

THIRD OF THE TWO: RESOLVING THE INCLUSIVE-EXCLUSIVE DICHOTOMY IN RELIGIOUS THOUGHT

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The study at hand will apply itself to the former intra-religious exclusivism and will expound upon the consequent inclusive-exclusive dichotomy within a religion.

In the case of the inclusive-exclusive dichotomy, it is wisdom which tells us where to inclusively enter into dialogue with people of other faiths, and also where to exclusively try to propagate our faith as the truth that is better for the people of other faiths to accept.

Modern digressions and debates on the validity of Dialetheism aside, the resolution to this paradox is found in the metaphysical and mystical doctrines of religion. The mystical approach, outwardly and simply, is to repeat the paradox and to deny, implicitly, the absolute truth to either side. In so doing, it encourages man to go beyond the dualisms of discursive rational thought and to arrive at a unitive understanding – by way of a direct knowledge or “tasting” – of the fundamental matters of being. Moreover, it attempts to overcome the dichotomy implicit in the knower-known paradigm and to achieve a vision of the unity that comprehends and composes all reality. Hence, the supra-rational mystical resolution of this paradox is best accomplished by the perfect man who transcends the realm of multiplicity until he is united with his Maker in such a fashion that he becomes God’s eye, face, and hand on earth, and in short, His vicegerent (*khaliḥah*) and highest manifestation. Wisdom demands that true intellectuality and objectivity come into play – an objectivity that allows for transcendence towards the “third of the two” and an intellectuality that knows that it does not know all. For it is only an intellect that is existentially present to the sacred perplexity (*taḥayyur*) at play in the realm of manifestation that can

remain eternally wondrous and perpetually in awe of its Creator. Ultimately, it is only a person possessing such an intellect that can be a real Muslim, a true slave of God, and a bona fide *'abd Allāh*.

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Religion is innate to the human condition and all men, to some extent, know what is meant when the word “religion” is mentioned. The same word is also used in its plural form as “religions” and, once again, the meaning is understood. What this simple fact tells us is that when we observe a number of “religions” in human society we see them as entities that are different, unique, and countable. However, it also tells us that there is something that is common to all of them; otherwise, we would not be able to point to any one particular religion and claim that it is a “religion”. Hence, there is a perspective in which every religion is unique, and there is also a perspective in which the religions are the “same” and share commonalities.

Religions are unique vis-à-vis their particular form, their method, and their “branches” while they are the same in their essence, their origin-destination, and their “root”. Religions are the same in so far as they are from the same limitless Source of manifestation and His boundless treasures (*kbazā'inahu*), while they are unique in so far as they – as manifested form – have limits (*bi qadarin ma'lūm*) (Qur'ān 15:21). Again, they are similar in that they are revealed and radiate from the One light of the heavens and the earth, but upon refraction, they differ in their intensities and colours. There is an aspect to all true religions where we are told not to differentiate, (*lā nufarriqu bayna aḥādīn minhum*, Qur'ān 3:84; 2:136; 2:285; 4:152); and then there is another aspect to them that situates the religions and their founders within a hierarchy (*faddalnā ba'dahum 'alā ba'dīn*, Qur'ān 2:253). Āyatullāh Jawādī Āmulī, a contemporary authority on religion, writes:

“Religion is everywhere permeated by the kernel and the light, and since light has degrees and levels of intensity and dimness – and as the religious practice of individuals has degrees and levels of strength and weakness – so too does religion itself have degrees of strength and weakness; the principles of religion are like the intense light, while the branches [and precepts] of religion are like the weak light” (Jawādī Āmulī 2001: 71).

He adds:

“A study of religions reveals that their multiplicity is gradational (*tashkiki*) and not oppositional (*tabāyuni*). That is to say, divine religions hold many of their doctrinal, ethical, legal, and jurisprudential lines of thought in common – but they are of various levels and degrees: some are perfect while others are more perfect” (ibid.: 205).

The fact that religions are effectively of different levels or “colours of light” does not harm their essential unity, nor does it negate the fact that religion as such is one single reality. Religion is like an existential universal or archetype that gives rise to numerous particulars or instances. Āyatullāh Jawādī writes:

“The use of the word ‘religion’ in its plural form (‘religions’) is with respect to the perfection of religion on the plane [or arc] of descent. It is the manifestations of religion that undergo perfection; it is not the case that religion was once imperfect and then became perfected, thereby reaching its most perfect and most complete level. That is to say, the reality of religion is one – sometimes the lower levels [of this single reality] become apparent, sometimes its intermediate levels descend, and sometimes its higher levels manifest themselves...” (ibid.: 201).

