

Hajj, Manifestation of Unity



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Abstract

Hajj is the greatest outward symbol of both tawhid and the ummah—including implicitly the latter's integrity and unity. The inner reality of the Hajj is tied to the idea of walahah and the waliullah. Muslims, in embodying these ideas, will be able to achieve higher and higher forms of unity, empowering them for the cause of Allah in this world and engendering for them the heavenly states of the hereafter.

Sectarianism is one of the greatest impediments for such achievement in the path of the Muslims. This article delineates these themes and provides the general direction that individual Muslims are to follow.

Keywords: Hajj, tawhid, Muslim unity, ummah, walayah, Imam, transcendental unity of Islamic sects, sectarianism, Shia–Sunni unity, Shia–Sunni polemics.

1. Hajj, Symbol of Unity and Universality

Of all the rites of religion, Hajj is the greatest in its manifestation of unity and Tawhid. This is because the concept of unity, as expressed in creation, essentially involves the idea of universality. Just as God, the One, is eternal, ubiquitous, and the sustaining Creator of mankind, His last word and final religion must rightfully be universal.

Hence, Islam – the universal religion – is for all times, all places, and for all peoples. The Hajj clearly portrays this truth and the Ka’bah, its focal point, poignantly symbolises the same. Islam is for all times, past, present and future. For is not the Ka’bah the first place of worship?

God says in the Qur’an:

إِنَّ أَوَّلَ بَيْتٍ وُضِعَ لِلنَّاسِ لَلَّذِي بِبَكَّةَ مُبَارَكًا وَهُدًى لِّلْعَالَمِينَ فِيهِ آيَاتٌ بَيِّنَاتٌ
مَّقَامُ إِبْرَاهِيمَ ۚ وَمَنْ دَخَلَهُ كَانَ آمِنًا ۗ وَلِلَّهِ عَلَى النَّاسِ حِجُّ الْبَيْتِ مَنِ اسْتَطَاعَ
إِلَيْهِ سَبِيلًا ۗ وَمَنْ كَفَرَ فَإِنَّ اللَّهَ غَنِيٌّ عَنِ الْعَالَمِينَ

“Indeed the first house to be set up for mankind is the one at Bakkah, blessed and a guidance for all nations. In it are manifest signs [and] Abraham’s Station, and whoever enters it shall be secure. And it is the duty of mankind toward God to make pilgrimage to the House – for those who can afford the journey to it – and should anyone renege [on his obligation], God is indeed without need of the creatures”. (Qur’an 3:96–97)

The word “Bakkah” means the place of confluence and congregation of throngs and it refers to the ground upon which the Ka’bah is built. God says that the structure there was the first house to be set up for mankind and hence is as old as man himself. It is also the last point of convergence that man will have available to rally around during his spiritual epic and sojourn on this planet.

The great–grandson of the Prophet (S), Imam Ja’far al–Sadiq (‘a) said:

لا يزال الدين قائماً ما قامت الكعبة

Religion will withstand so long as the Ka'bah stands. 1

Islam is for all places. This is graphically symbolised in the Hajj by the influx of people from all different places on the earth towards Makkah. As such the Ka'bah is the centre whose circumference encompasses the entire world. God says in the Qur'an:

وَإِذْ بَوَّأْنَا لِإِبْرَاهِيمَ مَكَانَ الْبَيْتِ أَنْ لَا تُشْرِكْ بِي شَيْئًا وَطَهِّرْ بَيْتِيَ لِلطَّائِفِينَ
وَالْقَائِمِينَ وَالرُّكَّعِ السُّجُودِ وَأَذِّنْ فِي النَّاسِ بِالْحَجِّ يَأْتُوكَ رِجَالًا وَعَلَىٰ كُلِّ ضَامِرٍ
يَأْتِينَ مِنْ كُلِّ فَجٍّ عَمِيقٍ

When We settled for Abraham the site of the House [saying], Do not ascribe any partners to Me, and purify My House for those who go around it, and those who stand [in it for prayer], and those who bow and prostrate. And proclaim the hajj to people: they shall come to you on foot and on lean camels coming from distant places. (Qur'an 22:26-27)

Islam, the perennial religion practised by all prophets from Adam to Muhammad, was present in all times and all places because it was meant for all people. For God, the eternal and omnipresent Creator, created mankind and He alone knows best how to guide them – sending prophets to every people, at all points of human history.

