have started embracing all of humanity. Sectarianism can arguably be termed one of the greatest issues that the Muslim Ummah is currently facing. When Islam was revealed to our Holy Prophet (SAW) more than 1400 years ago, there was a single way of life that was preached to the new Muslims – and that was the way of the Prophet Muhammad (SAW). This paper will try to differentiate between Sectarianism and difference of opinion, elaborate the stance of Islam on sectarianism and difference of opinion and shed light on the nature, issues and ground realities of sectarianism in Pakistan. The author will also touch on the etiquettes of disagreement in Islam. The paper will investigate an important question: Is it possible for us as Muslims, to stand united despite permissible differences in opinions and respect each other? Are there ways, means or methods that may let us avoid sectarianism or violence while still having our difference of opinions? The research will be based on descriptive and analytical methods.

Key Words: *Sectarianism, Islam, Diversity, Tolerance, Humanity.*

For the earliest of Muslims, there was no need to divide into sects or factions, because they all unanimously agreed with the decisions made by the Messenger of Allah (SAW). After the passing of the Prophet (SAW), however, the succeeding generations of the Muslims began to weaken in faith and unity. These internal weaknesses coupled with some external forces that sought power and glory eventually led to the unfortunate split among the Muslim Ummah. The once powerful and unbreakable Muslims were eventually reduced to a mere sliver of what they once were and

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became a nation of factions warring over inconsequential minor differences. Allah (SWT) in the Holy Quran warns the believers to “not be of those who associate others with Allah [Or] of those who have divided their religion and become sects, every faction rejoicing in what it has.”¹

In the present day and age, the international community has begun to recognize how important it is for various groups to become more accepting of other groups that may differ from them in ideology or nationality. The modern world has witnessed its fair share of war and bloodshed due to supremacist ideas and intolerance of diversity, where the greatest of loss is incurred upon the common man. Perhaps, as a lesson learnt from these atrocities, there are numerous multi-national organizations that have come out of their self-created cocoons and have started embracing all of humanity. They have done so by founding non-profit organizations such as ‘Doctors without borders’, ‘Musicians without borders’, ‘Libraries without borders’, ‘Bankers without borders’, ‘Families without borders’ and ‘Democracy without borders’. The basic aim of these NGOs is to promote tolerance and acceptance among the people of the world; to work for the betterment of humanity as a whole rather than classifying oneself into so many groups and factions that one becomes insensitive to the needs of those outside that group.

It is unfortunate that we witness so many cases of violence and hatred between people belonging to different religious sects. The same holds true for the many sects within Islam. Clergy belonging to certain sects have set apart their mosques, have distinct ulema and often interact with their own communities. Hate crimes and expressions of intolerance are common in inter-sect interaction. The question that then arises is: can we as Muslims not come up with movements such ‘Imams without borders’, ‘Ulama without borders’, ‘Mosques without borders’ and ‘Madrasas without borders’? Can we not put aside the supposed ‘good’ of our sect for a while and attempt to work for the benefit of all Muslims? Can we not attempt to unite upon our similarities and reconcile our differences in a civilized manner, rather than reacting in an aggressive, violent and damaging manner?

Sectarianism and difference of opinion

To correctly understand sectarianism and what Islam’s verdict is regarding it, we need to first understand the difference, if any, between sectarianism and difference of opinion.

Sectarianism

According to the New Shorter Oxford Dictionary, a sect is a “body or group of people subscribing to views that are divergent from other

people of the same religion.” The Merriam Webster dictionary adds that sectarianism refers to “having limited character or scope” or being “narrow, bigoted”. Sectarianism generally refers to some form of discrimination or prejudice arising from belonging to a particular sect, where an individual believes that his/her sect is superior to others. Sects are often associated with religious groups, political parties, ethnicities or classes.

