The Mawlid al-Nabi is celebrated by all Muslims in their common love for the last and greatest of God’s messengers to mankind. As such, this fervent and ubiquitous celebration of the birth of prophet Muhammad (S) indelibly marks his Ummah and gives them their unique Muhammadan character. The Islamic nature of the Mawlid celebrations and their natural and providential role in holding the Ummah of Muhammad within a single fold were obvious to our predecessors but call for some explanation in our day. So in what follows, let us begin with the most fundamental truth of Islam.

There is no doubt that the idea of tawhid is the quintessential principle of Islam. While this idea of Unity—in both its transcendent and immanent modes—defines the essential and vertical dimension of the Muslim soul, it has a correlative aspect that is substantial and horizontal. To explain, the first dimension defines the soul’s direct relationship with the Divine through prayer, remembrance, and unitive consciousness or awareness.

The second dimension refers to the soul’s indirect relationship with God through His Word and the human Logos that is the intermediary—being both the pontifex of the created order and the point of conflation between the Divine and the human. The conflation and closeness to the Divine allows for the human Logos to firstly be closer to created beings than they are to themselves, hence the statement in the Qur’an:

لا بَلْ بِنَفْسِ أَنفْسِهِمْ

The Prophet is closer to the faithful than their own souls (33:6)

Secondly, this closeness allows for accessibility and makes it more existentially possible for the human Logos to draw humans “like” himself towards the Creator—increasing their remembrance of Him at every step. This horizontal attraction and assimilation occurs through the virtues for which the Logos is the personification and best model. Hence the ayah:

لَقَدْ كَانَ لَكُمْ فِي رَسُولِ اللَّهِ أُسُوَّةٌ حَسَنَةٌ خَيْرًا كَانَ يُرْجُو اللَّهِ وَاليَوْمُ الآخِرَ وَذَكَرَ اللَّهَ كَثِيرًا

In the Apostle of Allah there is certainly for you a good exemplar, for those who look forward to
By attaching themselves to the outward virtues and moral code of the Sunnah, the believers can progress in a very real and tangible way towards the inner substance of the exemplar, which is nothing but a constant state of remembrance and the ultimate station of tawhid and Unity. It is by following the Prophet’s commands and example, and consequently by losing their “individualities” and lower personas that the believers are able to gain and find their true identities as any one, or more, of the multiple aspects and qualities of the Prophet (S). Hence, in Islam the Law is not contrary to the esoteric Path, but rather a part of the single continuum that comprises them both, as well as the other stations and levels. Nor is the historic and practical existence of the Prophet (S) opposed to his most inner reality as the divine Logos. Dr. Muhammad Legenhausen writes of this dichotomy in the following manner:

This is not to deny the historical person or to oppose the historical person to the idealization, for there is a single person who appears in history who was orphaned and raised by an uncle and experienced all the details of the life of the famous religious leader of Arabia some six hundred years after Christ (peace be upon him), but at the same time is one who was appointed by God and given a mission of warning and bearing the glad tidings of divine mercy and sovereignty, and again, is the same person who is the pure light of God’s first creation and for the sake of whom the entire world has been created.

In Shia thought, these are not to be understood as opposing paradigms, but as different hierarchically ordered aspects of a single reality. The lowest level of such aspects is that of the Arabian man’s physical history, his movements, and what he ate. At a higher level, there is the person Muhammad as prophet and apostle of God, the recipient of divine revelation, and divine guide. Finally, there is Muhammad as the light of the intellect, pure illumination and virtue, a cosmic reality totally annihilated in divinity. This division is reflected in Haydar Amuli’s division of Shari’at, Tariqat, and Haqiqat, and in Mulla Sadra’s division of the sensory, imaginal, and intellectual worlds.

The breadth and width of the “single reality” that the spiritual substance of the Prophet represents, especially in its aspect of universal mercy, entails that it reaches out further and further as it unfolds on the plane of human history. This means that over and beyond the law, the prophetic substance imbues itself in the living cultures of Muslim societies, and Muslims the world over gain access to this quasi-sacramental presence by partaking in those sacred times and places that have maintained a continuous link with it.

Hence the absolutely positive nature of the day of Mawlid al-Nabi and the holy shrine of the Prophet (S) and the Masjid al-Nabi; and the relatively positive nature of the birth and death anniversaries as well as the shrines of those Muslim saints that represent the continuity of the Prophetic presence and his walayah. To remove these auspicious points of access from the Muslim culture on the charge of being “innovations” is tantamount to denying the walayah of the Prophet (S) himself. The misuse and abuse of such occasions and places aside, they are not only ‘good innovations’ or bid’ah hasanah, but goodness and ihsan itself.
As can be inferred from the discussion above, the spiritual benefits of the Mawlid al-Nabi and the prophetic presence are widespread and many. But the goodness does not stop there; it manifests itself on the social and political plane as well. For when Muslims of all types and inclinations acknowledge their abundant love and intimate closeness to the Prophet (S), they are implicitly acknowledging and actualizing their love for each other—precisely because he (S) is closer to all the believers than they are to themselves and to each other. When they are close to him, they are closer to each other and closer together. God smiles upon those believers who befriend each other and He has mercy on them.

But the faithful, men and women, are friends of one another: they bid what is right and forbid what is wrong and maintain the prayer, give the zakat, and obey Allah and His Apostle. It is they to whom Allah will soon grant His mercy. Indeed, Allah is all-mighty, all-wise. (9:71).

