

230339 - It is essential to make friends with Muslim students in the west and cooperate with them, instead of engaging in theological arguments

the question

I am a university student who has some friends with Ash`ari and Maturidi beliefs. When I try to explain that the belief of Ahl Al-Sunnah is to affirm Allahs attributes, they say that these finer details of creed are not important to ones religion as long as one believes in the six articles of faith and does not commit shirk. Rather, we should focus on increasing in worship and abandoning sins. How should I respond? I get on quite well with these brothers and we co-operate in organising Islamic classes and lectures on campus.

Detailed answer

So long as the truth is clear in your mind, and you think it most likely that there is no deceit on their part in order to spread their innovation, there is no reason why you should not accept their invitations and refrain from debating issues concerning which you differ, in order to focus on what is more important and cooperate with them in confronting the greater danger and serving the greater interest.

You are living in a country where there is the greatest need to support and help one another, not to be divided and fight. The ummah today needs each one of us to play his role wherever he is, and strive to overcome the many crises we face, which are leading to drifting away from religion, loss of identity, hidden colonization, occupation, poverty, ignorance, injustice, the spread of oppression and tyranny, and so on. These crises cannot be overcome by focusing on arguments or by giving precedence to differences of opinion that have existed throughout our Islamic history and have been the subject of much debate and argument.

We are not talking here about giving up the beliefs of Ahl as-Sunnah wa'l-Jamaa'ah – Allah forbid. Nor are we talking about ignoring the need to research, discuss and examine these beliefs, and focus on the various issues of 'aqeedah that have an impact on the thinking of the modern Muslim, and how we can build people with better understanding and stronger faith.

Rather we are talking about finding a way that could help us to focus our energy on constructive and positive activities, and unity. We are talking about discussing and recalling the most beautiful pages of our Islamic history, when people were guided by the light of knowledge and the sublime manners and attitudes of scholars, which taught us – in addition to adhering to the ‘aqeedah of Ahl as-Sunnah wa’l-Jamaa‘ah – to show mercy to people and not to look down on them at all, in accordance with the practical advice that was transmitted by al-‘Allaamah as-Sa‘di (may Allah have mercy on him) in his book al-Munaazaraat al-Fiqhiyyah (p. 10): We cooperate in that on which we are agreed and excuse one another with regard to issues on which we differ.

This was the attitude of many scholars, both classical and modern: an attitude of creating harmony among Muslims and overlooking issues concerning which there were differences, and creating a framework that was broader than the issues of difference, in which they could work together and cooperate, making excuses for those who had different views concerning some issues. This was also the attitude of Shaykh al-Islam Ibn Taymiyyah, which manifested itself in many situations and in many of his statements, one of the most significant of which is that which we will quote here, in which he said:

People know that there was alienation and ill feeling between the Hanbalis and Ash‘aris, and I was one of those who tried the most to create an atmosphere of love and harmony among the Muslims, seeking to bring them together, and I was one of the most assiduous in following the commands of Allah to hold fast to the rope of Allah (the Qur’an). I was able to remove most of the resentment that people felt in their hearts, and I explained to them that Imam al-Ash‘ari was one of the greatest scholars of ‘ilm al-kalaam who affirmed his adherence to the way of Imam Ahmad (may Allah have mercy on him) and others who followed in his footsteps, as al-Ash‘ari himself mentioned in his books...

When I told them about some of the statements of al-Ash‘ari – and the Hanbalis saw that – they said: This is better than what we heard from Shaykh al-Muwaffaq, and the Muslims rejoiced at this reconciliation.

I also told them what Ibn ‘Asaakir had said about his (al-Ash‘ari’s) virtues: that the Hanbalis and Ash‘aris had been in harmony until the time of al-Qushayri, and when that friction occurred in Baghdad, there was division. And it is well-known that among all groups you will find some who are deviant and some who are righteous.