Difference of Opinion

Difference of opinion, on the other hand, is a completely different matter. An individual can and often does differ in opinion from another individual, about a minor or major matter. Difference of opinion is present within every group or team, no matter how closely-knit or united they are. Difference of Opinion stems out of a sound mind and a righteous soul. It is the mark of a person who attempts to think for himself/herself and does not blindly conform to the masses, hence, it is more often than not, a positive trait to possess. Where human beings exist, difference of opinion follows, without a doubt. Complete unanimity can be found in two situations only:

1. If there is no one in the group who is able to think and reflect, if someone says anything, everyone will follow him.
2. If the members of that society are untrustworthy. They do not give their opinions according to their conscience. ²

Islam on Sectarianism and Difference of opinion

Let us now arrive at our main topic of discussion. What does Islam have to say about sectarianism and difference of opinion? Does it support either, both or none?

As far as sectarianism is concerned, Islam has nothing to do with it. Islam is the only religion that uplifts the status of humanity irrespective of caste, color, ethnicity or social status.³ Islam demands that respect be given to all other religions and forbids the use of derogatory comments against them. It teaches tolerance, patience and forgiveness to its followers and discourages them from irrational and negative thinking. This notion can be derived from the following verse:

وَلَوْلَا دَفَعُ اللَّهُ النَّاسَ بَعْضَهُمْ بِبَعْضٍ هَلَّامَتْ صَوَامِعُ وَبِيَعٌ وَصَلَوَاتٌ وَمَسَاجِدُ يُذَكَّرُ فِيهَا اسْمُ اللَّهِ كَثِيرًا

“And had there not been Allah’s repelling some people by others, certainly there would have been pulled down cloisters and churches and synagogues and mosques in which Allah’s name is much remembered”.⁴

Brandino Machiavelli mentions in his documentary on Islamic sectarianism how sectarianism restricts minds, causes hatred of other cultures and civilizations and legitimizes the killing of anyone who does

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not agree with you. He goes on to add that it is this principle that has developed and has been tapped at different times by political, religious and sectarian factions to create havoc.⁵ If we compare this analysis to the teachings of Islam, it is fairly obvious that Islam – the religion of peace – is one hundred percent against any sort of such ideas that lead to bloodshed, violence and disunity. Allah clearly rebuffs divisions among the Muslims in the Holy Quran, stating:

وَأَعْتَصِمُوا بِحَبْلِ اللَّهِ جَمِيعًا وَلَا تَفَرَّقُوا وَاذْكُرُوا نِعْمَةَ اللَّهِ عَلَيْكُمْ إِذْ كُنْتُمْ أَعْدَاءً فَأَلَّفَ بَيْنَ قُلُوبِكُمْ فَأَصْبَحْتُمْ بِنِعْمَتِهِ إِخْوَانًا

“Hold fast strongly on to the rope of Allah, and be not divided among sects.”⁶

Unfortunately, the Muslim ummah has forgotten all about the real spirit of Islam⁷ and has become involved in petty squabbles with one another that eventually cause the rift between various groups to increase and eventually result in a large-scale disaster. In fact, Islam preaches the very opposite of what sectarianism stands for, that all humans are equal in the eyes of Allah and are only distinguished based upon their righteousness.

أَلَا لَا فَضْلَ لِعَرَبِيٍّ عَلَى عَجْمِي وَلَا لِعَجْمِي عَلَى عَرَبِيٍّ وَلَا لَأَحْمَرَ عَلَى أَسْوَدٍ وَلَا لَأَسْوَدَ عَلَى أَحْمَرَ إِلَّا بِالتَّقْوَى، إِنْ أَكْرَمَكُمْ عِنْدَ اللَّهِ اتَّقَاكُمْ

“Behold! There is no superiority of an Arab over a non-Arab, nor of a non-Arab over an Arab. There is no superiority of a white man over a black man, nor of a black man over a white man except with piety. Indeed, the most honorable among you in the sight of Allah is the most pious among you.”⁸

As for difference of opinion, it is believed to be very natural among people and is praised by Allah (SWT) in the Quran:

