

Imam Ali (A) the Herald of Unity

Part I

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Introduction

In Islamic thought, “unity“ has a high status in continuation of the holy Prophet (S) and Imams’ (A) mission. Thus, a thorough research of the conduct and speech of Imam Ali (A), who was the herald of unity, would show the status of unity and its various dimensions in true Islam. Imam Ali (A) viewed unity as the fruit of the mission of the holy Prophet (S), among whose results is burying mutual rancor and developing brotherhood and affection among Muslims. Criticizing disunited nations, Imam Ali (A) mentions that division leads to destruction of dignity and honour while unity leads to the descent of divine blessings.

To establish unity, Imam Ali (A) urged people toward unity in every context and asked the governors to refrain from carrying out any alteration (restructuring) and preserve good traditions in society in order to promote unity of Islamic society. He (A) knew unity and establishing justice as developing each other and expected the government to fulfil them. He (A) reinforced the

judicial system, selected special people to judge and exercised intensive supervision over his executive officers. In Imam Ali's (A) viewpoint, paying attention to people's legitimate demands and true emotions were among material and social causes of creating unity among people. He (A) would count Allah, the holy Prophet (S), the leader, law and the Qur'an among the spiritual elements which facilitate unity, and in this regard, would emphasize the role of the leader. He (A) also regarded disbelief, deviation from truth, worldliness, lawbreaking and arrogance as some of the major elements which cause divisions. He (A) gave orders to prevent these elements.

Prior to studying Islamic unity, we must have a clear definition of "religion" in general, as well as in terms of true root of Islamic community, for the whole Islamic community has a single religious identity.

"Religion", which in its general meaning embraces all human and divine beliefs, is bound by a collection of ideological and moral teachings as well as a set of laws and rules. However, religion in its specific meaning (according to scholars' point of view) is to believe in one God, the all-Knowing, the all-Powerful, who possesses all attributes of perfection; the One who has created the whole universe based on wisdom and justice and has called human beings to move towards achieving perfection until they meet with Allah, with the help of two proofs of revelation and reasoning capability. This is a movement whose departure and destination are Allah, as mentioned in the verse of *Istirjā'*: "Verily, to Allah we belong and to Him we shall return." (2:156)

The leaders of the movement are the reason and conscience which are internal proofs as well as the Prophets (A) and their successors who have been appointed by God to guide people. And by “Islamic community” we mean those who have accepted Islam as the religion that can secure their happiness in both material and spiritual lives.

Islam is a religion which encompasses all individual, social, material, cultural, political, martial and economic aspects of life and it has not ignored even a single point which would play a role in the material and spiritual progress of both individuals and society. Islam is a religion which brings happiness to believers in this world and the hereafter when they properly observe Islamic rules. Islam is against oppression, plundering and corruption and enables a human being to get closer to perfection. However, one cannot observe Islamic rules properly unless he knows Islamic teachings and clings steadfastly to the practical conduct of the holy Prophet (S) and his true successors.

Accordingly, the life of the Commander of the Faithful, Ali b. Abi Tālib (A), after the holy Prophet (S) is very special. The name of “Ali” is associated with attributes such as bravery and patience, devotion to God and justice, truthfulness and loyalty, knowledge and piety and other human virtues.

The life of Imam Ali (A) had different stages, among which the stage of his caliphate is of a special significance. This stage has various aspects such as the rising of Imam Ali (A) to political power, complicated political conditions, civil wars, the

approaches and strategies of Imam Ali's (A) opposition and Imam's manner in dealing with them, cultural, economic and political problems of the society and finally Imam's (A) approach in dealing with thought-provoking problems.

On the other hand, the short period of Imam Ali's (A) caliphate is truly an excellent model of Islamic government provided for humanity; a government which would quench human's thirst for justice and equity. The unity of Islamic community has a special status and its importance for Imam Ali (A) is no secret to anyone based on his attempts in preserving Muslims' unity. He (A) can certainly be called the great herald of unity in the holy Prophet's (S) ummah in both his words and conduct. Imam Ali (A) did not hold back any efforts to achieve and preserve unity.