Man for his part, in his imperfect and fallen state, is always in need of God's guidance and is the perfect receptacle of this Divine guidance and grace. But man in his fallen and earthly nature can not immediately conceive of Divine realities, whether it be this supreme guidance or man's own essence and spirit.

He needs help and support from the outside, so to speak. He needs tangible things to aid him and guide him towards guidance and the Guide. The Ka'bah serves as this external symbol and is God's House not because God needs a house, but because man in his weakness needs a solid point of reference to turn to. The Ka'bah is as a lighthouse which guides sailors lost at sea back to the shore and back to their home and origin.

The first verse quoted above speaks to this role of the House of God being a source of guidance for all nations and peoples.

But it also mentions the House being "blessed"; meaning that there is really and truly grace flowing from this place and that it is a point that has been providentially chosen to be an "opening" up to the heavens.

In addition to being for all people a source of guidance, the House of God – and the symbol of Islam – is also a refuge and sanctuary for people. The Qur'an says:

وَإِذْ جَعَلْنَا الْبَيْتَ مَثَابَةً لِّلنَّاسِ وَأَمْنًا وَاتَّخِذُوا مِن مَّقَامِ إِبْرَاهِيمَ مُصَلًّى ۖ وَعَهِدْنَا
إِلَىٰ إِبْرَاهِيمَ وَإِسْمَاعِيلَ أَنَّ طَهِّرَا بَيْتِيَ لِلطَّائِفِينَ وَالْعَاكِفِينَ وَالرُّكَّعِ السُّجُودِ

“And [remember] when We made the House a resort for mankind and a sanctuary, [declaring], ‘Take the venue of prayer from Abraham’s Station.’ We charged Abraham and Ishmael [with its upkeep, saying], ‘Purify My House for those who go around it, for those who make it a retreat and for those who bow and prostrate.’”(Qur’an 2: 125)

It is a “resort” or “place of return” because man, who came from the Divine presence, needs to return to God by centering himself on Him by way of His signs – the House being the central-most and manifest of them.

It is a sanctuary, morally speaking, because it is a channel of grace and those that take refuge in it are openly showing that they no longer want to be renegades and fugitives from God. By so doing they accept the grace and receive mercy – entering the flock of God; and God protects his flock.

It is also a sanctuary, intellectually speaking, because it centers man, providing him refuge from the vicissitudes of the material realm and the multiplicities of the ephemeral world.

For Divine grace treats man in his totality and in all his dimensions – heart and mind, spirit, soul and body.

The Ka’bah is the life–line and beating heart for all people in the world. It lives and breathes. As a refuge, sanctuary, and guiding light shining in the dark, it attracts and draws the people to itself. It then graces and blesses the worthy from amongst them and releases them, raising them in spirit and body – giving new life and vigour to their spiritual being as well as enriching their material livelihood. It gives them a sustenance which at once increases their intellectual rapture, moral uprightness, and physical worship.

For in God’s Sacred House and the Divine Presence, man rises in respect and awe, realizing all the while that it is not really he who is “doing” the rising – as he is nothing in himself – but that it is his Origin and Source which is raising him. Seeing himself in this new and novel way, man begins to see everything as being connected to the Origin; casting aside the eyeglasses that made him see things as separate and independent entities, he now sees the all–pervasive unity that resides and resounds in creation.

His empathy and sympathy with created beings grows; and as he rises in rank and station, he is able what it is. He longs to reach out and raise with himself all those around and below him. The Qur’an says:

جَعَلَ اللَّهُ الْكَعْبَةَ الْبَيْتَ الْحَرَامَ قِيَامًا لِلنَّاسِ وَالشَّهْرَ الْحَرَامَ وَالْهَدْيَ وَالْقَلَائِدَ ؟
ذَلِكَ لَتَعْلَمُوا أَنَّ اللَّهَ يَعْلَمُ مَا فِي السَّمَاوَاتِ وَمَا فِي الْأَرْضِ وَأَنَّ اللَّهَ بِكُلِّ شَيْءٍ
عَلِيمٌ

“God has made the Ka’bah, the Sacred House, sustentation for mankind – and [also] the sacred month, the offering and the garlands – so that you may know that God knows whatever there is in the heavens and whatever there is in the earth, and that God has knowledge of all things.”

