

Pluralism and Islamic Traditions of Sectarian Divisions

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Professors, colleagues, fellow teachers, fellow students, ladies and gentlemen, it is a great honor to address an audience at this ancient and distinguished university on «Pluralism and Islamic Traditions of Sectarian Divisions.» The first part of this essay analyzes the most common system of categorization used by Muslim writers for sectarian difference. In this period of tragic confrontations between Shi'ites and Sunnis in Iraq, Afghanistan, Pakistan and other places, this subject is more relevant than ever. The second half of this essay studies the use of this tradition by the great poet and mystic, Jalāl ad-Dīn Rūmī, and turns to the larger question of pluralism between systems of belief.¹

The central organizing system for sectarian division among Muslims is a scheme that divides Muslims into seventy-two or seventy-three sects. This scheme is not totally unfamiliar to readers of English literature. In the 1888 edition of Edward Fitzgerald's creative reimagining of Omar Khayyam the forty-third quatrain reads:

The Grape that can with Logic absolute
The Two-and-Seventy Sects confute:
The subtle Alchemist that in a Trice
Life's leaden Metal into Gold transmute.

Now this essay is not written to celebrate the power of wine to dissolve sectarian differences, although such an essay might be much more fun. But I think we should pause for a moment at the name of Omar Khayyam, the Iranian Muslim mathematician and astronomer who died in the early twelfth century of the Common Era and whose Swedish translator spent much of his life here in Lund, albeit at St. Lars Mental Hospital and not at the University. Khayyam's skepticism was as thrilling to his medieval contemporaries as it was to our Victorian forefathers who first made Omar Khayyam a figure of interest in the West. Matthew Arnold was scandalized to find out how much he resonated with Omar Khayyam's skepticism.

In fact, it is both one of the virtues and great shortcomings of moderns to believe in a thorough-going and homogenized system of thought. A totally apocryphal story is told of the Mughal emperor Akbar who in 1581 founded his own religion, the celebrated Dīn-e Elāhī or «Divine Religion», which he and his vizier Abu al-Fazl formulated to accommodate the multiple truths of existing religions. When emperor Akbar, who had already purchased four hooves of the donkey that bore Jesus into Jerusalem, agreed to buy a fifth hoof, the vizier Abu al-Fazl said: «But, Your Majesty, no donkey has five hooves.» To this the emperor replied: «Who knows? One of them might be genuine.» This hopeful but not absolutely committed form of belief helps us to understand the culture in which a text of hedonism, like that of Omar

¹ Much of this essay is similar in its contents to another essay which will be published by the Institute of Ismaili Studies in London.

Khayyam, can exist alongside the most rigorous texts on the ascetic and self-denying life written by contemporaries of Omar Khayyam. Incidentally, Akbar's interesting religious experiment did not survive the emperor's death.

At this point let us turn to a discussion of the meaning of the traditional division into seventy-odd sects, a division which to many Muslim authors seemed firmly anchored in sayings ascribed to the Prophet, the *ḥadīth* or «traditions» which, if seen to be scrupulously transmitted, have a nearly scriptural authority for most Muslims. In one form or another this *ḥadīth* or saying attributed to the Prophet Muhammad is quoted by almost every author on religious differences among Muslims and often gives structure to the books written on the subject.

The *ḥadīth*, often called the *ḥadīth at-tafriqah* or «tradition concerning division», occurs in one of its most frequent forms as: «The Jews divided into seventy-one sects (*firqah*), the Christians into seventy-two sects, and my community will divide into seventy-three sects.» This form of the *ḥadīth*, is found in Abū Da'ūd as-Sijistānī (d. 275 A.H./889 C.E.), Ibn Mājah (d. 273 A.H./887 C.E.), at-Tirmīdhī (d. 279 A.H./892 C.E.) and an-Nisā'ī (d. 303 A.H./915 C.E.), four of the six so-called «canonical» Sunni collections of *ḥadīth*. The *ḥadīth* also occurs frequently in a different version: «There will befall my nation what befell the children of Israel. The children of Israel divided into seventy-two religious groups (*millah*) and my community will divide into seventy-three religious groups (*millah*), one more than they. All of them are in hell-fire except one religious group.»²

