

## The Ethics of Disagreement in Islam

Taha Jabir al-‘Alwani. Trans. Abdul Wahid Hamid. London and Washington: The International Institute of Islamic Thought, 2011 (reprint).

Review by R. Mukhtar Curtis  
US Bureau of Prisons (Ret.)

*The Ethics of Disagreement in Islam* is a translation of Dr. Taha Jabir al-‘Alwani’s *Adab al-Ikhtilāf fī al-Islām*, originally published in Qatar in 1984. Dr. al-‘Alwani is an accomplished scholar of Islam, with bachelor’s, master’s, and doctoral degrees from al-Azhar University. He was president of the School of Islamic and Social Sciences, which later became the Graduate School of Islamic and Social Sciences; president of the Fiqh Council of North America; president of Cordoba University in Ashburn, Virginia; founding member and president of the International Institute of Islamic Thought (IIIT); founder-member of the Council of the Muslim World League in Makka; and member of the Organization of the Islamic Conference-Islamic Fiqh Academy. His works are regarded as authoritative in the fields of Islamic legal theory, jurisprudence (*fiqh*), and *uṣūl al-fiqh*.

The text has 10 chapters with three main themes: (a) Muslim groups are almost hopelessly disunited due in large part to their failure to deal with their conflicts in an amicable fashion; (b) the solution, beginning with the key actors, is to adopt the norms and mores that characterized the personalities of the early generations and of particular subsequent scholars; and (c) a primary reason for sharp disagreements is the predominance of *taqlīd* (imitation) and the almost total absence of *ijtihād* (independent reasoning) as a problem-solving procedure.

The author envisioned the original Arabic text as a guide to help eradicate the internecine disagreement and enmity between “Islamic political parties in one part [‘a small section’] of the Muslim world.” These groups have not only fractured into more adversarial sects, but also frequently hurl terms implying apostasy or near apostasy (*kufṛ* كفر), abject sinfulness (*fiṣq* فسق), or disobedience and unprecedented unauthorized religious practice (*bid‘ah* بدعة) at one another.

Although the author does not explicitly name those groups and individuals whose behavior spurred him to write the text, his biography leads one to conclude that Islamic groups in either Iraq or Egypt were the areas of the contentious Islamic activities. There is no mention, however, of any groups especially targeted by this translation. Concerning the intended audience of Arabic speakers, however, Dr. al-‘Alwani maintained that problematic behavior and hostilities

between such factions could be overcome by familiarizing oneself with and imitating the behavior of the early *fuqahā'*. Thus, he states, "This book may more appropriately be titled 'The Ethics of Disagreement between the Classical Jurists ...' [for it] serves as a useful introduction to the subject of disagreement in general...."

Such a subtitle would enable the reader to have an accurate expectation about the reading material. Given the actual title, one may easily infer and expect that the book will present a host of Qur'anic and hadith texts about good behavior along with practical real-life examples that are applicable to contemporary Muslims, their societies, and environments. Rather, the text expertly delves into the subject matter from an academic point of view, but without a rigorous road map to help the reader internalize the ethics and recommended behaviors. Hence the text is, ipso facto, an introduction to the subject of disagreement, as the author himself has stated. It is not a workbook, per se, for eradicating behaviors ill-suited for the believer. *The ethics of disagreement in Islam* is an excellent reminder for those whose ethos and behavior is already based either upon a conscious blueprint for pious behavior or a set of norms and mores internalized via the family or a similarly strong social influence.

The first chapter, "The Malaise of Discord," was the preface of the original Arabic publication and thus contains the themes and subtopics discussed in the rest of the text. It opens with the less-than-positive observation that the Muslim world is beset by "[m]oral torpor and intellectual paralysis, subversion from within, subjugation from without, the absence of justice and fair dealing, exploitation and corruption, extremes of ignorance and disease, poverty and waste, dependence and insecurity, discord and internecine strife." Signs that the correct practices, according to the Qur'an and Sunna, are absent include the appearance of violent disagreement (*ikhtilāf*), selfishness, and egotistical motivations (*hawā*); the labeling and insulting of others with terms such as "deviant," "sinner" or "sinful," and "unbeliever"; and disregarding pertinent the Qur'an and prophetic texts. Without being specific, the author states that in one country there are 93 separate [competing or adversarial] organizations involved in the Islamic movement.

The leitmotif of the book, that disagreement and discord [الاختلاف والمخالفة] are the "most dangerous" and omnipresent afflictions is repeated in various ways with nuanced examples amid mentions of those aspects of a general solution. Because "Muslims have forsaken the uncompromising belief in and worship of Allah alone" and its concomitant practice of the Sunna, their disunity is a fait accompli. The author asserts that according to the Qur'an and Sunna, the most important aspect of Islam – after monotheism – is the unity of the *umma*, thereby implying that when one is deficient, the other is also deficient. Muslims were warned about this situation: "And do not dispute with one another lest you fail

and your moral strength desert you” [ وَلا تَنَارَ عُوا فَتَفْشَلُوا وَتَذْهَبَ رِيحُكُمْ وَاصْبِرُوا ۗ إِنَّ اللَّهَ مَعَ الصَّابِرِينَ ] (8:46). Toward the end of the chapter, he states that this “crisis is in fact an intellectual one.”

That the *umma* as a body exists at all must be due to an unknown number of Muslims who maintain the legacy of the Qur’an and Sunna, as well as those Muslims who “depend upon Allah and genuinely seek His guidance and forgiveness.”

The author’s solution to “disagreement and discord” is to address the “roots of ... Muslim disunity” beginning with “the dimension of faith,” which is weak – if not absent – from the hearts of many Muslims. He asserts that this dimension and a sound understanding of Islam are the only guarantees for rectifying things, for doing so will reconstitute the link between knowledge and ethics. There is no other way to achieve all of this except by imitating the early Muslims’ unswerving attachment to the Qur’an and Sunna, which was based on a sound knowledge and understanding of Islam.

The author paraphrases a hadith to help illustrate a part of the “dimension of faith” that a Muslim needs to defeat the malaise of discord, namely, that a Companion was promised paradise particularly because every night before he retired, he conscientiously rid himself of feelings of rancor toward other Muslims.

The aforementioned topics are discussed with more depth throughout the book. The more the reader has engaged in Muslim community affairs and politics, the more coherent the text becomes, because the author does not name any specific groups, individuals, or geopolitical areas. By the same token, this may have been necessary if only to avoid any imitation of those about whom the text is criticizing. This text and the author’s life itself reflect the princely behavior being called for. Thus, although readers are left to their own experiences in order to identify the text with real-life protagonists and incidents, those who will get the most benefit are those for whom the book is a reminder of that toward which they are already consciously striving.