In the present article, Imam's words in *Nahj al-Balāghah* are selected in order to prove the fact that he (A) has been the greatest herald of unity of Islamic community and he (A) constantly made efforts to achieve and preserve it. In some cases, Imam's (A) conduct is also mentioned as portrayed in the historical sources. In what follows, firstly, we will study Imam 'Ali's (A) theoretical view on unity and its fruits and then we will refer to the factors which create unity in Islamic community.

Imam Ali's (A) theoretical view on unity

During the history of Islam, disunity of Islamic sects and nations has caused irreparable material and spiritual damage to the body of Islamic community. This wound on the beautiful face of

Islamic community has not been hidden from the reformers of ummah, and it has worried them. Thus, some of them planned to create unity among Muslims and to somehow heal the excruciating pain of the heart of Islamic community.

Ali (A) is among the distinguished reformers who sought unity after the holy Prophet (S). After the Prophet himself (S), he (A) is truly the greatest herald of unity of the Islamic community. He (A) knew the consequences of disunity and knew that political, economic, social, cultural and martial disunity within an Islamic community would bring about many negative effects, the removal of which if not impossible, would be very difficult.

Unity had a wide scope in Imam Ali's (A) point of view and it embraced all human beings in the world as well as Muslims and underprivileged ones in Islamic community. Imam Ali's (A) goal in seeking unity was to pursue Islamic causes and to establish social justice. The call for unity can be heard from the most of his sermons, maxims and letters.

In a letter addressing Muslims, Imam Ali (A) stated that:

Steer clear through the waves of mischief by boats of deliverance, turn away from the path of dissension and put off the crowns of pride. If I speak out they would call me greedy towards power but if I keep quiet they would say I was afraid of death. By Allah, the son of Abu Tālib is more familiar with death than an infant with the

breast of its mother. I have hidden knowledge, if I disclose it you will start trembling like ropes in deep wells.¹

The knowledge which Imam (A) talks about is awareness of terrible consequences of disunity and conflicts. He (A) knew that disunity and civil war would cost Muslims their religion (Islam) and a return to the beliefs of the Age of Ignorance.

The sayings of Imam Ali (A) about the root, nature and fruits of unity are mentioned under seven headings:

1. Unity is the fruit of the mission of the Prophet (S)

Imam Ali (A) knew unity as the fruit of the mission of the holy Prophet (S); the blessing bestowed by God to humanity. Imam (A) described people's condition before Islam and the great influences and blessings of Islam and the mission of the holy Prophet (S) in a sermon in which he stated:

The people of the earth at this time were divided in different parties, their aims were separate and ways were diverse. They either likened Allah with His creation or twisted His Names or turned to else than Him. Through Muhammad (S) Allah guided them out of wrong and with his efforts took them out of ignorance.²

Imam Ali (A) knew burying mutual rancour and developing brotherhood affection among Muslims as the fruits of the mission of the holy Prophet (S), as he (A) stated in a sermon:

Through him Allah buried mutual rancour and put off the flames of revolt. Through him He gave them affection like brothers and separated those who were together (through unbelief).³

In another sermon regarding the same issue, he (A) stated:

Allah repaired through him the cracks, joined through him the slits and created (through him) affection among kin although they bore intense enmity in (their) chests and deep-seated rancour in (their) hearts.⁴

Imam Ali (A) knew the Prophet's (S) mission as a great blessing which brought tranquillity to all Muslims through uniting the Islamic community. Regarding the high status and importance of unity, he (A) stated:

Certainly, it is a great blessing of Allah, the Glorified, that He has engendered among them unity through the cord of affection in whose shade they walk and take shelter. This is a blessing whose value no one in the whole world realizes, because it is more valuable than any price and higher than any wealth.⁵

It can be understood from Imam Ali's (A) words that the Islamic community gained a strong rope of unity through the holy Prophet's (S) mission. Today, the same strong rope can create unity among the followers of Islamic community.