The addition about hell-fire is sometimes followed by the account of a question addressed to the Prophet as to who are the sacred sect (*firqah*) or religious group (*millah*) not in hell-fire, to

which the Prophet answers: «That group/sect which I and my Companions believe in.»³ A variant of this *ḥadīth* explicitly identifies the sacred sect as the *ahl as-sunna wa-l-jama'ah*, i.e., the Sunnis. The *ḥadīth* also exists in Twelver Shi'ite texts, however without the coda identifying the saved sect and with the understanding that the saved sect is the Imāmī (Twelver) Shi'ites.⁴ The Zaydī Shi'ites likewise use a variant of this *ḥadīth*.⁵

An important variant of the tradition says that «The children of Israel divided into seventy-one sects (*firqah*) and my community will divide into seventy-two, all of them in hell-fire except one. It is the [majority Muslim] community (*jama'ah*),» presumably the Sunnis.⁶ The principle of progression in numbers is preserved here. Not the least curious thing about this family of traditions is the claim that Islam should be superior in number of sectarian divisions (whereas to be superior in number of people of piety, or antecedent prophets, would seem a more reassuring feature of a religious tradition). Perhaps the corruption wrought by time, a frequent theme in traditions, a corruption made more severe by the ever lengthening time between the revelation of Islam and the end of time, might argue for the greater number of sectarian divisions among Muslims.

The tenth century geographer al-Muqaddasī says that seventy-two sects are in heaven and one in hell according to what he considers a more sound line of transmission (*isnād*).⁷ Similarly, the great theologian al-Ghazālī, who died in 505A.H./1111 C.E., supports a reading that «all are in heaven except the *zindīqs*» (Manichaeans, outrageous heretics).⁸ The opinion that

³ Mashkūr, *op.cit.*, p. 6.

⁴ Lewinstein, Keith, «Studies in Islamic Heresiology: The *Khawārij* in Two *Firqah* Traditions.» Ph. D. Dissertation, Princeton University, 1989, p. 3, n. 3, including the quotation from Ibn Bābawayh.

⁵ *Ibid.*, quoting from the unpublished fifth century *Asās-al-Maqālāt* of Abū l-Mā'ah.

⁶ Mashkūr, *op.cit.*, p. 6

⁷ *Aḥsan at-Taqāsīm* (Leiden: 1906) p. 38, cited by Lewinstein, *op.cit.*, p. 3, n. 4.

⁸ Cited by Mashkūr, *op.cit.*, p. 7.

² For references to these sources, see Muḥammad Javād Mashkūr, introduction, *Haftad-o Do Millat* (Tehran: 1962) pp. 6–7 and Aḥmad Maḥdāvī-Damghānī, *Ḥaṣīl-i Awqāt* (Tehran: 2002) p. 615. Dr. Maḥdāvī-Damghānī's outstanding treatment of this subject has greatly aided me in writing the present study.

all but one of the sects was saved was not widely held and was not followed by pre-modern Muslim writers of heresiographies.

Such scholars of Muslim heresies almost invariably quote the tradition of seventy-odd sects in their books on heresies. A large number of them work to fit the heresies into a scheme of seventy-odd. This effort forced them to multiply heresies and to combine heresies as each category might be a single heresy or a category of heretics.

Over a century ago Ignaz Goldziher noticed that a few later writers found the seventy-two- or seventy-three-fold division of sects to be an ill-fitting suit of clothes. He quotes the great scholar Fakhr ad-Dīn ar-Rāzī (d. 606 A.H./1209 C.E.) who, in his commentary on the Quran, writes: «Some have attacked the authenticity of this tradition. They say that if by seventy-two they mean the fundamentals of religious beliefs (*uṣūl al-adyān*) then they do not reach this number; and if they mean the practices (*furū'*), then the number passes this number by several multiples.»⁹ Goldziher also suggested that the family of division traditions owed their inspiration to another, possibly older, very well-attested tradition that: «Faith has seventy-odd branches and modesty (*al-ḥayā'*) is one of them.»¹⁰ The learned contemporary scholar Maḥdāvī-Damghānī has pointed out that this is an independent sentiment with its own line of transmitters.¹¹ Indeed, as Goldziher observed, here the «seventy-odd» are all praiseworthy «branches,» and this tradition gave rise to an independent genre of literature called *shu'ab al-īmān*, or «branches of faith.»¹² It is interesting to notice that, unlike the traditions based on «sect/religious group» distinctions, this «branches of faith» tradition is found in both Bukhārī and Muslim, who are