وَلَوْ شَاءَ رَبُّكَ لَجَعَلَ النَّاسَ أُمَّةً وَاحِدَةً وَلَا يَزَالُونَ مُخْتَلِفِينَ إِلَّا مَن رَّحِمَ رَبُّكَ وَلِذَلِكَ خَلَقَهُمْ

“And if your Lord had so willed, He could surely have made mankind one *Ummah*, but they will not cease to disagree. Except him on whom your Lord has bestowed His Mercy and for that did He create them”⁹

Possessing a different opinion is not a problem, rather, it is an initial part of the solution for newly occurring issues. This difference of opinion is followed by discussions on the matter, consultations and finally arriving at a unanimous decision. Allah the Almighty praised the practitioners of this method in these words:

وَأَمْرُهُمْ شُورَى بَيْنَهُمْ وَمِمَّا رَزَقْنَاهُمْ يُنْفِقُونَ

"And those who answer the Call of their Lord, and perform *Salat*, and

who conduct their affairs by mutual consultation .¹⁰

وَشَاوِرْهُمْ فِي الْأَمْرِ فَإِذَا عَزَمْتَ فَتَوَكَّلْ عَلَى اللَّهِ

“And consult them in the affairs. Then when you have taken a decision, put your trust in Allah.”¹¹

What is the nature, issues and ground realities of sectarianism in Pakistan?

Power, authority and control over wealth and resources have been at the base of much of the sectarianism in Pakistan and the Muslim world, in the past and present.¹² The bloody conflicts in Iraq, Syria and Yemen bear testimony to this; where Muslims have become the enemies of Muslims simply because they belong to different sects.

In Pakistan, the issues of power and authority cannot be divorced from theology in Sunni-Shia conflicts. Similarly, we see the forceful occupation of mosques among Brailvis and Deobandis. It is unfortunate that the state of the Muslim Ummah is such today that I am forced to document the names of so many great ulema who became the victims of sectarian violence and hatred. In Pakistan alone, the past few decades have been bloody, with news reports of attacks on minority sects becoming part of the norm. It is accurate to state that no sect has been safe from sectarian violence and each group has faced its fair share of loss. Allama Ihsan Ilahi Zaheer a great Ahl-e-Hadith scholar of the late 20th century was martyred on 30th March, 1987. The following year, the Shia community in Pakistan suffered the loss of Allama Arif Husain al Husaini on 5th August, 1988. At the turn of the new century, sectarian violence was still at its peak as the world witnessed the martyrdom (God willing) of Dr. Ghulam Murtaza Malik (7th May, 2002), who did not identify with any particular sect and Mufti Shamzai (31st May, 2004), a Deobandi scholar. Dr. Sarfraz Naemi, a Brailvi *aalim* and the head of *Jaamia Naeemia* was martyred on the 12th of June, 2009 due to a suicide bombing attack.

Modern-day violence among sects of Islam often spring primarily from political, not religious, motives. The Quran is very clear in its guidance to Muslims that it is wrong to divide into sects and fight one another. Allah says:

إِنَّ الَّذِينَ فَرَّقُوا دِينَهُمْ وَكَانُوا شِيَعًا لَسْتَ مِنْهُمْ فِي شَيْءٍ إِنَّمَا أَمْرُهُمْ إِلَى اللَّهِ ثُمَّ يُنَبِّئُهُمْ بِمَا كَانُوا يَفْعَلُونَ

“Verily, those who divide their religion and break up into sects, you have no concern in them in the least. Their affair is only with Allah, Who then will tell them what they used to do”¹³

The Holy Qur'an gives us the concept of one Ummah:

إِنَّ هَذِهِ أُمَّةٌ وَاحِدَةٌ وَأَنَا رَبُّكُمْ فَاعْبُدُونِ

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“Truly! This, your *Ummah* is one *Ummah*, and I am your Lord, therefore worship Me alone.”¹⁴

While condemning sectarianism the Qur’an says:

فَتَقَطَّعُوا أَمْرَهُمْ بَيْنَهُمْ زُبُرًا كُلُّ حِزْبٍ بِمَا لَدَيْهِمْ فَرِحُونَ