2. Unity results in descent of divine grace

Imam Ali (A) viewed the unity of Islamic community as a cause for descending the blessings of God. He (A) saw the divine blessings and grace during all periods of Islam by himself and knew with all his heart and soul that these blessings were bestowed because of the unity of the Islamic community, so he warned people of disunity:

Certainly, Allah the Glorified has not given any person, whether among the dead or among those who survive, any good from separation.⁶

In another sermon, referring to the consequences of disputes, Imam (A) blames dispersed people of his time and states:

How strange! How strange! By Allah, my heart sinks to see the unity of these people on their wrong and your dispersion from your right."⁷

Reproaching disunited people of Kufah, Imam (A) preferred to exchange them with the people of Syria (al-Sham) like Dinars (golden coins) with Dirhams (silver coins) and stated:

O' those whose bodies are present but wits are absent, and whose wishes are scattered. Their rulers are on trial. Your leader obeys Allah but you disobeyed him while the leader of the people of Syria (al-Sham) disobeys Allah but they obey him. By Allah, I wish Mu'āwīyah exchanges with me like Dinars with Dirhams, so that he takes from me ten of you and give me one from them.⁸

Imam (A) considers large number of people as insignificant when they are disunited and states: "There is no benefit in the majority of your numbers because of the lack of unity of your hearts."⁹

Imam (A) maintains that a group of people who are united may have victory, even though they may be in error. He (A) reproached the people of Kufah and stated:

By Allah, I have begun thinking about these people that they would shortly snatch away the whole country through their unity on their wrong and your disunity (from your own right) and separation.¹⁰

Imam Ali (A) also believed that the destruction of right thought and counsel was an adverse consequence of division and disunity, and, of course, without right thought and counsel, making any progress and reform in the society is impossible. Regarding this issue, Imam Ali (A) states: "Opposition destroys good counsel."¹¹

Furthermore, Imam (A) viewed losing honour, dignity and divine blessings as the fatal consequence of disunity:

Thereafter, also see what happened to them towards the end when division overtook them, unity became fractured, and differences arose between their words and their hearts. They divided into various groups and were scattered fighting among themselves. Then Allah took away from them the apparel of His honour and deprived them of the prosperity produced by His favours. Only their stories have remained among you for the guidance of those who may learn the lesson from them.¹²

3. Unity under all circumstances

In all stages of his life, whether in the period of Prophet's (S) mission, the period when he (A) had to be silent, or in the period of his Caliphate, Imam Ali (A) invited the Islamic community to unity. Even in the bed of martyrdom, he (A) advised his children who are guides and Imams after him to preserve unity and avoid separation. In his will, Imam Ali (A) told Imam Hassan (A) and Imam Husayn (A):

Stick to unity and avoid division and turning away (from each other's help) and withholding the hand from one another's assistance.¹³

In order to preserve unity, Imam (A) criticized some scholars for their opposite verdicts and reminded them that their God, their prophet and their book are the same:

When a problem is put before anyone of them he passes judgment on it out of his own imagination. When exactly the same problem is placed before another of them he passes an opposite verdict. Then these judges go to the chief who had appointed them and he confirms all the verdicts, although their Lord is the One (and the same), their Prophet is the same, their Book (the Qur'an) is the same. Is it that Allah ordered them to differ and they obeyed Him? Or He prohibited them from it but they disobeyed Him?¹⁴

Regarding the importance of unity and destructiveness of division in military affairs, Imam Ali (A) advised soldiers and commanders of Islam's troops to preserve unity and avoid division: "Beware of dispersal. When you halt do so together and when you move you should move together."¹⁵

4. The ideal community

For Imam Ali the ideal world, which he wished human beings to reach by clinging to the real Islam, is the celestial and angelic world. He (A) has described the people of that world as follows:

