

Dealing with Differences

Firstly, it is important to realize that religious matters can be classified into **three** basic categories:

1. **Core issues**, on which the Ummah is largely in consensus, and about which it is not permissible to disagree, due to the overwhelming evidences. e.g.: • the oneness of Allāh • the Finality of Prophethood • eternity of Heaven and Hell • belief in angels • obligation of the five prayers, Zakāt, ḥajj and fasting • prohibition of theft, adultery, wine, lying, backbiting, etc.; • praiseworthiness of good character, voluntary charity, reconciliation between brothers, maintaining ties of kinship, etc.

There are other fundamental issues, which may be considered a subcategory of this first category, in which it is not permissible to differ, but for which the evidences are not absolutely convincing, such that dissenters are **not** considered unbelievers, but are considered guilty of innovation and sin if they persist upon their incorrect views after the evidences have been explained to them. e.g. • the belief of the Mu'tazilah that a Muslim who commits a major sin will abide eternally in Hell if he does not repent. • the belief of the Khawārij that a Muslim who deliberately sins becomes an unbeliever.

2. **Peripheral issues**, for which the scriptural evidences are open to more than one interpretation, or for which there exists no evidentiary text, so that they are in the domain of **ijtihād**, and hence are the subject of some disagreement among qualified jurists (**mujtahids**). In such issues, it is generally not permissible to criticize one following another legitimate school of thought. e.g. • where to fold the hands in Ṣalāh : above the navel or below • whether to recite the Basmalah silently, or aloud • whether the Prophet (ﷺ) saw Allah on the night of Mi'rāj or not.

It should also be pointed out that there are some issues on which the majority have agreed, but over which there has been a difference of opinion from some scholars. If the dissension arises from a mistake or slip on the part of

the dissenting scholars, or due to their not having had all of the related evidences, or if they went against a priorly-enacted consensus, then it is not permissible to follow them; one must stick with the majority (**Jumhūr**). e.g.:

- the view of some of the salaf, who considered that wiping on the **Khuffs** can be done without any time limit, due to the aḥādīth limiting the wiping (to 24 hrs in residence or 72 hrs on a journey) not having reached them.

3. **Strategical issues**, which are not core issues of belief, nor peripheral matters of jurisprudential ijtihād, but which are concerned with how best to attain a particular religious goal. e.g.:
 - disagreement over stratagems and plans of war
 - disagreement over what precise course of action should be adopted to restore the Caliphate.

Dealing with fundamental differences

Having established these three categories, it is evident that the Muslim automatically accepts the fundamental, core matters. As we have said, the evidence for them is overwhelming, and there is no disagreement over them. Nor may there be taqlīd ("blind following") in the core beliefs.

As far as dealing with those who differ in these matters, such as innovators and heretics, it is widely held that they must be abjured and boycotted, and this is correct, but within certain guidelines. It is permissible, and even recommended, to cut off relations with those guilty of serious innovations and other major sins if:

- the boycotting will not lead to a greater harm or evil, AND
- the boycotting will serve as admonishment to them so as to return them to the straight path, and/or
- the boycotting will serve to dissuade others, of the lay masses, from being influenced by and/or joining the wrongdoers, and/or
- the Muslim fears himself being adversely affected by associating with the wrongdoers if he does not cut off relations with them.

However, it should be emphasized that drastic steps such as this are a last resort; they must be preceded by conveying of the evidence (for the innovator may be ignorant or confused), and then by advice, reminder and exhortation. It is perhaps worth mentioning that some scholars are of the view that it is not permissible to break off relations with even a sinful Muslim for more than three days, based on a general application of the ḥadīth stating that, and because cutting off relations implies that one has given up hope of the sinner's reform whereas one should not despair of a person's becoming guided. Nevertheless, the majority hold that it is permissible to break off relations if the conditions we have discussed above are fulfilled.

Dealing with peripheral differences

As for the second category, the **layman** must: - accept what is agreed upon by consensus - take by one of the valid opinions on those issues where there exists scholarly disagreement. For jurisprudential issues, this is easily accomplished by adopting one of **the four established schools of thought** (Ḥanafī, Shāfi'ī, Mālikī, Ḥanbalī), or by referring to a contemporary scholar whom one trusts. In the case of the latter, there may still arise cases where a person is uncomfortable with what his Shaykh teaches or advocates. In this case, if he has a genuine conviction about his uncomfortableness, then if there exists an alternate, legitimate scholarly opinion, which is more precautionary and morally/religiously safer, he should adopt that position. Similar is the case if the person is not sure whether a particular issue is in the domain of legitimate difference of opinion, or weak, intolerable dissent. It is reported in the hadith literature that good is that with which one feels comfortable, and evil is that which makes one's heart/conscience uncomfortable, even if people continuously give him Fatwā about its acceptability. "Leave aside that which gives you doubts, and take up instead that which does not give you doubts." [Nawawi's 40 hadith]

Needless to say, one should in any case be convinced of the piety, religiousness and moral uprightness of a Shaykh before one accepts to follow his judgement. The Shaykh: • should be upholding the pillars of Islām, • should not be known to flagrantly violate any of the religions limits, • should not belong to a deviant group (although if his deviation is limited to a particular sphere, one can still consult him on issues unrelated to his deviation). • should have had some form of formal traditional Islamic education with the ijāzah system.