(Qur’an 5:97)

The word qiyaman or “sustentation” in this verse has been interpreted by the exegetes in many of the ways alluded to above. From the personal rapture and ascent of the individual believer to the mass revival of the Muslim Ummah; from the progress in din or religion to the increase in livelihood; from the physical exertions of the believers around the Ka’bah as they rise to the occasion of the Hajj to the attempts of Muslim communities for the establishment of justice and the rule of God on earth.

The Ka’bah was seen to be for all times (the first and the last) and for all places (as it is the centre) and for all people (as it is a guide, refuge, and sustainer or elevator for them). The following verse emphasizes the fact that it is for people of all places equally and that no one is to be given preference based on where he hails from.

إِنَّ الَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا وَيَصُدُّونَ عَن سَبِيلِ اللَّهِ وَالْمَسْجِدِ الْحَرَامِ الَّذِي جَعَلْنَاهُ لِلنَّاسِ
سَوَاءً الْعَاكِفُ فِيهِ وَالْبَادِ ؟ وَمَنْ يُرِدْ فِيهِ بِالْحَادِ بِظُلْمٍ نُذِقْهُ مِنْ عَذَابٍ أَلِيمٍ

“Indeed those who are faithless and who bar from the way of God and the Sacred Mosque, which We have assigned for all the people, the native and the visitor being equal therein – whoever seeks to commit therein sacrilege with the intent of wrongdoing, We shall make him taste a painful punishment.”(Qur’an 22:25)

That the Ka’bah is for all people, the first and the last, can be seen from the following sermon of Imam ‘Ali (‘a).

أَلَا تَرَوْنَ أَنَّ اللَّهَ سُبْحَانَهُ، اخْتَبَرَ الْأَوَّلِينَ مِنْ لَدُنْ آدَمَ صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ، إِلَى
الْآخِرِينَ مِنْ هَذَا الْعَالَمِ، بِأَحْجَارٍ لَا تَضُرُّ وَلَا تَنْفَعُ، وَلَا تُبْصِرُ وَلَا تَسْمَعُ، فَعَجَلَهَا
بَيْتَهُ الْحَرَامَ الَّذِي جَعَلَهُ لِلنَّاسِ قِيَامًا.

Do you not see how God, most Holy, has tried the first of men from the time of Adam to the last of men from this world by means of stones [i.e. the Ka'bah] which neither harm them nor benefit them; and which neither see nor hear; and He has made them His Sacred House, the one which He has made to be a sustentation for people.²

Not only does the temporal extent of the Ka'bah's influence span the extent of human history, it transcends it, making its presence felt even after death and in the afterlife. There is a tradition which says:

قال الصادق (عليه السلام) ودَّ من في القبور لو أنَّ له حَجَّةً بالدنيا و ما فيها

Al-Sadiq ('a) said: He who is in the grave wishes that he could give the world and all that is in it for just one Hajj for himself.³

2. Hajj, Symbol of Walayah

The Hajj is one of the pillars of Islam whose importance and centrality becomes apparent upon even a little deliberation. For instance a part of the first verse quoted above read, "And it is the duty of mankind toward God to make pilgrimage to the House". For no other pillar or commandment of the Law are the words "duty...toward God" used and this manner of speaking is unique to the Hajj.

The remainder of the verse implies that those who do not take up this duty – while having the ability to do so – have disbelieved in some manner!

So among the exoteric pillars of Islam, the Hajj stands out and God has called the people to perform the Hajj in this serious tone. But there is another pillar, more esoteric than the others, which demands even greater attention.

In a tradition from the grandson of the Prophet (S), Imam Zayn al-'Abidin ('a) it is said:

بُنِيَ الْإِسْلَامُ عَلَى خَمْسٍ عَلَى الصَّلَاةِ وَالزَّكَاةِ وَالصَّوْمِ وَالْحَجِّ وَالْوَلَايَةِ وَلَمْ
يُنَادَ بِشَيْءٍ كَمَا نُودِيَ بِالْوَلَايَةِ

Islam has been founded on five [pillars]: on Salah, zakah, Sawm, Hajj, and walayah; and nothing has been called to like walayah has been called to.⁴

What is this walayah that is so important and how is it related to Hajj?