By the same token, the essential unity of all religions does not denigrate the unique nature and identity of any one particular religion. In principle, this is because when each religion was revealed by God, it partook of His will in a direct fashion. Whenever God sent a prophet with a “new” religion, He did so in consonance with the fullness of His Identity and the divine “I”. God affirms this truth to the Prophet in the Qur’ān in the following manner:

“We did not send any apostle before you but We revealed to him that ‘There is no god but I; so worship Me’” (Qur’ān: 21:25).

This divine Ipseity or *anā* of the Absolute and the fact that all of the divine Names, despite their conceptual variances, refer to this one and only Reality, means that the particular divine Name that a prophet is sent with to institute a “different” religion is shrouded in a cloak of absolutism. Hence, every religion is intrinsically motivated to “protect” its integrity and genius – giving rise to a divinely sanctioned exclusivism on the level of forms where a follower of any particular religion practically excludes the beliefs and practices of the other religions. Āyatullāh Jawādī Āmulī explains this necessary intra-religious exclusivism in this fashion:

“A religious person... does not retreat from his beliefs and ideological stances on the doctrinal level, nor from his principled precepts on the practical level” (Jawādī Āmulī 2001: 201).

There is another type of “extra-religious” exclusivism that is common to all true religions whereby they distinguish themselves from error and disbelief in general. In this case all these religions, together, are seen as being examples of the single and perennial tradition of “Islam” and thereby as excluding or being opposed to the secular, atheistic, or humanistic perspective on reality. Āyatullāh Jawādī writes:

“God Immaculate speaks in two ways in the noble Qur’ān: 1 – within the [religious] fold, whereby each and every one of the religious schools of thought (*madhāhib*) and divine religions (*adyān*), in its own measure (*andāzeh*), partakes of the truth in general; 2 – without the [religious] fold, whereby only the religion of Islam is the truth and everything outside of Islam is error and does not partake of the truth at all; hence the fundamental existence of God and His unicity (*tawhīd*) is the truth, while heresy and polytheism (*shirk*) is error” (ibid.: 220).¹

The study at hand will apply itself to the former intra-religious exclusivism and will expound upon the consequent inclusive-exclusive dichotomy within a religion. But first, two important notes are in order.

First, esoteric tendencies and an over-emphasis on inclusivism have led some thinkers to posit the equality of the exclusivisms of all the various religions. In supporting their claims, such thinkers sometimes refer to Ibn al-‘Arabī’s example of the water in the cup becoming “coloured” by the colour of the cup – the water standing here for the Absolute within, and the cup denoting the particular religion that carries the truth of the Absolute. It is inferred that what is important is the *water* contained in the cup and not the shape or colour of the specific cup in question, and that effectively, in so far as they are containers for water, all cups are the same and hence equal.

In an exceptional article entitled, *Civilizational Dialogue and Mysticism: The Holy Qur’ān and the Metaphysics of Ibn al-‘Arabī* (see: Shah-Kazemi 2009: 117–139), Dr. Reza Shah-Kazemi, an authority on Comparative Religion,

1 On the previous page Āyatullāh Jawādī set the stage for this comment of his in these words: “God Immaculate, holds that the truth is commonly shared by all those who believe in the general principles and original features of religion, while having faith in and practicing the same, even though they are made distinct from each other by way of their [particular] methodology and [practical] law. But as for those who do not accept God, according to the Qur’ān, ‘So what is there after the truth except error?’ (10:32)”.

uses the cup-water symbolism to first expound the positive meaning that one may take from this metaphor:

“In terms of the image of the water and the cup, briefly alluded to above: the cup might be seen to symbolize the form taken by Revelation, while water stands for the Essence of Revelation. Water, in itself, is undifferentiated and unique, whilst undergoing an apparent change of form and colour by virtue of the accidental shape and colour of the receptacles into which it is poured. The receptacles, the forms of Revelation, are fashioned according to the specificities of the human communities to which the specific revealed message is addressed: ‘And We never sent a messenger save with the language of his folk, that he might make the message clear for them’ (14:4). Just as human communities differ, so must the ‘language’ of the ‘message’ sent to them: the cups cannot but differ. However, the one who knows ‘water’ as it is in itself, that is, the essence of that which is revealed, and not just its forms, will recognize this ‘water’ in receptacles other than his own.”