Apart from this, however, there is no concrete or tangible measure for gauging a Shaykh's suitability for this purpose. The lay-individual must be honest with himself before Allāh, and his heart must be convinced of the Shaykh's reliability. If, before consulting with the Shaykh, he has taken all of the precautions we have mentioned, then even if it should transpire in the Hereafter that one particular verdict he followed was wrong, the layman is, inshāAllāh, excused, because he did what was within his capability, and is not to be considered accountable for something beyond his grasp. It is only if he realizes something to be wrong, such as a verdict contradicting what is necessarily known to be part of the (fundamentals of the) religion, and still insists on following the Shaykh, that he becomes blameworthy, and guilty of shirk.

Dealing with strategic differences

Dealing with the **third** category of disagreements is similar to dealing with the second. As long as a view does not contradict the principles of Islām, and is not manifestly harmful to the interests of the Ummah, it may be pursued. Most of the differences between the various Islamic movements today are of this category. Hence, one may join any movement which best serves one's capabilities and motivations, as long as

the group aims to uplift and re-establish Islām and the Caliphate, and provided that:

- the group keeps within the bounds of the Qur'ān and Sunnah, and shuns deviation
- one does not become fanatic to the movement, bearing in mind always that allegiance to Islām comes before allegiance to the group if the two should conflict
- one does not automatically regard followers of other groups as deviants, for that is another manifestation of fanaticism

As an alternative to joining a specific group, one may work and cooperate with all the legitimate groups, providing assistance and advice to them equally. In any case, dialogue, cooperation and coordination should be ongoing between the different groups, and the higher goal of the re-establishment of Islām as a state and entire way of life should not be lost sight of.

Final Words

All this having been said, it is worthwhile to note that the layman need not, and indeed should not, make the disagreements of Scholars his own private and/or primary concern. There is sufficient material to occupy him amongst that of Islām on which the scholars are in consensus. Even the students of Sacred Knowledge are advised by their teachers, in their earlier stages, to stick to issues of consensus, and not to delve into the discussions, arguments and refutations of the scholars on finer points. This is for his own peace of mind, and to allow him to establish a firm foundation upon which to build. Once the foundation is firm, he can then go on to occupy himself with more controversial issues, if there is nothing more pressing or useful for him to do. In any case, the issues of **scholarly disagreement** should not become a source of wrangling and dispute, nor should one devote excessive time or effort in delving into and/or attempting to solve issues which do not contain significant practical benefit for oneself. The Salafu's-Ṣāliḥīn used to frown on this, for it leads to hardness of the heart and unmindfulness of one's purpose in life. Their way was to busy themselves with preparing for the Hereafter, by performing such deeds as will be of benefit on the day when wealth, property, elaborate discourses and embellished arguments will be of no benefit, "except for him who comes to Allāh with a sound heart."

And Allāh knows best, and He is the guide to the Straight Path.

Disrespecting the 'Ulamā

Beware Poison!

Assalamu 'alaykum..

I have kept my silence on this issue for some time, but I feel the time has come for me to say something. Let us stop, pause and re-examine our hearts and intentions. Let us ask ourselves why we are doing what we are doing. The Messenger of Allah (ﷺ) told Mu'adh ibn Jabal (رضي الله عنه), "Is there anything which drags people into the Fire on their faces other than the harvest of their tongues?" And, it is established that he (ﷺ) said, "Whoever believes in Allāh and the last day, let him say [something] good or keep silent. And, it is narrated that he (ﷺ) advised 'Uqbah ibn 'Amir (رضي الله عنه), "Hold your tongue, let your house contain you, and weep over your misdeeds." Imām al-Ghazālī in *Ihya 'Ulūmu'd-Dīn*, has a copious section on the Vices of the Tongue.