The word walayah, in its root meaning, means “nearness” and proximity – both in its physical and figurative senses. As such it is a relative concept. When it is said “waliyahu” (i.e. he/it became close to him/it), the meaning is reciprocal in that just as one thing became close to and attained proximity to the second – the other thing, in an equal and similar manner became close to the first.

This is very much like brotherhood and opposed to fatherhood. In this meaning if someone becomes close to Allah, He becomes near to him. But in the Qur’an, the concept of nearness is not usually used in this simple “horizontal” sense – especially when the nearness that is intended is not of a material and physical nature.

This “vertical” nearness in the Qur’an is such that it is obtained on one side and ,not obtained for the other. For example Allah is equally close to both a believer and a disbeliever:

وَنَحْنُ أَقْرَبُ إِلَيْهِ مِنْ حَبْلِ الْوَرِيدِ

We are nearer to him (man) than his jugular vein. (Qur’an 50: 16)

But on the other hand, the disbeliever, due to his not performing good actions (acts of qurb), is “far” from the Divine Presence.

أُولَئِكَ يُنَادُونَ مِنْ مَكَانٍ بَعِيدٍ

Those (kuffar), they are called to from a far-off place. (Qur’an 41:44)

The nearness or farness then is from the human perspective.

So to recap, the walayah that is usually used in the Qur’an is not a relative term that is equal on both sides; rather it is of a type that the Muslim philosophers have termed as ishraqi. In an ishraqi relation the second term is dependent upon the first and can be said to be a manifestation of it.

In the Arabic language, especially as used by the ‘ulama, the first case of the two-sided nearness is termed wilayah and the second case – one-sided or ishraqi is termed walayah.

Now the Qur’an says:

...فَاللَّهُ هُوَ الْوَلِيُّ...

But it is Allah Who is the (real) Wali. (Qur'an 42:9)

So absolute walayah (and implicitly wilayah) belongs only to Allah. He most perfectly and supremely encompasses all creation and is infinitely close to all things and hence has command over them. His servants become close to Him and hence gain walayah only by approaching Him through correct intellection and willpower.

They must know the truth and do good acts to gain this nearness and become one of the awliya. The widening of the circle of walayah for a person and its ability to encompass more and more of reality is a tendency pointing towards the Absolute walayah of Allah and hence is divine in nature and essence. What is God-like is liked by God and is the cause of our becoming near to Him and His friends.

And Allah in turn becomes the Friend of these believers.

اللَّهُ وَلِيُّ الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا

Allah is the Wali of those who believe. (Qur'an 2:257)

In this sense walayah can be seen to be the great chain of being and becoming – the principle in existence and of existence that ties all existents together and unifies them in their Source and Origin. As such the wali al-mutlaq is the *raison d'être* of walayah – infinitely close to all things but yet the cause of their gradation and farness from Him and the cause of their becoming towards Him.

To phrase again, the principle of walayah is known by its peak – that is by the Wali – Allah. This very same principle in both its horizontal aspect (implying connectedness and relevance) and its vertical aspect (implying goal and example) requires the existence of a relative peak in all realms and conditioned by the limitations of that realm.

Hence the necessity of a human wali in the human realm – a centre – an insan al-kamil – exemplifying the way of overcoming the particular limitations of that realm for the purpose of salvation and eternal becoming – to be more and more.

Now just as the Ka'bah is the centre and the House of God or the House of al-Wali, it is also the symbol of the human wali.

The human wali in his turn is the living example and standard of this symbol, mediating between it and God. The wali *par excellence* after the Prophet (S) was Amir al-Mu'minin Imam 'Ali ('a). In defending himself against the attacks and accusations of the Khawarij he said:

قد قال الله عزوجل : (ولله على الناس حج البيت من استطاع إليه سبيلا)ولو ترك الناس الحج لم يكن البيت ليكفر بتركهم إياه ولكن كانوا يكفرون بتركهم إياه ، لأنّ الله قد نصبه لكم علما، وكذلك نصبني علما حيث قال رسول الله (صلى الله عليه وآله وسلم) : يا علي ، أنت مني بمنزلة الكعبة تؤتى ولا تأتي.