considered by many Sunnis to be more authoritative sources.¹³

The interest in the number «seventy-odd», however, is a consistent theme and deserves independent attention. As Annemarie Schimmel has noted in her book on number significance, the Islamic tradition follows the Bible in its fascination with heptads, from which the interest in ten times seven springs. The seventy nations, the seventy judges of the Sanhedrin, and the seventy years of Babylonian exile are only a small number of the many Biblical seventies. According to Islamic tradition the Prophet recited the Qur'an seventy times during his journey to the Divine Presence and also asked forgiveness seventy times a day.¹⁴

Just as important as seventy was seventy-two because it has links with three, six, eight, nine and twelve. Already in late antiquity, its numerical significance — as, for example, the number of degrees in an arc divided by the sacred pentagram equals seventy-two — was added to the significance of seventy-two in the Bible. According to the New Testament seventy-two disciples were sent to preach the gospel in seventy-two languages of the world. The Bible was translated into Greek by seventy, or seventy-two, scholars, each isolated from all others, and miraculously the seventy or seventy-two translations matched;¹⁵ hence, of course, the Septuagint.

In the Islamic tradition seventy-odds are very frequent. Seventy-two were killed at the martyrdom of the Prophet's grandson, Ḥusayn, at Karbalā. In a tradition (of modest authority but in a respected collection) the Prophet asks: «Do you know the distance between heaven and earth?» They said: «We do not know.» He said: «The distance between the two is seventy-one or seventy-two or seventy-three years and the sky extends for the same distance ... » The distance to hell was not dissimilar; a tradition relates: «We were with the Messenger of God and heard the sound of something falling ... The Messenger of God

⁹ Tafsir Fakhr ar-Rāzī (Cairo: 1985) XI, p. 219. My translation is slightly different from Goldziher's. See Ignaz Goldziher, «Le dénombrement des sectes mahométones,» in *Gesammelte Schriften* (Hildesheim: 1968) II, pp. 409–410.

¹⁰ Goldziher, *op.cit.*, p. 410, where it is also noticed that some say «sixty-odd.»

¹¹ Maḥdāvī-Damghānī, *op.cit.*, p. 618.

¹² Goldziher, *op.cit.*, p. 411.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 410.

¹⁴ A. Schimmel, *The Mystery of Numbers* (New York: 1993) pp. 132, 263–264.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 264–266.

said, «That was a stone that was thrown into Hell seventy years ago and it was still falling into Hell until it reached its bottom.»¹⁶

Interestingly, a Shi'ite source says that God's «Greatest Name» has seventy-three letters, of which Imam Muḥammad al-Bāqir knew seventy-two letters. The medieval Jewish Cabalists held that YHWH's name consisted of seventy-two letters or that YHWH had seventy-two names.¹⁷ Both the Muslim and the Jewish esoteric traditions believed that God saves those who call on Him using his «Greatest Name.»

That seventy meant «a sizeable number» and seventy-odd meant «a sizeable number and then some» is fairly clear. In many (and perhaps most) cases the expressions are meant to be pictorial numbers and not exact «head counts.» In the *Sūrat at-Tawbah* the Koran addresses Muḥammad and says (IX:80): «Whether [O Muhammad] you ask forgiveness — or do not ask forgiveness — for them [the Hypocrites] seventy times, God will not forgive them because they did not believe ...» Here, clearly, «seventy» is a pictorial number, and current English usage would be as well served if one were to say «whether you asked forgiveness a hundred times ...» since there is no exact number of times and the number is only rhetorically significant. The commentators I have consulted are in no doubt about the pictorial meaning of the number here. The specialist in rhetoric, Az-Zamakhshārī (d. 538 A.H./1144 C.E.), for example, writes on this verse in his Quran commentary that: «Seventy assumed the role of a metaphor for numerousness in their speech.»¹⁸