Moreover, throughout my life until this moment I have never called anyone – when teaching about the fundamentals of Islam – to the Hanbali madhhab or any other madhhab, and I have never been biased towards the Hanbalis. I have not mentioned that in any of my words, and I have only mentioned that on which the salaf and their scholars were unanimously agreed.... Furthermore, I have always been – and those who are close to me know this from me – one of those who most emphatically prohibit describing any particular individual as a disbeliever, evildoer or sinner, unless it is known that definitive proof has been established against him, in such a way that anyone who goes against that proof is either a disbeliever, evildoer or sinner.

I affirm that Allah has forgiven this ummah for all mistakes, which includes mistakes that have to do with issues of belief and mistakes that have to do with some religious practices.

The early generations differed concerning many of these issues, but none of them accused anyone of being a disbeliever, evildoer or sinner.

End quote from Majmoo‘ al-Fataawa (3/22 7)

The point we are trying to emphasise is that ordinary people and non-specialists are not required to get involved in issues of differences concerning beliefs, because their understanding of these issues (and the different views concerning them) is insufficient and they will not be able to understand them properly, in which case they will not be able to handle their relationships with one another in the light of the differences concerning these matters in a proper and beneficial manner. Rather these differences will lead to schism, argument and division, and even to accusations of disbelief, innovation and treason, the reason for which will be their lack of understanding of the issues concerning which they differ and their lack of understanding of scholarly statements in the way in which the scholars intended them.

Therefore Shaykh al-Islam Ibn Taymiyah (may Allah have mercy on him) did not discuss these matters with ordinary people at all, and he did not explain the views of various groups in detail to anyone other than specialists, as he himself stated when he said:

As for the view of one who says that the hadiths and verses which speak of the divine attributes are not to be discussed in front of the masses, I have never discussed these issues with any of the common folk at all.

End quote from Majmoo‘ al-Fataawa 5/266

This does not mean that it is discouraged to learn what is mentioned in the Qur’an and Sunnah, and to discuss it in detail as much as one is able. Rather what is meant is to pay attention to Muslim unity in adhering to the main issues of knowledge and practice that are mentioned in the Qur’an and Sunnah, and to focus on creating an atmosphere of harmony and give precedence to that over discussing the details of some academic issues that are not a must for everyone, especially when living in non-Muslim lands or at times when the Muslims are weak, and people are not familiar with the Sunnah, and when the religion and its followers are in a state of alienation.

Shaykh al-Islam Ibn Taymiyah (may Allah have mercy on him) said:

The need of nations to know what is enjoined and what is forbidden is greater than their need to know the details of issues of belief concerning which belief in general terms is sufficient. As for commands and prohibitions, it is essential to know them in detail, because acting upon commands cannot be achieved unless one knows them in detail; and with regard to prohibited matters that must be avoided, it is essential to be able to distinguish between them and other things.

End quote from al-Jawaab as-Saheeh (3/34)

And he said:

With regard to deeds that are enjoined, what is required concerning them is to do them, and it is not enough to believe in them in general terms. Rather it is essential to learn them in detail. This

is in contrast to issues of belief, in which believing in general terms in what the Messenger brought with regard to the divine attributes and issues of the hereafter is sufficient.

Hence the scholars stated that it is sufficient to hold these beliefs in general terms, and they disapproved of discussing them in detail in such a way that could give rise to fighting and division, unlike the laws that are enjoined, with regard to which it is not sufficient to refer to them in general terms; rather they must be discussed in detail, learned in detail and put into practice.

End quote from Majmoo‘ al-Fataawa (20/99). See also: Majmoo‘ al-Fataawa (17/388)

And he said:

What must be done is to enjoin ordinary people to believe in general terms in that which is proven by the texts and scholarly consensus, and tell them not to indulge in detailed discussions that will create division and differences between them, because division and differences are among the things that are most emphatically forbidden by Allah and His Messenger.