This friendship of the believers is real and actualized and not just sentimental because it is consequent upon the obedience of God and His prophet. Moreover, the only disparity and divergence that the faithful show is in their competing and vying with one another to outdo each other in goodness and virtue, and calling upon one another to the particular good that God has given them; or in other words, they only differ in that they invite others towards the Good through those aspects of the Sunnah of His prophet that have become apparent to them in their particular position in the multifarious channels of prophetic grace.

In the lead article of this issue of the journal, Ayatullah Muhammad ‘Ali Taskhiri, speaks of the differences between the schools of thought in the Ummah to be natural and good. He even refers to the differences existing between the prophets of God. The true or good differences occur where limitations of perspective and knowledge are acknowledged and an attempt is made by all parties to achieve a higher and a more comprehensive picture of reality.

The false or bad differences occur where one side believes in the relativity of the truth and thereby claims total truth to itself, implicitly denying the other of any claim to truth in any sense whatsoever. The first set of differences is akin to different intensities and colours of light, while the second are like the difference between light and darkness itself. Hence the differences between the Islamic madhahib can potentially be good if they are seen to be different paths to, and aspects of, the total and comprehensive prophetic substance and Sunnah – such ways as are traversed by Muslim scholars and mujtahidin in their arduous journey of love and rapture towards the holy Prophet (S). Ayatullah Taskhiri writes in his article:

When we accept the existence of the various Islamic schools to be a result of the variety of ijtihads endorsed by Islam, we must consider each to be a different path in attaining the satisfaction of Almighty God. When there is difference among schools, it is natural for Muslim individuals to research them until
satisfied that they have performed their duty before God and choose in accordance with the criteria in which they believe. Naturally, no one may reproach others for their choices, though such choices may not be to their liking. It is also wrong to force someone to choose a specific school since selection of a school of thought is intertwined with matters of faith and cannot occur but through one’s own reason and judgement.

Muhammad Wa’iz–Zadeh Khurasani, in his article in this issue, “The Voice of Unity: Islamic Brotherhood”, echoes these sentiments:

Therefore, Islamic madhahib are paths towards Islam. The source of most of them lies in the ijtihad and differences of opinions regarding the Qur’an and the Sunnah, which stem from the [limited] understanding of an individual or a group of people.

In his article “Imam Khumayni’s Vision of Islamic Unity”, Dr. Muhammad Rahim Iwazi explains that while Muslims must avoid the “bad” differences—those that stem from disparate and unconnected parochial approaches to integral reality, the “good” differences of opinion are not contrary to the central principle of tawhid in Islam when seen in its fullness; he writes:

However, in the view of Imam Khumayni, differences of opinion should not prevent unity—there can be unity in tandem with dissimilar opinions: “Why should different opinions cause external discord?” Consequently, all humans, and all Muslims must disregard their personal, factional, and ethnic beliefs and preferences and prepare the way for out-and-out governance of Islam on the basis of tawhid and through emphasis on common human and Islamic principles.

Clearly the most common of all human and Islamic principles is the Prophet (S) and his continued presence through the streams of walayah that manifest themselves as springs of pure life–giving water throughout the breadth and span of the Muslim world and history. In so far as the stream is continuous, we must, out of pure humility if nothing else, accept what is allotted to us by providence and drink of its rejuvenating waters. In comparing our stream with the streams of other Muslims, we should bear in mind the common source of all streams and follow them to that supreme source of great bounty that gives any given stream its merit. 2 It is at the source that we should expect to finally fully understand the relative worth and the ultimate wisdom behind the different streams that issued from it. In one of his last counsels to his Ummah, the Prophet (S) said:

رَسُولُ اللَّهِ ﷺ قَالَ: إِنِّي أَرَاكُمْ فِي كُلِّ مَا كُنْتُمْ مِنْهَا لَا تَضَلُّوا مُسْكَنَةً لَّا تَضَلُّوا كِتَابَ اللَّهِ وَ عِيْنَتِي أَلْهَ بَيْنِي وَ إِنَّمَا لَنْ يُفْتَرِقَا حَتَّى يَرَى عَلَى أَحَدِ الْحُوْضَاءِ

Verily, I am leaving behind two precious things (al–thaqalayn) among you such that if you take hold of them, you will never go astray: the Book of God and my kindred (‘itrah) my household (Ahl al–Bayti), for indeed, the two will never separate until they come back to me by the Pond (of al–Kawthar on Judgment
Insofar as no authentic madhhab in Islam can ever dispose of the Qur’an and its transcendent authority in an absolute way, whatsoever of the Qur’an it preserves is inevitably accompanied by the immanent presence of the prophetic substance by virtue of the grace and blessings of the Prophet’s progeny that continued the esoteric function of the walayah and passed it on to all the various madhahib in differing ways and amounts. The final end of all madhahib and the ultimate madhhab is the union of the exoteric and esoteric streams, the meeting place of the vertical pole of Truth and the horizontal ocean of Presence, the coincidence of the reality of nubuwah and the reality of walayah—it is the very Pond itself. For those who reach the Pond, have reached the Prophet, upon whom and his Progeny be peace; and those who reach the Prophet (S) are given the eternal gift of the beatific vision.

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2. The inner esoteric reality of the Prophet (S) and its identity with the ism al-jami’ allows for him to bring together all partial and disparate realities qua reality. Partiality can only be overcome by reference to the whole; the contingent can only exist by connection to the necessary; the accidental can only subsist by way of the essential.

Just as all religions must be protected by the Ultimate religion of Islam which is their guardian or ‘muhaymin’, similarly all madhahib must base themselves on the ultimate—and not “original”—madhhab of the Prophet (S). As will be explained below, it is not so much a matter of going back to the origin as it is a matter of persevering till the end in the right manner so that we are united with the Prophet (S) and all those that he is united with.

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