One of the many traditions that uses seventy-odd to signify numerousness is the following: «The Messenger of God said: «He who helps a [Muslim] believer [in his difficulty], God — Almighty and Glorious — will remove him from seventy-three afflictions, one of which is this

world; and seventy-two afflictions at the time of the Great Affliction, when people will be occupied with their souls in the hereafter.»¹⁹

A deeper theological insight into the question of sectarian division, however, comes from the Sufi mystical tradition. Ḥāfiz (d. 791 or 2 A.H. /1389 or 90 C.E.) epitomizes this tradition when he says:

Heaven was too weak to bear the burden of responsibility — they gave it to my poor crazy self.

Forgive the war of the seventy-two warring religions; Since they did not see the truth They have struck out on the road of fancy.

Or, to give this last line in the more poetic translation of Gertrude Bell:

Though the soft breath of Truth readies my ears,
For two-and-seventy jangling creeds he hears,
And loud-voiced Fable calls him ceaselessly.

In the two Ḥāfiz translations, «religions» in the former and «creeds» in the latter are *millat*; «fancy» in the former and «Fable» in the latter are *afsānah*.²⁰ For Ḥāfiz sectarian divisions are the fancy or fable that preoccupy those who have not struck out on the mystical path.

The highest and the most developed reflection of the Sufi tradition is in the *Masnavī* of Jalāl ad-Dīn, known in the West as Rūmī (d. 672 A.H./1273 C.E.). Rūmī depicts the confrontation between a partisan of predestination or divine «compulsion» (*jabr*) and a partisan of free will:

In just this way there is a dispute [*baḥth*] between the partisans of compulsion and those [partisans of] free will till the resurrection of mankind.

If the disputant had been able to refute his adversary, their schools of thought [madhhab] would have fallen out of sight.

Since [presented with unquestionable truth] these [disputants] would not be able to escape

¹⁶ On heaven, see Maḥdāvī-Damghānī, *op.cit.*, p. 617, quoting from *Mishkāt al-Maṣābiḥ* no. 2821 from Tirmidhi. On hell, see Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ* ed. M.F. Abd al-Bāqī (Cairo: n.d.) IV, pp. 2184–2185, the 21st *ḥadīth* in «Kitāb al-Jannah.»

¹⁷ Schimmel, *op.cit.*, p. 265. Maḥdāvī-Damghānī, *op.cit.*, p. 618

¹⁸ *Al-Kashshāf* (Riyadh: 1998) III, p. 74.

¹⁹ Al-Kūlinī, *Al-Kāfī* (Tehran: 1982) II, p. 199

²⁰ *Dīvān*, ed. Salim Naysari (Tehran: 1993) p. 61.

[admitting the truth] in reply, they would recoil from that road to perdition.

Yet, in so much as their continuation on that course was divinely ordained, [God] feeds them with arguments,

So that [one disputant] not be compelled by the difficulties posed by [another] disputant, and [each] may be prevented from seeing his opponent's success.

[All happens] so that these seventy-two sects should remain in the world till the day of resurrection.

Since this is the world of darkness and that which is hidden, the earth [and its uncertainties] is necessary for [this] shadow [to exist].

Until the resurrection the seventy-two sects will remain, and the talk of those who introduced ideas without religious foundation will not fail.

The high value of a treasure is [shown by the circumstance] that there are so many locks upon it ...²¹

As Nicholson, the great commentator on the *Masnavī* rightly remarks, the argument of the passage is «that religious heresies are necessary and [even] providential.»²² The whole passage can be seen as a commentary on the first part of the well-known Quranic verse: «And if God wished, He would have made them into a single religious community (*umma*) ...» (42:8). God has not given certainty to mankind. On this earth man must puzzle out the correct meaning in the shadow — and not in plain sight — of certain truth. God even nourishes the opposing sides of disputes. As earthly creatures we see only the high value and not the real nature of truth because it is locked away and thus difficult to access.

Rūmī has a somewhat different approach to the seventy-two varieties of Muslims in a passage on doubt and faith:

Take care, O believers, for that [vein of philosophical] doubt is within you; within you is many an infinite world.