While the essence of the revealed religions is one, Shah-Kazemi is quick to remind us of “the proper level at which we can say that all religions are one. It is not on the level of forms that they are one; rather, they are one in God as their source.” Hence, one can only differentiate and judge between them according to their forms and their efficacy – since, in their content or essence, they are non-delimited and one. To repeat the same idea using the cup-water analogy, it can be said that it is the cup that is limited; it is limited not only in its shape and colour – which define the original genius of the religion in question – but, like all worldly limitations, it is also limited in time and by the intrinsic qualities of the temporal world such as change, mutation, and deterioration. Hence, the formal aspect of any religion, unlike its essential core, is open to degeneration from the outside, so to speak. Given the ever-increasing degenerative and entropic forces of the lower and limited world of manifestation, even the best of cups are prone to decay, disrepair, and leaks. Therefore, while all cups hold water and give it the appearance of a certain shape or colour, given the vicissitudes of time, some will do it better than others. It is because of Islam’s temporal positioning as the last religion for humanity that it can be claimed that its “cup” is in better shape and has not degenerated as other formal religions have. It is also for this reason that one can make the intellectual argument that divine wisdom would prefer a container and vehicle that is the most sound; hence, the general divine will supports the use of this container for the masses at large in our time.

There is one other reason to give preference to Islam in our age. It has to do with the fact that, even on the exoteric and “exclusive” level, Islam has a

certain universality that includes other religions. In this regard, Martin Lings writes:

“It should be mentioned that there is a lesser universality as well as the greater one which we have been considering. All mysticisms are equally universal in the greater sense in that they all lead to the One Truth. But one feature of the originality of Islam, and therefore of Sufism, is what might be called a secondary universality, which is to be explained above all by the fact that as the last Revelation of this cycle of time it is necessarily something of a summing up. The Islamic *credo* is expressed by the Qur’an as belief in ‘God and His angels and His books and His Messengers’. (2:285) The following passage is also significant in this context. Nothing comparable to it could be found in either Judaism or Christianity, for example: ‘For each We have appointed a law and a path; and if God had wished He would have made you one people. But He hath made you as ye are that He may put you to the test in what He had given you. So vie with one another in good works. Unto God ye will all be brought back and He will then tell you about those things wherein ye differed.’ (5:48) Moreover – and this is why one speaks of a ‘cycle’ of time – there is a certain coincidence between the last and the first. With Islam ‘the wheel has come full circle’, or almost; and that is why it claims to be a return to the primordial religion, which gives it yet another aspect of universality. One of the characteristics of the Qur’an as the last Revelation is that at times it becomes as it were transparent in order that the first Revelation may shine through its verses...” (Lings 1999: 23).

Another way of saying that Islam is more universal than the other existing world religions is to say that it is closer to the essence of religion and the perennial tradition of Truth (*dīn al-ḥaqq*) that the Qur’ān speaks about. This explains the relatively-absolute superiority of the last religion, or more accurately, the fact that this last religion is the singularly greatest particular¹ of the pervasive or existential universal known as the *dīn al-ḥaqq*. By virtue of its essential identity with this universal, primordial, or ultimate Tradition, “Muḥammadan Islam” becomes the ultimate and final point of reference and actually protects and confers on the other preceding religions a relative “right” to exist. (Qur’ān: 5:48).

The second important point regarding the inclusive-exclusive dichotomy, or the question as to whether the religions are unique or the same, is to know

¹ The “particular” here refers to the individual or the referent – the *miṣḍāq* – of the existential universal – the *kullī sa’i*.

that the Islamic perspective would want to emphasize that Islam includes, without contradiction, both of these perspectives at the same time; and that it is wrong and even impossible to take any one without the other in any *real way*. Or to put it differently, the truth is neither this nor that but “an affair between the two affairs”. The paramount importance of this truth calls for some further explanation.