They did not differ (among themselves) about their Sustainer as a result of Satan's control over

them. The vice of separation from one another did not disperse them. Rancour and mutual malice did not overpower them. Ways of wavering did not divide them. Differences of degree of courage did not render them into divisions.¹⁶

In fact, all human beings will be like angels, even superior to them if they pay attention to the main goal of creation which is proximity to Allah and achieving happiness in all aspects of life, and they know that they would attain this goal only through obeying Allah's commands, cleaning their vices and decorating their hearts with virtues and acting upon them.

5. The borderline between tradition and innovation

Good traditions are among the elements which maintain unity within communities and also the consolidation of society. The governor of an Islamic society must keep such traditions alive and defend them. The governor who is indifferent about such traditions and customs and does not try to preserve them will create divisions within the society and weaken the pillars of the government.

Regarding this issue, Imam Ali (A) wrote to his executive officers as follows:

Do not discontinue the good lives in which the earlier people of this community had been acting, by virtue of which there was general unity and through which the subjects prospered. Do not

innovate any line of action which injures these earlier ways.¹⁷

Imam (A) believed that the correct way of distinguishing between truth and falsehood when being drawn into a dispute about something was to refer to Allah's words (Qur'an) and the Prophet's (S) Sunnah [tradition], and he stated:

Addressing the people whom Allah the Sublime, wishes to guide, He said: "O' you who believe! Obey Allah and obey the Prophet (S) and those vested with authority from among you; and then if you quarrel about anything refer to Allah and the Prophet (S) if you believe in Allah and in the Last Day (of Judgment). (Qur'an, 4:59)

Referring to Allah means to act according to what is clear in His Book and referring to the Prophet (S) means to follow his unanimously agreed Sunnah in regard to which there are no differences.¹⁸

6. Unity as a prerequisite for administration of justice

Imam Ali (A) believed that the administration of justice was a divine obligation and never considered it right if Muslims acquiesced in discrimination and injustice. When the society is divided into two classes of the oppressors and the oppressed, while the former are gluttonous and the later are hungry, Islam does not allow Muslims to be indifferent. That was why Imam

(A) himself accepted the heavy responsibility of Caliphate. In this regard, he (A) stated:

Behold, by Him who split the grain (to grow) and created living beings, if people had not come to me and supporters had not exhausted the argument and if there had been no pledge of Allah with the learned to the effect that they should not acquiesce in the gluttony of the oppressor and the hunger of the oppressed I would have cast the rope of [the camel of] Caliphate on its own shoulders and would have given the last one the same treatment as to the first one.¹⁹

The main goal of Imam Ali (A) was to administer the justice; as he (A) intended to head the government to return people to the Prophet's (S) Sunnah, to stop class distinctions, and to divide the spoils [of war] equally. To achieve this goal, he (A) certainly encountered difficulties since it was obvious that there were self-seekers and worldly people who attempted to stand against his justice-seeking method by causing war and creating divisions.

However, Imam Ali (A) knew that creating unity within the Islamic community was a prerequisite for establishing justice, and he wanted warmongers to end wars so that justice could be established. In this regard, Imam (A) stated:

We suggested to them to appease the situation by calming the temporary irritation and pacifying the

people till matters settled down and stabilized when we would gain strength to put matters right.²⁰

The Commander of the Faithful (A) believed that there was a mutual relationship between unity and justice: “If justice does not exist in a society, then there is no unity in that society either.” Thus, since he (A) knew the oppression of governors as the cause of people's separation from governments in the period of his caliphate, he (A) always controlled his executive officers and observed them in different ways. If one of them committed an offence, he (A) would advise him and, when necessary, dismiss him.