In you are all the seventy-two sects; woe [to you] should [that philosophical] doubt extend its hand from within.²³

Without question this passage urges the believer to master his or her doubts in the name of belief. And yet it regards the internal world or internal forum as a place where inevitably there are encounters of all sorts of belief, here symbolized by the seventy-two sects. That such an internal forum exists is a consequence of the many infinite worlds inside each human being.

In yet another passage Rūmī addresses sectarian difference within a mystical vision of the universal — if not fully conscious — worshipfulness of all creation:

Each glorifies [Thee] in a different fashion, and that one is unaware of the state of this one. Man disbelieves in the glorification uttered by inanimate objects, but these inanimate objects are masters [in performing] worship.

Nay, the two-and-seventy sects, every one, are unaware of [the real states of] each other and in a [great] doubt.

Since two speakers have no knowledge of each other's state how will [it] be [with] wall and door?

Since I am heedless of the glorification uttered by one who speaks, how should my heart know the glorification performed by that which is mute?

The Sunni is unaware of the [predestinarian's] [mode of] glorification.

The Sunni has a particular [mode of] glorification; the predestinarian has the opposite thereof in [taking] refuge [with God].²⁴

Nicholson well summarizes the passage as saying that everything glorifies God by displaying some of His attributes in a special way known to

²¹ My translation, influenced by that of R. A. Nicholson, *Masnavī, Text* (London: 1933) Bk.V, vss. 3214–3232, p. 205; Translation (London: 1934) p. 194.

²² *Commentary* by R. A. Nicholson (London: 1940) p. 289.

²³ *Masnavī, Text* (London: 1925) Bk. I, vss. 3288–3289, p. 302; *Translation* (London: 1960) p. 179. Here the Nicholson translation is given without alteration.

²⁴ Again, R. A. Nicholson's translation is given without alteration. *Text* (London: 1929) Bk. III, vss. 1496–1504, p. 85; *Translation* (London: 1930) p. 84.

God alone, Who has the infinite knowledge necessary to understand all the particulars of the world. This glorification is an act of worship, and, willing or not, every object, animate or inanimate, glorifies God. Both the Sunni (and Rūmī was a Sunni) and his opponent, the Pre-destinarian, glorify God — even though one may be right and one may be wrong about a specific article of belief — insofar as the beliefs of both express diverse aspects of Divine self-manifestation.²⁵

Finally Rūmī explodes the two and seventy «sects» as mere epiphenomena of lesser religious consciousness. In an ecstatic passage on Love of the Divine and the Divine as Love, Rūmī writes:

Love is a stranger to the two worlds; in it are two-and-seventy madnesses.

It is exceedingly hidden, and [only] its bewilderment is manifest: the soul of the spiritual sultans is pining for it.

Its religion is other than [that of] the two-and-seventy sects: beside it the throne of kings is [but] a split-bandage ...

Then what is Love? The Sea of Not-being: here the foot of the intellect is shattered [when it tries to swim] ...

Would that Being had a Tongue, that it might remove the veils from existent Beings!

O breath of [phenomenal] existence, whatsoever thou mayest utter, know that thereby thou hast bound another veil upon it [the mystery].²⁶

While the intellect may be destined to speculate, the religion of love passes beyond sectarian difference. Love manifests itself in great variety, called here seventy-two madnesses, and ultimately takes the lover beyond the phenomenal world. Ultimately, beyond the babble of sectarian differences, the soul seeks a mystery which language cannot express.

Rūmī has brought us to the end of our quest. The scheme of seventy-odd sects may be inspired by an earlier tradition about sixty-odd or

seventy-odd branches of faith. Seventy-odd is very likely meant to convey the idea of considerable number. Whether one agrees with the usual interpretation, that only one sect is saved, or the minority interpretation, that only one is lost, the only punishment for right or wrong belief mentioned in these traditions is otherworldly, i.e., heaven or hell.