Surely God has said, “And it is the duty of mankind toward God to make pilgrimage to the House – for those who are able to find a way to go to it”. So if the people do not perform the Hajj , it is not for the Ka’bah to be (accused) of unbelief due to their keeping away from it, rather it is the people who disbelieve (i.e. become kafir) by staying away from the Ka’bah.

This is because it is surely Allah who has set the Ka’bah for you as a standard (or point of reference); and similarly He has appointed me as a standard, as the Prophet (S) said: “O’ ‘Ali, you are like the Ka’bah – you are approached and you don’t approach.”⁵

Hence the man born in the Ka’bah and the first holder of the station of walayah after the Prophet (S) is the inner reality and substance of the Hajj.

Through the mediation of the Imam – the holder of the station of walayah – the Ka’bah plays its fundamental role as the channel of Divine grace and the sustainer of religion and livelihood of the people; for in one of its most significant meanings walayah is nothing other than the Divine channel of grace.

3. The Wali, the Kabah of Tawhid

Just as the batin and esoteric aspect of prophethood (nubuwah) is the tradition of initiation (imamah), the inner reality of tawhid is walayah. This itself can be seen from two perspectives. Looking inwardly more emphasis is put on the “vertical” walayah in its aspect of truth. As al-Wali, is also al-Haqq, the Truth permeates and hence unites – walayah being the dynamic principle of the Truth. The human Wali symbolizes this and acts as the “Pole” and “Ka’bah” around which and through which humanity can unite, in their journey to the One.

The second perspective is more outward and more importance is paid to the “horizontal” wilayah – the one that human beings have with one another through love, assistance, brotherhood and the other valid and true human relations.

To begin with the second, it can be said that the clearest and most obvious manifestation of this idea in the context of Islam is the Ummah. The political and practical unity of the community of Muslims is of paramount importance.

Was it not for this very reason that Imam ‘Ali (‘a) refused to fight for his right after the death of the Prophet (S). Only the person who truly understands and is the possessor of the station of walayah could forgo his rights – in practice if not in principle – so as to meet the demands of the wilayah and its logic of unity.

For the Qur’an says:

إِنَّمَا الْمُؤْمِنُونَ إِخْوَةٌ....

The believers are surely brothers. (Qur’an 49:10)

It also says:

وَالْمُؤْمِنُونَ وَالْمُؤْمِنَاتُ بَعْضُهُمْ أَوْلِيَاءُ بَعْضٍ

And the believing men and the believing women are the friends of one another. (Qur’an 9:71)

The meaning of both these verses is imperative – a command from Allah. As such it is the duty of Allah’s trustee and guardian to enforce this law. Hence the great and overwhelming task that is at hand for the Imam (‘a) and his representatives and followers to try to unite the Muslim Ummah, with all its many divisions and differences.

The outward symbol of this coming together of all Muslims, with their various schools of thought, races, tongues and cultures, is the Hajj. It is the focal point of the unity of the Ummah.

Now to return to the fist perspective – the one in which the vertical walayah in its aspect of truth and connection to the Truth predominates – it can be said that this is the essence of the other perspective.

The truth, by its very nature unites, and unites in a real and true sense. But the quintessential point here is to know and realize that the truth qua truth – in its totality – is unfathomable by any and all human minds. One can never claim to know all of the truth; hence one cannot absolve oneself totally from its many possible manifestations, in all their variegated degrees and archetypes.

In fact the closer a person is to the Truth, the more he can see these various manifestations and help to perfect their “light”, as it were. This is precisely what the Imams (‘a) would do and in particular the foremost of them. Hence it is no accident that all Sufi orders, without exception, trace their chain of authority and grace back to Imam ‘Ali (‘a).⁶

And it is also not coincidental that it was these very orders that played such an important part in the

spread and subsistence of Islam in the world. The logic of the above can be found in the saying of the Prophet (S), in which he said that:

علي مع الحق و الحق مع علي يدور حيث ما دار

‘Ali is with the truth and the truth is with ‘Ali – he goes wheresoever it goes.⁷

The truth and right was with the Imam (‘a) as is so clearly and graphically portrayed in Ghadir at the time of the last Hajj of the Prophet (S). The consequence of this is that the truth proceeded through his progeny and we now have access to it through mainly their sayings – to whatever extent that they were recorded and correctly transmitted to us.⁸

But ‘Ali is with the truth. This is a much greater claim. So, where ever the truth is to be found, irrespective of whether there is documented proof of it or not, know that the reality of the Imam (‘a) – in his role as the initiator of the station of walayah and partaker of the Muhammadan Light – is also there.