Brothers and sisters! I exhort you! Before you say, write or post anything, sincerely ask yourself if it is for the sake of Allāh, or there is some personal motive [Ḥazz al-nafs] present. I don't think any of us is above such caution, for indeed we might often be caught up in the fury of a debate, or overcome by the zeal of wanting to defend a certain issue or idea, to the extent that we lose our focus and perspective. Indeed, so much so that we might take ourselves to the brink of a cliff, ready to hurl ourselves precipitously over the edge, to plunge into the Fire although we perceive not! This is a devious ploy of Satan, whereby he misleads the unwary into transgression through the doors of knowledge and virtue. None is immune from this save those whom Allāh has blessed with perspicuous insight and precise scrutiny such that they distance themselves from these temptations. One of the savants said that the pious one scrutinizes himself more intensely than a distrustful and suspicious business partner scrutinizes his comrade.

Allāh, the Exalted has ordered us in the Qur'ān to respect the dignity of one another in our interaction and speech, saying, "O you who believe! Let not a people make fun of another people; it may be that [the latter] are better than [the former]. Nor defame one another, nor be call one another by [offensive] nicknames . . . and do not spy on one another, nor backbite one another. Would one you love to eat the flesh of his dead brother? Nay! You abhor it! Fear Allah." [Surah al-Hujurāt] "And tell

My servants that they should say that which is good. Indeed, Satan will sow dissension amongst them. Indeed, Satan is a plain enemy to man." [Sūrah al-Isrā]

And He, the Mighty, the Majestic, has commanded justice, saying, (translated), "O you who believe! Be establishers of justice, even if it be against your own selves, or parents or near-of-kin." [Sūrah al-Nisā'] "And let not your hatred of a people lead you to not be just; be just it is closer to piety. And fear Allāh." [Sūrah al-Mā'idah]

And, the Messenger of Allah (ﷺ) has said, "Whoever covers [the faults of] a believer, Allāh will cover his faults on the Day of Arising." [Riyāḍu's-Ṣāliḥīn]

And, the distinguished historian and **Hāfiẓ, Ibn 'Asākir** of Damascus, has similarly cautioned against **letting our tongues loose against the scholars**. He said, "Know, brother, that the flesh of scholars is poisonous [i.e. whoever backbites them is liable to poisoning, for the Qur'ān likens backbiting to eating the flesh of one's dead brother], and the Way of Allāh concerning those who insult them is well-known. So, whoever insults the scholars of this ummah by his tongue, Allah will afflict him in this [very] world by death of the heart."

Why is it that we will take the greatest of pains to defend our own scholars, and keep stressing that the criticisms of them are often unfounded, and that it is essential to refer back the person's own works, and to overlook mistakes, . . . and yet when we disagree with some positions of another scholar, we fall into that which we were cautioning other against. We are judgemental, cruel, harsh and insulting. We resort to ad hominem attacks, trying to attack the person's dignity and personality rather than focussing on discussing the ideas involved. Telling a man that his wife is ugly will not win you a debate against him. "Do you command people towards righteousness, and forget your own selves, although you are the ones reading the Scripture? Will you then not understand?" [Surah al-Baqarah]

We concentrate on all the evil we can dig out and ignore much good. We make the arguments of scholars our personal concern, as if we are at their level! We forget that a well-established principle among the scholars of **Accreditation** and **Disreputation** is that criticism of a scholar generally cannot be taken from his contemporaries or those with whom he differs in some aspects of approach and methodology, due to the possibility of bias and jealousy. The examples of this are well-known to those who have some familiarity with the field, and we need not drag the names of some of the most prominent scholars of this ummah through the mud merely to illustrate this point. Indeed, some people would be surprised if we were to present some of the faults of those men, may Allah have mercy upon them and forgive them, and reward them for their good. The scholars are human beings, who have faults and weaknesses, and we should try to overlook these and to take what is good from them.

Have we finished with criticizing and refuting the depraved and wretched people of heresy, such as the Qadianis, Bahā'is, the Submitters and other people of disbelief

and misguidance such as the Jews and the Christians, such that we have nothing better to do than to let loose our tongues upon the Muslims, to direct our fire at them, and to **gloat** over their faults? Not that we should ignore the refutation of evil and innovation; rather, we should observe appropriate limits and etiquettes in doing so. Let us teach, educate and inform people about the essentials of worship and monetary transactions, of marriage and divorce, of good character and avoidance of vice, of cases of Muslim suffering, struggle and persecution and other global concerns, before we start exposing them to the debates of scholars over peripheral issues such as tawassul, and finer points of doctrine and jurisprudence.