The Sufi tradition goes beyond these commonsensical understandings of religious pluralism among Muslims. Arguments for pluralism often depart from the suppositions that there are good impulses in all humans, or that most forms of belief are refractions of the vision of God. Rūmī would accept both suppositions and transcend them. For him it is a logical necessity that people dispute about religion, even among Muslims. God put the arguments inside us, each of whom continues a wide variety of opinions, symbolized by the seventy-two sects, in our internal forum. This plurality arises from flaws, created by the intellect, yet each opinion is in its way an attempt to worship God. The deeper religion is the trans-religious mystery of love of God which the intellect can never really understand. This love manifests itself in many (that is, seventy-two) madnesses and takes the soul beyond the world of being. Ultimately, we not only accept pluralism among Muslims but among all the mysterious paths of the love of God.

Rūmī, whose *Masnavī* may be the greatest spiritual epic of the Islamic tradition, proves to be above categorization as a «pre-modern» or «modern» sensibility. He believes that there are right and wrong opinions about Islam (and, indeed, about religion in general). But he leaves such judgment to God, since we live in the world of «shadow» where conflict is inevitable. He urges upon us the ultimate pluralism: to respect the other's quest as springing from the same impulse as our own, without giving up faith in our own spiritual belief.

The Islamic tradition offers more than one path to pluralism. I think a strong argument for pluralism can be made on the basis of some thinkers' view of innate human nature, *fiṭrah*. In any case, Rūmī's path seems to me spiritually and intellectually powerful. But it also tells us something about the uses of tradition. Hundreds

²⁵ *Commentary* (London: 1940) p. 43.

²⁶ *Masnavī, Text* (London: 1929), Bk. III, vss. 4719-4726, omitting 4722 and 4724, p. 270; and *Translation* (London: 1930) p. 263, given here without alteration.

of millions of Muslims have lived over the past fourteen centuries since the life of the Prophet and there are many voices and approaches in this vast and varied tradition.

Given the sociological realities of the religious world in which we live, Muslims must and can find in their tradition authentic voices that speak for an acceptance of pluralism. The wanton killing of Iraqis in an attempt to ignite a civil war between Sunnis and Shi'ites warns us of the need to establish a strong ethical basis for pluralism among Muslims. And the fates of Muslim minorities — in the case of India, the second largest Muslim community in the world — show that if one urges Muslims to embrace pluralism, one should also urge their non-Muslim neighbors to embrace difference. Here I address a criticism to the stubborn secular religion of France. Surely a Muslim woman should be free to wear a head scarf to school, as a Jewish man should be free to wear a yarmulke and a Catholic nun to wear a habit.

The message of Rūmī is not some mealy-mouthed multiculturalism. Rūmī is a devout believer. Yet he recognizes that others are not only free to disagree with him but that God Himself or Herself supplies the arguments of disagreements. Certainty is structurally impossible in the mundane realm and, as the Sufi theologian al-Ghazālī had said, instead of «true religion» we have human knowledge of religion. Yet we all see the high value of truth and right belief and would surrender to it if it were self-evident. Correct belief may be one path but all imaginable forms of belief live inside us and their presence is not to be denied. The seventy-two sects are not even fully aware of each other's existence, although the members of these sects — like every inanimate object — knowingly or unknowingly, worship God.

And let no one say Rūmī is impossibly far from the Quran, the pivotal text which for so many Muslims remains central to their belief. In the fifth Surah of the Quran, *Sūrat al-Ma'idah*, the long verse 48 reads:

To you We sent the scripture with truth, confirming the scripture that came before it, and guarding it in safety; so judge between them by what God has revealed, and follow not their vain desires, diverging from the truth that has come to you. To each among you have We prescribed a law and a clear way. If God had so willed, He would have made you a single people, but [God's plan] is to test you in what He has given you; so vie with each other in good works. The goal of all is [to hasten] toward God; for it is [God] who will show you the truth of the matters in which you differ.

For the Quran, too, diversity of belief is divinely initiated, and the common goal, known or unknown, is God. God urges all communities of belief to strive with each other as in a race in all virtues. We can see this passage as a direct inspiration to Rūmī.

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Before concluding this essay I want to acknowledge the long tradition of Middle Eastern and Islamic studies in Sweden, from which I and so many scholars have benefited and express my appreciation that this tradition will be continued by the formation of a center for Middle Eastern studies and the foundation of a chair of Islamology. In this age in which religious pluralism is becoming a pressing problem both sociologically and in terms of human understanding, I salute the enlightened policies of Lund and Sweden.