It is precisely because of this that such great figures of Islamic history as Mawlana Rumi and Ibn ‘Arabi, inspite of the differences in their exoteric perspectives and madhabi affiliations, were great. They partook of the Muhammadan spirituality through the grace and connection that they had with Mawla ‘Ali (‘a) – the Ka’bah of faith.

To deny this would be to limit and belittle the greatness of the Imam (‘a). It is through this – through reference to the esoteric reality of Islam (which principally unites and gives grace to exoteric partialities) and its initial channel that the first Imam (‘a) represents – that we can conceive of a unity that is truly becoming of him and his Beloved, the One.

4. Muslim Unity and the Hajj

The concept of unity is central to Islam, tawhid being the most important principle and doctrine of religion. Tawhid literally means “unification” and “the act of uniting” – of bringing disparate “realities” together under a single total vision and Reality.

On the doctrinal level tawhid means nothing less than understanding and seeing reality for what it is, on all its levels. It means to understand the unity – or unicity – of the Godhead in the first place and then to realize the unity of His creation in the second; all created things being nothing but the signs, words, and acts of the one God. Now, man being the greatest creation of God, is no exception to this rule.

Hence, unity on the human plane implies that first and foremost, men are united in their created Divine nature – God having inspired them with something of His Spirit. From there on down, any type of unity in the human sphere acquires worth in accordance with its awareness of the Divine and its efforts at trying

to aim for and reach It.

The concept of the Ummah is precisely this type of unity. It is the concept of a congregation of humans self-consciously traversing the path to God. As the goal is one and the One, the Ummah is one. The Qur'an says:

وَإِنَّ هَذِهِ أُمَّتُكُمْ أُمَّةً وَاحِدَةً وَأَنَا رَبُّكُمْ فَاتَّقُونِ

Indeed this Community of yours is one Community, and I am your Lord, so be wary of Me.
(Qur'an 23:52)

So the ideal is clear and straightforward. All those that are Muslim and are wary of their common Lord are a part and parcel of the Ummah and they, by Divine decree, must be united. But of course, the devil is in the details. For if any kind of details detract the Muslims from the application of this Divine precept, and then they truly must be from the Devil. If on the other hand, the details are aspects of the overall unity and fall in line with its ultimate purpose, they are acceptable.

This is because unity can be envisaged on different levels and different people, depending on their aptitudes and archetypes, will incline to one or more of these levels.

On the most outer, basic, and pragmatic level, there is the need to unite out of sheer necessity. This is the political unity of those who label themselves Muslims in an attempt to defer the attacks of those who oppose them. This is a temporary and tactical unity which cannot withstand the test of time because on this level, the hearts of the Muslims are still divided.

Nonetheless, this unity is still a real unity because of the necessity underlying it, and stands in opposition to the "false" or "virtual" unities of groups which rally around a common name or imagined cause in a superficial way.

On the most inner level is the unity which arises from man's awareness of the Divine and hence, his own essence; the transcendent unity of God and the immanent unity of Divine nature and creation (fitrat Allah) in man and the world. For in understanding these matters, man understands his origin and end, and his present state which lies between the two.

He grasps the fallen and falling nature of man in this world and so becomes able to engage his will to make amends and to constantly struggle in the way of regaining his original heavenly state. This struggle or way is what is known as "religion" (or din) and, when understood in its totality, is the highest and best way to achieve true unity among men.⁹

Which of the two forms of unity must be chosen? Well, if the challenge of the Ummah is seen to be

primarily a political defeat from the outside, then the first “pragmatic” method of unity will be emphasized. If on the other hand, the challenge of the Ummah is seen to be a decline from the inside, then the second type of essential or transcendental unity will be the most pressing. For the most part, the choice of perspective will depend on how the idea of Ummah is understood in the first place. The second understanding – the one based on the total and unitive understanding of reality – is not exclusive and can certainly include the first.