Allah's help is to entreated, and in Him is reliance to be placed.

al-Jarh wa al-Ta'dīl

A Principle in Accreditation and Discreditation of the 'Ulamā

'Allāmah al-Subkī says, in "*al-Ṭabaqāt al-Kubrā*," (vol. I, p. 187), "One whose leadership and uprightness have been established, whose extollers and accreditors abound, and whose discreditors are rare, and there are circumstances indicating the reason for his discreditation - by way of partisanship to a school of thought or something else - we do not heed discreditation of him. We deal with him as upright; otherwise, if we were to open this door, and to start giving absolute precedence to discreditation, none of the Imāms would remain for us unscathed, for there is no imām whom [some] maligners have not maligned, and in [whose malignment] some fools have not destroyed [themselves]."

Hāfiẓ Ibn 'Abdil-Barr composed a chapter, in his book on knowledge, about the verdict of scholars' statements about one another. In it, he began with the Ḥadīth of Zubayr (رضي الله عنه) ascribed [to the Prophet (ﷺ)], "**The malady of the nations before you has crept towards you : envy and hatred . . .**" And, he narrated through his *isnād*, on the authority of Ibn 'Abbās (رضي الله عنه) that he said, "**Listen to the knowledge of scholars, but do not affirm them against one another, for by He in whose Hand is my soul, indeed, they differ with one another more than the goats in a corral.**"

And, on the authority of Mālik ibn Dinār: he said, "**Take by the sayings of the scholars and reciters in everything except their statements about one another.**" "

[Similarly, Hāfiẓ Ibn Ḥajar al-Asqalānī reports, in "*Tahdhīb al-Tahdhīb*", (vol. IX, p. 427), under the biographical entry for Muḥammad ibn al-Muthanna, "'Amr ibn 'Ali was asked about [Muhammad ibn al-Muthanna and Bundar, whereupon he replied, "Two reliable individuals; everything is accepted from them **except** for that which they say about one another."]

Al-Subki continues, "We informed you at the start that Discreditation is not accepted from a discreditor - even if he details it - with regard to one whose [acts of] obedience [to Allāh] outweigh his acts of disobedience, whose extollers [outnumber] his critics,

and whose commendators [outnumber] his discreditors -if there are circumstances which [are such that] reason testifies that the like of them can incite [someone] to defamation of the one he is discrediting. [These circumstances can be] by way of fanaticism to a school of thought, or worldly vying such as may occur among rivals, or other [factors] besides those. So, we say, for example: the words of Ibn Abī Dhi'b about Mālik are not to be heeded, nor [those of] Ibn Ma'in about al-Shāfi'i, nor [those of] al-Nisā'i about Aḥmad ibn Ṣālih. [This is] because these are famous Imāms, [and so] the discreditor of them becomes comparable to one producing an obscure report [which,] if it were authentic, is such that there would be abundant motives [for others] to report it [as well, but since no such abundant reports exist], certainty is established about its untruthfulness.

Among that which should be investigated when [considering] discreditation is: the state of beliefs and differences in them, with regard to the discreditor and the discredited. Often, the discreditor may differ with the discredited in [peripheral issues of] doctrine ('aqīdah), and discredit him because of that. This was alluded to by al-Rāfi'i when he said, "It is imperative for the commendators [of narrators] to be free of rancour and partisanship to a school of thought, out of fear that that may incite them to discredit an upright individual, or to commend a transgressor, and [in fact] this has occurred for many of the imāms."

Shaykh al-Islām Taqiyy al-Din Ibn Daqīq al-'Id, in his book, "*Al-Iqtirah*" has indicated this, saying, "The reputations of the Muslims are one of the pits of the Fire [of Hell]. Two groups of people have stood at its brink: the Ḥadīth scholars and the judges."

One of the examples of that which we have mentioned above is the statement of one of [the scholars] about al-Bukhāri, "Abū Zur'ah and Abū Hātim forsook him on account of the issue of the Word [of Allāh]." Alas, what a calamity!! Is it permissible for anyone to say Bukhāri is to be forsaken, when he is [in fact] the bearer of the standard of this vocation, and the forerunner of Ahl al-Sunnah wa al-Jamā'ah?

Among [the examples of this also] is the statement of one of the **corporealists** about Abū Hātim Ibn Ḥibbān [the famous Imām of Ḥadīth], "He was not very religious; we expelled him from Sijistān because he denied a limit for Allāh." Alas! I wish I knew who is more deserving of expulsion: one who considers his Lord limited, or one who declares His transcendence above corporeality!!

The examples of this abound."

[See : "*Sharh al-Manzumat al-Bayquniyyah*," by 'Abdullah Sirāj al-Din, pp. 190-195; and also: "*Fawatih al-Rahamut*," vol II, p. 154; "*al-Raf' wa al-Takmil fī al-Jarh wa al-Ta'dil*," by M. 'Abdul-Ḥayy al-Laknāwī.]