“But people have broken their religion into sects, each group rejoicing in that which is with them.”¹⁵

إِنَّمَا الْمُؤْمِنُونَ إِخْوَةٌ فَأَصْلِحُوا بَيْنَ أَخَوَيْكُمْ وَأْتُوا اللَّهَ لَعَلَّكُمْ تُرْحَمُونَ

“The believers are but a single Brotherhood. So make peace and reconciliation between your two contending brothers, and observe your duty to God, that you may receive mercy.”¹⁶ The Sunnah of our beloved Prophet is clear in condemning sectarian violence. Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) warned his followers about breaking into groups and fighting one another. He said:

لَا تَرْتَجِعُوا بَعْدِي كُفَّارًا يَضْرِبُ بَعْضُكُمْ رِقَابَ بَعْضٍ .

“Do not revert to disbelief after me by cutting the throats of one another (killing each other).”¹⁷

عَنْ عَبْدِ اللَّهِ بْنِ مَسْعُودٍ قَالَ: حَطَّ لَنَا رَسُولُ اللَّهِ صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ يَوْمًا حَطًّا، وَحَطَّ عَنْ يَمِينِهِ حَطًّا، وَحَطَّ عَنْ يَسَارِهِ حَطًّا، ثُمَّ قَالَ: "هَذَا سَبِيلُ اللَّهِ"، ثُمَّ حَطَّ حُطُوطًا فَقَالَ: "هَذِهِ سُبُلٌ، عَلَى كُلِّ سَبِيلٍ مِنْهَا شَيْطَانٌ يَدْعُو إِلَيْهِ".

“On one occasion, the Prophet drew a line in the sand and told his Companions that this line is the Straight Path. He then drew additional lines, coming off the main line like branches springing from a tree. He told them that each diverted path had a *shaytan* along it, calling people to misguidance.”¹⁸

One of the paths to initiate violence is to call other Muslims "*kafir*" (disbeliever), something that people unfortunately do when they divide into sects. Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ) has strictly warned us against doing so. He said:

أَيُّمَا امْرِئٍ قَالَ لِأَخِيهِ يَا كَافِرٌ، فَقَدْ بَاءَ بِهَا أَحَدَهُمَا إِنْ كَانَ كَمَا قَالَ وَإِلَّا رَجَعَتْ عَلَيْهِ .

“Anyone who calls another brother an unbeliever, is either telling the truth or is himself an unbeliever for making the accusation.”¹⁹

Etiquettes of disagreement in Islam

As mentioned earlier, Islam does not condemn having differences in opinions, rather, it encourages it. However, while expressing a distinct opinion, a Muslim must follow a certain set of etiquettes that ensue that he/she does not cross any boundaries of basic ethics. He/she should try to remain calm and present the evidences or *daleel* that he/she for his/her point of view. This is important because often, when a person runs out of *daleel*, it is that point where he/she resorts to the use of violence to win an

argument.

Difference in opinion among people is natural and an unavoidable factor in life. But if we try to understand other people with an open mind and listen to them with love and respect in our hearts instead of trying to put them down or remaining suspicious of their intentions, then it is very likely that most of the problems our *Ummah* is facing today leading to fights and divisions could be avoided.

Scholars have divided differences in opinion into two categories. The first category is permissible, the other one is forbidden. The first category is due to one's individual nature.

We have seen that the companions of the holy Prophet (ﷺ) (*Sahaabah*) (may Allah be pleased with them all) used to have differences in opinion with the pure intentions of trying to reach the truthful conclusion based on the spirit of Qur'an and Sunnah. Our religion has allowed this. This is evident from the incident of the Battle of *Badr*, when there was a debate among *Sahaabah* on how to deal with prisoners, some *Sahaabah* suggested to obtain a ransom from them and let them go, whereas others suggested that they should be killed for having killed the Prophet's companions and intending to harm the Prophet himself. The Prophet (ﷺ) listened to both opinions and followed the first opinion. This was an example of difference in opinion based on nature. Allah the Almighty has encouraged such differences in opinion where both parties are seeking the truth in order to live together in peace and harmony instead of differing to have fights and wars.