The same cannot be said of the first or political viewpoint.

What is clear is that the higher and more encompassing the understanding, the better will be the unity – of whatever type, level and extent, from the smallest groups and brotherhoods to pan-Islamic movements. Imam ‘Ali (‘a) counselled his companion Kumayl in the following way:

يا كميل ما من حركة إلا و أنت محتاج فيها الى معرفة

O’ Kumayl! There no movement [or action] whatsoever but that you need understanding for it.10

The precursor to understanding is knowledge. So if understanding is necessary for any unity movement, knowledge is indispensable and without it more harm is done than good – no matter how good and noble the intentions and irregardless of how numerous the good deeds.

In a tradition from the most Noble Prophet (S) it is reported he said:

قال رسول الله (صلى الله عليه و آله) من عمل على غير علم كان ما يفسد أكثر مما يصلح

The harmful effects of a person who acts without knowledge are greater than his beneficial ones.11

Knowledge and understanding are qualities which are divine in principle, for God is al-‘Alim and al-Hakim. As such quantity is not of primary importance. This means that even if a handful of believers in the One struggle to achieve a unity based on knowledge and understanding, it is of great consequence.

What’s more, the traditions tell us that their very coming together aids in achieving the necessary understanding. It is said in a tradition:

ملاقة الاخوان نُشرة و تلقيح للعقل و إن كان نزرًا قليلاً

Meeting with brothers brings about expansion and life [lit. impregnation] for the intellect – even if they be a small insignificant number. 12

This then seems to be the traditional logic and methodology of unity; to start on a human scale, based on quality not quantity, and to build up from there. There are many references to both the perfection of the intellects in the latter days and with the coming of the Mahdi ('a), the quality and strength of the believers in this age, and to the existence of such small groups of the faithful. In the recent history of the Muslims, Imam Khumayni wrote in his last will and testament of the formation of “cells of the party of God” throughout the world.

The first unit after the “meetings of brothers” is the local community, the jama'ah. The Noble Prophet (S) said:

أيها الناس! عليكم بالجماعة وإياكم والفرقة

O' people! Enjoined for you is the community and forewarned [and detrimental] to you is disunion [and separatedness]. 13

Beyond this level of “community” are higher levels.

Now all of these levels are alluded to in the Law by institutions such as the congregational prayers – which begin with just two Muslims, the Friday prayers, the enjoining of good and the forbidding of evil (*amr bi al-ma'ruf wa nahi 'an al-munkar*) in society, jihad, and finally and most prominent in its symbolism, the Hajj.

So this is the methodology and these are the steps to achieve higher and higher forms of unity. A glimpse of where this can lead to is achieved by combining these levels with the inner or esoteric understanding of unity. In our time the greatest exponent of such a breadth and depth of understanding was Imam Khumayni. His son, Ahmad, summed up the vision of his father in this regard in the following way:

Imam wanted unity on all levels... unity on the international front – as Imam believed that the world's oppressed should attempt to unite against the oppressors; unity of the followers of religions and prophets in opposition to profanity, infidelity, and arrogance; unity of the Ummah and Islamic countries so as to fight and counter the attacks of the enemies of the Islamic world; unity of Shias, Sunnis and orthodox Islamic schools and sects within the Islamic world... 14

Imam Khumayni was emphatic and insistent on especially the unity between the different sects and schools of thought in the Muslim world. To the extent that he said: “We are united with Sunni Muslims – we are one – because we are Muslims and brothers. If a person says anything that causes division

between Muslims, then know that such a person is either ignorant or wants to sow the seeds of dissension between Muslims.”

Moreover, in line with his esoteric understanding of unity – something for which there is ample room within the Shia school of thought – he gave a fatwa making it wajib and obligatory on the Shias to participate in the congregational prayers of the Sunnis during the Hajj. 15

5. Final Words

A cursory glance at the state of the Muslims today shows us that we are desperately in need of unity on all its levels – from the inner or esoteric and transcendental to the outer or exoteric and political – and on all its scales – from a study group of two Muslims to the super-collective that is called the Ummah.

But we will not achieve it by just being aware of the need, nor by harbouring a thousand good intentions. The methodology has been shown to us weak and imperfect beings by the all-Perfect Being and His prophets, saints and friends (‘a).