In logic, the Principle of Contradiction states that contradictory statements cannot both at the same time be true. Hence, it is impossible to predicate of the same thing, at the same time, and in the same sense, the absence and the presence of the same quality. While this principle is definitely true, it does not alter the fact that in man’s quest for the truth, his “researches of the mind” have led him to antithetical conclusions on a single issue. In such questions as the permanence or impermanence of the human soul, the predestination or freedom of the human will, the created or uncreated nature of Holy Writ, and others, human inquiry that sought rational and conceptual resolutions has been forced to accept one of the “antithetical” propositions at the expense of denying the other.

Modern digressions and debates on the validity of Dialetheism aside, the resolution to this paradox is found in the metaphysical and mystical doctrines of religion.¹ The mystical approach, outwardly and simply, is to repeat the paradox and to deny, implicitly, the absolute truth to either side. In so doing, it encourages man to go beyond the dualisms of discursive rational thought and to arrive at a unitive understanding – by way of a direct knowledge or “tasting” – of the fundamental matters of being. Moreover, it attempts to overcome the dichotomy implicit in the knower-known paradigm and to achieve a vision of the unity that comprehends and composes all reality. Hence, the supra-rational mystical resolution of this paradox is best accomplished by the perfect man who transcends the realm of multiplicity until he is united with his Maker in such a fashion that he becomes God’s eye, face, and hand on earth, and in short, His vicegerent (*khalīfah*) and highest manifestation.

The metaphysical approach to the resolution begins by affirming that the Absolute Truth is God Himself – who, in essence, is unknowable.² It goes

1 In Islamic mystical writings, mention is often made of the “doctrine” of *huwa-lā huwa*, popularized and given formal exposition by Ibn ‘Arabī. Similar ideas are expressed by the Jainist principle of *Anekantavada*. Traditional opposition to this idea on the part of religious authorities is mostly due to its misuse at the hands of pseudo-mystics and antinomian charlatans in religious attire – who were the relativist pluralists of their time.

2 “Absolute truth is the lot of no one; that is to say, there is no person or group that has understood all of the truths of the world. This is because an individual or a group is limited and finite, and no limited or finite being can comprehend the essence/crux (*kunh*) of

on to postulate that this profound truth, where God is the ultimate Mystery, must also “spill over” to the level of worldly truths and must somehow be reflected on the factual plane – especially when the factual event concerns the Word of God, such as Jesus or the Qur’ān. In the case of the latter Word of God, the “contradictory” statements made by traditional authorities speak to this air of mystery, for instance: “it was revealed in one night and it was revealed gradually”, or, “it is created and it is uncreated”. A similar “ambiguity” is found when it comes to the theomorphic nature of man – created from the Spirit of God – and his enactment of will in the world of manifestation. This is none other than the famous freewill-predestination issue, which is beyond the rational pale of human inquiry and whose resolution is alluded to by the ambiguous and somewhat mysterious statement that it is neither one nor the other; rather, it is “an affair between the two affairs” (al-Kulayni al-Razi 1986: 155)¹ What this implies is that the limits of human reason, as well as the necessity of belief in the unseen, demand that we allow for certain factual details to remain beyond our discursive reach, and, by first suspending logical judgement, try to achieve an inner supra-rational understanding of any factual paradox or irresolvable dichotomy. Imam Khumaynī spoke of this when he said:

“The creed of the middle position (*amr bayn al-amrayn*) is one which is affirmed by the way of the people of gnosis as well as by transcendental philosophy... That which is the soundest of views and most secure from controversy and more in consonance with the religion of *tawhīd* is the creed of the illustrious gnostics and the people of the heart. However, this creed, on every topic pertaining to the Divine teachings, stands in the category of ‘simple and impossible’ (*sabl wa mumtani*) whose understanding is not possible through discursive proofs and arguments and is unattainable without complete piety of the heart as well as Divine succour” (al-Khumaynī 2003: hadith 39).

Piety of the heart gives us the humility to know that we do not know – that our knowledge is limited.² This fundamental limitation means that there

the Unlimited. Hence, no one, by himself understands all the realities of the world – and consequently does not perceive Allah as-He-is” (Jawādī Āmulī 2001: 218).