In the second category, people differ solely for the sake of opposition. Someone argues just to win and insult his opponent and with this intention he keeps fighting and arguing till the other person loses. This behavior is condemned in our religion and very disliked.

So, the only category that is allowed is the first one, which is based on natural and harmless differences in opinion for the sake of reaching a true and correct conclusion.

Moreover, all Islamic issues that scholars have differed upon are based on the first category, the permissible one. The reasons for them are several.

1. The first reason is due to knowledge. The more knowledge one has, the clearer certain things become. They can then form an opinion based on it and they can express that opinion with evidence from the *Quran* and *Sunnah*.
2. The second reason could be when there is more than one meaning associated with a word. For example, there is a word "عين". This is an Arabic word which can mean eye or water spring or person or

gold & silver. It can even mean a spy. Since it has multiple meanings, one should know which one to apply based on context. So, this has been a reason for permissible differences in opinion, that a single word has multiple interpretations.

3. The third reason is the level or the authenticity of *Ahadith*. According to one *Muhaddith*, a certain *Hadith* might be reaching the level of *Sahih* whereas according to another, it might not be attaining that. So, it was observed that the *Muhadditheen* had varying attitudes from each other. Some were stricter than others in accepting *Ahadith*. For example, Imam Nasai used to be very strict in accepting *Ahadith*. Likewise, the *Muhadditheen* had varying standards for accepting *Ahadith*. Some had tremendously high standards in filtering and verifying *Ahadith* such as Imam Bukhari and Imam Muslim, compared to others. So, this is also considered a difference in opinion that one *Muhaddith* considers a certain *Hadith* as *Sahih* whereas another doesn't approve of it as such.
4. The fourth reason for difference that has been observed is the manner in which someone derives a command through *Quran* or *Hadith*, or the instruction or ruling on a matter that one takes.

Some scholars act upon the commandments in their literal form. Contrary to this, other scholars would try to reach the wisdom and reasoning behind these commandments. That if Allah (عزوجل) or His Beloved Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) gave a certain ruling, what is the purpose, wisdom and background behind that ruling. A mention-worthy example of this is an incident that took place in the Battle of the Ditch. When the Prophet (PBUH) and *Sahaabah* returned from battle, the Prophet (PBUH) started dismantling his armor and Jibreel (AS) came to *Rasulullah* (SAW) and informed him that the angels are still wearing their armors so you should command the *Sahaabah* to immediately set off for the Jewish village Banu Qurayza to deal with traitors who betrayed the Muslims in battle and also that the *Sahaabah* should pray *Asr* once they reach their destination. Upon hearing this order from *Rasulullah* (SAW), the *Sahaabah* left and it was time for *Asr* prayer during their journey. As time for prayer reached a delay, a group of *Sahaabah* suggested they should pray *Asr* during their journey whereas another group stated that because *Rasulullah* said to pray *Asr* at Banu Qurayza, that is where we will pray *Asr*. They delayed the prayer and by the time they reached Banu Qurayza, it was time for Maghrib but they offered *Asr* first followed by *Maghrib Salah*.

Upon their return to the Prophet (PBUH) they presented the situation to him, how some *Sahaabah* prayed during the journey while others upon reaching Banu Qurayza and they asked who was right or wrong. After listening to them, *Rasulullah (SAW)* stated that both groups were correct and neither disobeyed me. This *Hadith* shows us that if intentions are purely to please and obey Allah SWT, then differences are not condemned as long as each party intends to follow the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH).

Additionally, it is proven that differences such as these actually broaden Islamic viewpoints and improve on the understanding and purposes of our *Deen*. We attain solutions to newer problems. So, these were the reasons for permissible differences in opinion.