Glimpses of this all embracing vision cum ideology and methodology have been presented above. What remains now is for us to ponder and think. Given this need, should we not be doubling our efforts? Should we not renew our vigilance? Should we not stop being complacent and happy with the name of “Muslim” or “Mu’min”, but rather try to make the din everything in our lives?

How can we claim to be the followers of tawhid when we practice disunity?!

We talk of Islam but follow sectarianism as our way! How can we change the state of affairs? What must be done?

What we must do is gain and apply the knowledge that has been handed down to us. We must follow the lead of the ‘ulama, such as Imam Khumayni, who discounted secondary differences and divisions and remained fixed on the Divinity and His plan for man, in all its dimensions from the mystical to the political – or rather, the political based on the mystical and the exoteric on the esoteric. God tells His beloved Prophet (S):

قُلْ إِنَّمَا أَعْظُمُ بَوَاحِدَةٍ ۚ أَنْ تَقُومُوا لِلَّهِ مِثْلَىٰ وَفِرَادَىٰ ثُمَّ تَتَفَكَّرُوا ...

Say, ‘I advise you just with one [thing]: that you rise up for God, in twos, or individually, then reflect...’ (Qur’an 34:46)

We the Muslims have been advised by the best of God’s creation to rise to the occasion. Let us try to obey. Individually or collectively, we must increase our knowledge; then apply the knowledge and hence

gain wisdom and understanding. If we are sincere in this, grace and blessings will descend – as this is God’s promise – and we will be able to form the small cells of believers or communities that we have been encouraged to do.

It will be the coming together of such qualitative and enlightened groups of the faithful, by their following the One Light of the heavens and the earth and under the leadership of Its human representative, that will lead to the formation or manifestation of the Single Ummah (the *ummatan wahidah* referred to in the Qur’an).

We previously saw that the Hajj has been called the “sustentation of the people” or the place of “rising”. As such, it not only is a lasting monument to the plain of Alast, where we all stood and acknowledged our Lord, but it is also a foreshadowing of the final Resurrection, where we will be once again impelled to recognize His absolute Dominion and Sovereignty over creation.

The coming together of Muslims of all walks, tongues, and races every year for the Hajj then – as a commemoration of our common Origin, our common End and our absolute abasement in His presence – is a rhythmic tribute to the presence of the One in the many. It is a graphic reminder of our potential – of what we could be in breadth and depth, quantity and quality, dunya and akhirah – if only we witnessed His signs and believed in His word during the rest of our lives as we do in the Hajj.

وَأَعْتَصِمُوا بِحَبْلِ اللَّهِ جَمِيعًا وَلَا تَفَرَّقُوا ...

Hold fast, all together, to God’s cord, and do not be divided [into sects]. (Qur’an 3: 103)

1. al-Kafi, vol. 4, p. 272, Wasa’il, vol. 8, p. 14
2. Nahj al-Balaghah, sermon 192, p. 293
3. Wasa’il al-Shi’ah, vol. 11, p. 118
4. al-Kafi, vol. 2, p. 19
5. Wasa’il, vol. 11, p. 33
6. It is also important to note that the ultimate teacher of the founders of the four schools of jurisprudence in the Sunni world was his grandson, Imam al-Sadiq (‘a). In fact, many of the Imam’s thousands of students were from different schools of thought in the Islamic world.
7. Ibn Qutaybah, al-Imamah wa al-Siyasah, Vol. I, p. 68; al-Hamawini, Fara’id al-simtayn, Chapter 37. al-Khatib al-Baghdadi, Tarikh Baghdad, Vol. IV, p. 21; Fakhr al-Din al-Razi, Fusul al-Muhimmah
8. This line of the truth is represented by the ‘ulama and the muhaddithin.
9. This form excludes, on principle, any and all forms of “unity” – whether racial, tribal, national, linguistic, historical, ... – in which religion is not given priority and supreme authority.
10. Mustadrak al-Wasa’il, vol. 17, p. 269
11. al-Kafi, vol. 1, p. 45
12. Mustadrak al-Wasa’il, vol. 8, p. 326
13. Mizan al-Hikmah, tradition no. 2434
14. Awaye Wahdat, Papers Presented in the Seventh International Conference of IslamicUnity, July, 1995

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