1 Bāb al-jabr wa al-qadar wa al-amr bayn al-amrayn.

2 The limitation of knowledge is very different from the relativity of knowledge or the relativity of truth that pervades all types of scepticism. The difference between the relativity of knowledge and the relativity of truth lies in the fact that the former accepts, in principle, the actual existence of a concrete reality – which is the object of knowledge – as well as the truth or falsity of propositions in reference to actuality, but then posits an inescapa-

will always be differences and that, when we attempt to make a judgement, we will always tend to fall on one side or the other of an irresolvable dichotomy. God says in His book:

“Say, ‘O God! Originator of the heavens and the earth, Knower of the sensible and the Unseen, *You will judge* between Your servants concerning that about which they used to differ” (Qur’ān: 39:46).

The tone and gist of this verse and other similar verses is that differences are a part of this earthly reality and that some of them will only be fully resolved in the afterlife where the divine perspective that comprehends all perspectives and the total truth that comprehends all partial truths will become manifest.

This can be considered a sort of relativism – not in its meaning of a relativity of truth or knowledge but rather of a “limitation of truth” – and it does help in “removing” apparent contradictions among religions – not by resolving such contradictions but by deferring the resolution to a “later” time or a higher plane. Hence, by trying to distance ourselves from logically irresolvable dichotomies and keeping them in a shroud of mystery, we are not claiming that they are not understandable at all on earth, but rather, that they seem to sometimes involve “contradictions” that must be accepted and must be put on the top shelf for a full resolution “later”.

Having stated the metaphysical approaches and mystical tendencies towards the problem of the irresolvable dichotomies such as the inclusivist-exclusivist debate in religion, it would help to shed further light upon the resolution that has been termed as the “middle position”. It is first important to note that the middle position is not the middle of two things so as to be a

ble uncertainty or scepticism with regards to it or them. In the latter, however, actuality and reality – or the truth and falsity of propositions – are two mental constructs or two mentally posited notions which have their locus in the minds and understandings of men and which, in the case where there is a change of mind, are themselves changed. So while in the relativity of knowledge the existence of an absolute truth is agreed to, it is claimed that men do not have access to it in any authentic or integral fashion and, hence, it is never really known. In the case of religious pluralism, this relativity of knowledge is used by John Hick to argue for the relativity of all religions. It is claimed by Hick that the Real cannot be known in itself and when any religion claims that the Real has revealed itself, then such claims are false. The third type of “relativity”, the “limitation of knowledge”, denies the first two forms, for it is asserted in the first place that there is an absolute and objectively existing reality, and, in the second place, that man has access to this reality and he can partake of it with certainty. The “relativity” comes in admitting that the reality is absolute, and as such, it is infinite and that man can only take and comprehend a finite amount of it. Hence, the limited awareness of man with respect to the absolute Truth is true and certain within the confines and delimitations of his knowledge.

third point between two points. Neither is it the third of three positions; on the contrary, it is the third of two things because it is not on their plane – it transcends and comprehends them. The comprehensive distinction of this level with respect to levels lower than it implies the higher level's presence in the lower levels. This cannot be taken to mean, however, that realities of the higher level are brought down to the level of the lower so as to be counted as one of the existents of that lower level. It is for this same reason that God, Who encompasses and is infinitely near all things, can never be said to be on a par with them,¹ nor can He ever be enumerated along with them. The Qur'ān echoes this truth by, on the one hand, emphasizing God's omnipresence and immanence, while on the other, refuting the idea that God is rank and file with other things and that He subsists alongside the things that have effused from Himself. God asserts that He is with all things no matter where they may be:

“It is He who created the heavens and the earth in six days; then settled on the Throne. He knows whatever enters the earth and whatever emerges from it and whatever descends from the sky and whatever ascends to it, and He is with you wherever you may be, and Allah sees what you do” (Qur'ān: 57:4).

God is not to be counted alongside other things and He is not to be considered as just another numerical addition of or a member of a group of “other” existents, as per the verse:

“They have certainly disbelieved who say, ‘Allah is the third of three,’ while there is no god but One God. If they do not relinquish what they say, there shall befall those who disbelieve among them a painful punishment” (Qur'ān: 5:73).