Similarly, there are reasons for non-permissible differences in opinion. The most common reason for that is discrimination. Sometimes we form such a strong affiliation with a political party or religious group or a certain leader, teacher or individual, that we start blindly following them and thinking that whatever they are saying is correct, setting aside the stance of our beloved Prophet (PBUH) and Allah SWT (which are *Quran* and *Hadith*). Sometimes the case may be that an individual forms a self-serving personal opinion and gives it priority because that benefits him more than what Allah SWT has ordered. It could be due to worldly, materialistic or even political gains.

Conclusion and Suggestions

If we look into the last 30 - 35 years we will see that almost all sects that associate themselves strongly with Islam have been the victims of sectarian violence. We lost many great men. For example:

1. Allama Ihsan ilahi Zaheer (Ahl e Hadith), martyred on: 30. 3. 1987.
2. Allama Arif Husain al Husaini (Shia), martyred on: 5. 8. 1988.
3. Dr. Ghulam Murtaza Malik (author's father), martyred on: 7. 5. 2002.
4. Mufti Shamzai (Deobandi), martyred on: 31. 5. 2004.
5. Dr. Sarfraz Naeemi (Brailvi), martyred on: 12. 6. 2009.

The important question is whether it is possible for us to stand united despite permissible differences in opinions and for us to respect each other? Are there ways, means or methods that may let us avoid sectarianism or violence while still having our difference of opinions?

When Sheikh ul Hind Maulana Mahmood ul Hasan got released from imprisonment in Malta by the English Raj, he spoke at a gathering in Deoband and said: I have learnt two reasons that are responsible for the downfall of the Muslims: their leaving the Holy Qur'an aside and their

sectarianism.²⁰

The answer is that we definitely can. But there are a few conditions we have to fulfill to achieve that.

The first is that we need to stop being influenced by any single individual. Secondly, we should avoid being suspicious of another teacher or leader. We should not doubt their intentions. Verily, some suspicion is sin as Allah SWT stated in the *Quran* while warning believers to avoid suspicion. Furthermore, we should avoid speaking of that which we have no knowledge. Because Allah SWT tells us not to jump into discussions on matters where we lack knowledge. Lastly, we should always remember that we belong to one single *Ummah* and we shouldn't be divided, rather we should focus on similarities that unite us and not the differences that cause any division.

Allah SWT has given us minds and intelligence so that we can focus and reflect on important matters and this is the reason for a natural difference of opinion as each individual has their own mind and way of thinking.

This also explains the reason behind the 4 schools of thoughts in Islam. We have Imam Abu Hanifa, Imam Shafi, Imam Maalik, and Imam Ahmad bin Hanbal. And all four of them are correct in their opinions. We should remember that Allah SWT gave us minds of our own so that we can use it for benefit of the *Ummah* and unite, rather than fall into dispute and divisions.

It may be fair to say that the sectarian divide between Muslims around the world has been highlighted in the news one too many times. The split between different sects in Islam has been going on for centuries and has only intensified over time. But can we, as Muslims, blame anyone but ourselves? When we compare the teachings of the Holy Qur'an and Sunnah to how Muslims of different sects treat each other in reality, it is evident that the two pictures do not match up.²¹

After all is said and done, brotherhood between different sects of Islam cannot be initiated by anyone but ourselves. It is up to us to decide if we wish to live in a world of hatred, or if we want to spread love and brotherhood amongst ourselves. The call to end hatred between Muslims is only for our own benefit, after all, we are more alike than we are different. Only time will tell when we will finally heed the call to brotherhood and unite Muslims of all sects to truly be one *Ummah*.

To achieve the goal of unity and respect among the different sects, I may suggest some constructive suggestions:

1. Law should be made to stop insulting the Sahaba or the wives of the holy Prophet (SAW).
2. Law should be made to stop insulting Ulama of other sects.
3. Friendly debates be held under the supervision of neutral judges.
4. There should be a total ban on printing the material that contains insults to other sects.
5. The scholars of Islam who possess a high fame in the society should be given time on government and private TV channels. They should talk on Islamic harmony and tolerance.

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