End quote from Majmoo‘ al-Fataawa (12/237)

Here we may quote as evidence the hadith of Jundub ibn ‘Abdillah (may Allah be pleased with him) from the Prophet (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him), who said: “Read Qur’an (together) so long as your hearts are united then when you begin to argue (about the meaning), then stop and disperse.”

Narrated by al-Bukhaari (5060) and Muslim (2667).

Imam an-Nawawi (may Allah have mercy on him) said:

The command to stop and disperse when differences arise concerning the meaning of the Qur’an is understood by the scholars as referring to differences that are not permissible, or differences that could lead to that which is not permissible, such as differences concerning the Qur’an itself, or concerning an interpretation that is not subject to ijtihaad, or differences that could lead to doubt, confusion, friction, disputes or quarrels, and the like.

As for differences in deriving rulings that have to do with minor issues of religion, and debating with people of knowledge concerning that by way of learning and finding the truth, and their differences concerning that, that is not prohibited; rather it is enjoined and is a good deed. The Muslims have been unanimously agreed on that from the time of the Sahaabah up to the present.

End quote from Sharh Muslim (16/218-219)

What must be paid attention to with regard to what we have mentioned above is two issues:

Firstly: whoever is ignorant of some issue of religion is excused for his ignorance, unless proof has clearly been established for him and the knowledge that the Messenger brought has reached him. Once that has reached him in a clear manner, in such a way that proof is established and leaves them with no excuse, then it is not permissible for him to turn away from it or to follow anything contrary to it, whether it is the view of a shaykh or a prominent figure, or the view of a madhhab, and the like. Allah, may He be exalted, says (interpretation of the meaning):

“It is not for a believer, man or woman, when Allah and His Messenger have decreed a matter that they should have any option in their decision. And whoever disobeys Allah and His Messenger, he has indeed strayed in a plain error”

[al-Ahzaab 33:36].

See also the answer to question no. [228033](#)

Secondly: whoever learns the details of what the Messenger brought, to the best of his ability, whether they have to do with matters of belief or practical issues, then he is undoubtedly superior and of higher rank than one who is ignorant of that or of some of it, whether he is excused because of his ignorance or is negligent and therefore blameworthy.

Shaykh al-Islam Ibn Taymiyah (may Allah have mercy on him) said:

There are some people who believe in general terms; as for believing in detail, they are like one who was reached by much of what the Messengers brought, but some of it did not reach him, so he believes in whatever reached him from the Messengers, and whatever did not reach him he does not know, but if it reached him he would believe in it; so he believes in that which the Messengers brought in general terms.

If such a person acts upon what he knows that Allah has enjoined upon him, and he has faith and believes in Allah, then he is one of the close friends of Allah, may He be exalted, and his closeness to Allah is commensurate with his faith and fear of Him.

With regard to that concerning which proof has not been established for him, Allah, may He be exalted, will not take him to task for not knowing it or believing in it in detail, and He will not punish him for not doing that, but he will miss out on perfect closeness to Allah commensurate with what he has missed out on (of such knowledge).

Whoever knows what the Messengers brought, and believes in it in detailed terms and acts upon it, is more perfect in terms of faith and closeness to Allah than one who does not know that in detail and does not act upon it, but both of them are close friends of Allah, may He be exalted.

Paradise consists of levels that vary greatly, and the pious and believing close friends of Allah will be in those various levels according to their faith and fear of Allah.

End quote from Majmoo‘ al-Fataawa (11/187-188)

Conclusion:

Our advice to you is to unite with these students who are committed to their religion in da‘wah activities and beneficial student activities, so as to support Islam and the Muslims, and to support important issues of the ummah and the fundamentals of our great faith. And you should refrain from arguing about detailed issues of belief if that will lead to division, dissent and dispute. But if there is a discussion about such issues on the basis of wisdom and beautiful discourse, in an atmosphere of love and harmony between you, then there is nothing wrong with such discussions in that case.

And Allah knows best.