Rather, God's with-ness with all things places Him qualitatively beyond them and not numerically with them. In this realistic view of the Real He is not the third of three but rather the third of two. The following verse speaks to this idea:

“Have you not seen that Allah knows whatever there is in the heavens and whatever there is in the earth? There is no secret talk among three, but He is their fourth, nor among five but He is their sixth, nor less

1 In the first *khūṭbah* of the *Nahj al-Balāgha*, Imam 'Ali speaks of the enigmatic reality of the Real in this way: “He is with all things without being associated with them, [He] is other than all things without being apart from them (*ma'a kulli shay'in lā bimūqāranatin wa ghayru kulli shay'in lā bimuzāyalatin*).”

than that, nor more, but He is with them wherever they may be. Then He will inform them about what they have done on the Day of Resurrection. Indeed Allah has knowledge of all things” (Qur’ān: 58:7).

The crucial point that ties the above truth to the discussion at hand is that if God is the proverbial “fifth element” that transcends the manifested order by quality and not quantity, then His knowledge, which is equivalent to His being, must be the same. His absolute and all-embracing knowledge comprehends all partial knowledges and cognitive constructs. Any human knowledge that tends towards the divine must also have this characteristic of transcending apparently disparate and opposing perspectives in a grander perspective that comprehends the lower ones. To those humans who are situated on any of the lower perspectives, the higher one can seem nothing but perplexing.¹ Hence, it is praiseworthy to ask God for this type of perplexity that leads to greater and higher knowledge.² This supra-perspective acknowledges and comprehends the lower while not being tied and forced to accept any of its antithetical options. Hence, the “affair between the two affairs”, is the right answer to such irresolvable dichotomies. It is far from the disabling relativism that comes with the simple ignorance and confusion of scepticism; on the contrary, it is to have a sense of sacred ambiguity – the mystery in which and through which we seek proximity to God.

Perhaps the best word in English to describe this transcendent solution is “balance” rather than “middle”. Balance is to the will what wisdom is to the intellect. Hence, wisdom – and the beauty that accompanies it – are the things that we require to overcome any undue stagnation in a lower knowledge and perspective. In the case of the inclusive-exclusive dichotomy, it is wisdom which tells us where to inclusively enter into dialogue with people of other faiths, and also where to exclusively try to propagate our faith as the truth that is better for the people of other faiths to accept.

Shah-Kazemi writes in his previously quoted article:

“In the verse... 16:125, ‘wisdom’ (*hikma*) is given as the basis upon which dialogue should be conducted. The whole of the Qur’ān, read in depth and not just on the surface, gives us a divine source of wisdom; imbibing from this source empowers and calibrates our efforts to engage

1 Imam Bāqir said: “Allah’ is that Worshipped entity by whom creatures are awestruck (*aliha*) in perceiving His ‘whatness’ and in comprehending His ‘howness’ – the Arabs say, *aliha al-rajul* (i.e. the man was awestruck) when he is perplexed about something and is not able to comprehend it in knowledge” (al-Majlisi 1982: vol. 3: 222).

2 There is a famous saying that has been attributed to the Prophet in which he is reported to have said, “O Lord increase me in perplexity in Thee.”

in meaningful dialogue and to establish authentic modes of tolerance; it thus provides us, in the words of Tim Winter, with a ‘transcendently-ordained tolerance.’ (Winter 2001: 11) Wisdom is a quality and not an order: it cannot be given as a blue-print, a set of rules and regulations; it calls for human effort, a readiness to learn, it needs to be cultivated, and it emerges as the fruit of reflection and action. As the words of verse 16:125 tell us, we need wisdom and beautiful exhortation, and we also need to know how to engage in dialogue on the basis of that which is *ahsan* ‘finest’ ‘most excellent’, or ‘most beautiful’ in our own faith, if we are to authentically invite people to the path of the Lord.... This creative juxtaposition between *da’wa* and dialogue indicates implicitly that, rather than being seen as two contrasting or even antithetical modes of engaging with the Other, these two elements can in fact be synthesized by wisdom...”

A lack of wisdom causes us to miss the balance and to fall and tend towards one side more than the other. This, in turn, spurns those of the opposite perspective to further fortify their particular position and become formidable adversaries. This phenomenon is not limited to religious denominations and can be found across the board of human civilization and experience¹, including the political realm and its bi-polar tendencies.²

Another example of a “dichotomy” that requires a supra-rational and transcendental approach is the exoteric-esoteric dichotomy. When the higher wisdom and greater balance is lost sight of in this particular polarization, the two sides fall prey to an absolutisation of their partial perspectives. The resulting myopia makes them blind to the “third of the two” positions. It is not surprising that we should be witness to many groups in the modern world – modernity being, by definition, an imbalance – who have gravitated to one extreme or another. In this regard mention might be made of: pseudo-Sufis, pluralist-relativists, apolitical Islamologists, and the like on one side, and neo-Akhbaris, pietistic apologists, religious reformers, political activists... on the other.

