# You say that Islam is a religion of unity, but we see differences - sometimes major differences - even among the companions. Why is this so?

In classical Islamic terminology, pluralism means to perceive details in different ways while remaining true to the origin and truth, to understand God’s Will in matters related to us in a way that is worthy of Him, and to have different thoughts and ideas.

There are many ways to God, for how one reaches Him depends upon one’s environment, culture, the degree to which His Most Beautiful Names have been manifested, plus many other factors. Thus, we can say that the appearance of different groups and orders has always been a normal development.

For example, Ali Ibn Abu Talib’s (ra) approach in, by which he expressed his inherent character, cannot be compared to that of Abu Bakr’s (ra), just as the characters of Umar Ibn Khattab (ra) and Abu Dharr (ra) were very different from each other. For example, they both had the same bravery and courage, but Umar Ibn Khattab (ra) had a perfect understanding of state and administrative matters, as well as organizational skills, whereas Abu Dharr (ra) was more of a loner.

Given this, we can say that such pluralism existed even at the time of Prophet Muhammad (pbuh), a time when the Muslims were a perfectly unified community. Thus, such a condition is acceptable. In fact, we can say that unifying the different ways leading to God is against natural law, for people are created with different natures and so cannot think in the same way.

Those who want to make different characters the same cannot understand this fine point, for they cannot understand the inner realities of human behavior and, as a result, do not see people’s inherent abilities. Since God implanted different abilities so that each person would function according to His Wisdom, there has to be pluralism, which is just another word for having different ways of expressing the same reality. The difference in abilities manifested itself as different schools of Islamic jurisprudence, namely, Hanafi, Shafi`i, Maliki, Hanbali, Evzai, Sevri, and Zuhri.

Different systems have existed since the Qur’an’s revelation, and all have served the people’s souls, senses, hearts, and consciences. Other great examples of the differences in ability are Sufyan-i Sevri, Ibrahim ibn A`tham, Beyazid-Bistami, Junayd al-Baghdadi, Abdul Qadir al-Jilani, Sheikh Naqshband, Muhyiddin Ibn Arabi, and Imam Rabbani.

In other words, as long as the world exists, the different methods and characters of expressing Islam will also exist. Although the means may be different, a unity in aim and purpose can always be brought about. Although the languages may differ, the truth they explain is one and the same. As the Arab poet says: *“Our explanations are many and complicated, but Your Beauty is one. They all point to Your Beauty.”*

Now, we can discuss certain factors necessary for unity and collaboration in terms of true Islamic thought.

Unification, agreement, and managing the different aproaches and characters can take place only at the level of feelings, thought, and mind. At the level of feelings, this can help different groups come together, even if only on a superficial level. However, as people usually continuously develop in thought and soul, such a fragile feeling of unity may not be enough. Therefore, people can become unified on the level of subjective motives (i.e., unity of feelings), and, when this is not enough, on the basis of thought and reason.

Only in this way can the community of Muhammad, peace and blessings be upon him, regain its rightful place among humanity. To realize this lofty goal, Muslims have to do several things. First, we must applaud all services in the way of the Truth, instead of just those with which we agree. We must say: *“One who mentions my Lord’s name and praises and respects my Prophet is my brother and sister,”* and accept the others.

It does not matter which way we are following, for our God, book (the Qur’an), Prophet, qiblah (prayer direction), path, and thus our method, are one and the same. Our unity must not be subjective (based upon feelings), but objective (based upon thought and reason).

Secondly, we must never force someone to follow our own way. The way of the Qur’an is to show tolerance and acceptance to everyone. Those who behave with tolerance and gentleness have solved a potential future problem. Pluralism allows everyone to serve the Qur’an and Islam in his or her own way and thereby accomplish various important matters, such as those related to the society or the economy. This was the practice under the Abbasids, with a few exceptions, and we should follow it. We must measure using the criteria of the Ahl al-Sunnah (the followers of the Prophet), discard that which should be discarded, keep that which should be kept, design a new world with new syntheses, and try to be the founders and pioneers of a new world.

For example, two groups that are not part of the Ahl al-Sunnah, the Mu`tazilah and the Jabariyah, always opposed each other. The first group believed in total human agency, while the second group believed in the total lack of human agency. Given these beliefs, their ways of understanding human willpower and choice, as well as God’s creation, were exact opposites. Today, many rationalists think like the Mu`tazilah.

However, the Ahl al-Sunnah took a seed of truth from each group and produced a synthesis. They told the Mu`tazilah that each person has a choice, as revealed *in “there is nothing for people except what they strive for with their own effort”* (54:39) and *“If the Lord of all worlds does not will, you cannot will”* (81:29). They told the Jabariyah that their view was like kicking a person into the ocean and then saying: *“Don’t get wet!”* Thus, the synthesis that they developed was that God’s Will is an important principle that must not be forgotten. Your own will has such a small sphere of administration that its existence and non-existence are almost the same. However, it does exist and is the basis for sin or merit, punishment or reward.

Yes, all issues and principles in Islam are true, real, correct, and just. In every way, Islam is a collection of unifying principles. Each different way and thought contains a seed of truth. Given this, we cannot ignore the different details created by God and the reality of the *“inherent”* way of creation. We cannot mix the water coming from different pools and form an imaginary single water way. Everyone can demonstrate the truth of the Qur’an and Islam in their own field, and so should not be preoccupied with others.

Even if we cannot unify ourselves, at least we should not disagree with one another. We must learn to praise or applaud every Muslim and support everyone who says *“Allah”* or *“God.”* By His Will, and with this intention, true unity will come about in a short time.