- 1 The pendulum of public opinion, political leanings, and cultural trends on the social level, as well as the pendulum of mood-swings, fluctuating convictions, and erratic moral behaviour on the level of the individual also illustrate the inability of the vast majority of us to overcome the false dichotomy in question and to move towards the supra-formal “third” perspective that comprehends the lower two.
- 2 The two tendencies in question here are represented by the following truths: 1) Absolute rule, governance, and dominion is with God, as He is omnipotent and the destiny of the creatures is ultimately in His hands – human vagaries amounting to nothing in comparison to His will; 2) Man is the vicegerent of God on earth, having been given the divinely ordained freedom to choose truth over falsehood, goodness over evil, and beauty over ugliness – such a sacred choice being paramount to His wish.

The schools of thought or sects within a religion, the *madhāhib*, are like religions within religions. Hence, the same principles of inclusion-exclusion apply to them as they did to religions, but to a lesser degree and in a slightly different way. There is the need to be inclusive and stress unity, while at the same time there is the necessary tendency towards exclusiveness that guarantees the identity and integrity of the *madhhab* in question. It is wisdom that defines the limits and contours of where and how these two “opposing” tendencies should be applied. It is with this higher perspective of wisdom that some of the leading “*ulamā*” of our time, like Imam Khumaynī, provided us with standards by which to successfully accomplish this subtle balancing act. Among the bold steps taken by Imam Khumaynī to reassert the balance by increasing the emphasis on inclusivity were: the declaration of Rabi’ al-Awwal 12–17 as “International Islamic Unity Week” and the opening of “the World Forum for the Proximity of Islamic Schools of Thought” (*Al-majma’ al-Ālamī li al-Taqrīb bayn al-Madhāhib al-Islāmiyyah*). With regards to intra-Muslim unity and the spirit of inclusion within Islam Imam Khumaynī 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 Shi’a school of thought – the Imam gave a *fatwā* making it *wājib* and obligatory on the Shi’as to participate in the congregational prayers of the Sunnis during the *Hajj* (al-Khumaynī 1997: 133) and by extension in all other places. Other such contemporary scholars and leaders include Imam Mūsā Ṣadr, who went beyond the Islamic pale and forged forums of unity between Christians and Muslims in Lebanon (see: Abadharī 2009: 123), and ‘Allāmah Sharaf al-Dīn who once wrote:

“The time has now come when we must together find out how to save the Muslims from division. In my opinion, this will not be achieved by the Shi’as renouncing their school of thought and following the path of the majority; nor will it be achieved by the Ahl al-Sunnah renouncing their school of thought.”¹

1 This echoes the famous statement of Imam Khumaynī in which he said that, “those who wish to make Shi’as into Sunnis, or Sunnis into Shi’as, are neither.” It is also the standing policy of the present leader of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Ayatullah Khamenei who said, “I do not mean to say that Shi’as should convert to Sunni Islam or Sunnis should convert to Shi’a Islam. I do not intend to say that all religions should be amalgamated into one religion. Rather, what I intend to say is that Shi’as and Sunnis should not make intellectual efforts only to lend credence to their own beliefs.” (Ayatullah Khamenei, http://english.khamenei.ir//index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=868&Itemid=12)

Hence, it is important for the *madhāhib* to maintain their integrity by holding on to what has been authoritatively passed on to them through their respective traditions, but at the same time, the demands of unity and inclusion into the single Ummah of Islam require that they do not involve themselves in sectarian strife and subjective animosity. Wisdom demands that true intellectuality and objectivity come into play – an objectivity that allows for transcendence towards the “third of the two” and an intellectuality that knows that it does not know all. For it is only an intellect that is existentially present to the sacred perplexity (*tabayyur*) at play in the realm of manifestation that can remain eternally wondrous and perpetually in awe of its Creator. Ultimately, it is only a person possessing such an intellect that can be a real Muslim, a true slave of God, and a bona fide *‘abd Allāh*.

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