Such supervision was not confined to high-ranking officers, but rather Imam (A) ordered his executive officers to check their assistants' activities and have people who would keep an eye on them and report their wrong actions. In this regard, addressing Mālik Ashtar Nakha‘i, Imam (A) states:

You should also check their activities and have people who report on them who should be truthful and faithful, because your watching their actions secretly will urge them to preserve trust with and to be kind to the people.²¹

Then he (A) continued:

If any one of them extends his hands towards misappropriation and the reports of your reporters

reaching you confirm it, that should be regarded enough evidence. You should then punish him and recover what he has misappropriated. You should put him in a place of disgrace, blacklist him with (the charge of) misappropriation and make him wear the necklace of shame for his offence.

From Imam Ali's (A) point of view, the Islamic judicial system is established to solve political, social and financial problems and also disputes among people. In the Islamic judicial system, the right of the oppressed is claimed from the oppressor; the weak should have a feeling of safety and the oppressor should be worried. Imam (A) introduced the judicial system to his executive officers as follows:

Have a good will when judging people; because judgment is to restore the right of the oppressed from the oppressor and the right of the weak from the strong and to establish rules of God in a way which improves the cities and their residents.

Because of the important role of the judicial system in establishing justice, Imam (A) set up the judicial system based on Islamic rules in his short term government and he never compromised in implementation of justice and made no difference between the rich and the poor, rulers and peasants, friends and enemies.

Imam Ali (A) was very strict about appointing judges and he (A) would only select people who had special qualifications. Regarding this issue, Imam (A) tells Mālik Ashtar Nakha‘ī that:

For the settlement of disputes among people select him who is the most distinguished of your subjects in your view. The cases [coming before him] should not vex him, disputation should not enrage him, he should not insist on any wrong point, and should not grudge acceptance of the truth when he perceives it; he should not lean towards greed and should not content himself with a cursory understanding [of a matter] without going thoroughly into it. He should be most ready to stop [to ponder] on doubtful points, most regardful of arguments, least disgusted at the quarrel of litigants, most patient at probing into matters and most fearless at the time of passing judgment. Praise should not make him vain and elation should not make him lean [to any side. Such people are very few.²²

7. **Valueless unities from Imam Ali’s (A) point of view**

Imam Ali (A) would consider some types of unity as valueless, such as the unity between gangsters and those who tend towards falsehood.

These are the people who, when they assemble together are overwhelming but when they disperse they cannot be recognized.²³

It is narrated another way as:

These are the people who when they assemble together cause harm but when they disperse are beneficial.²⁴

Someone told him (A) that: “We know their harm at the time of their assembling, but what is their benefit at the time of their dispersal? Then he (A) replied:

The workers return to their work and people get benefit out of them, like the return of the mason to the building site, that of the weaver to his loom, and that of the baker to his bakery.²⁵

Imam Ali (A) implored Allah to shatter such unities:

O’ my Allah! If they reject truth disperse their group, divide their words (opinions) and destroy them on account of their sins.²⁶

¹ *Nahj al-Balāghah*, Sermon no. 5.

² *Ibid.* Sermon no. 1.

³ *Ibid.* Sermon no. 96.

⁴ *Ibid.* Sermon no. 231.

⁵ *Ibid.* Sermon no. 191.

⁶ *Ibid.* Sermon no. 175.

⁷ *Ibid.* Sermon no. 27.

⁸ *Ibid.* Sermon no. 97.

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- ⁹ Ibid. Sermon no. 119.
- ¹⁰ Ibid. Sermon no. 25.
- ¹¹ Ibid. Maxim no. 215.
- ¹² Ibid. Sermon no. 192.
- ¹³ Ibid. Sermon no. 192.
- ¹⁴ Ibid. Sermon no. 18.
- ¹⁵ Ibid. Letter no. 11.
- ¹⁶ Ibid. Sermon no. 91.
- ¹⁷ Ibid. Letter no. 53.
- ¹⁸ Ibid.
- ¹⁹ Ibid. Sermon no. 3. (F: please check why 20, 22, and 23 are highlighted in green)
- ²⁰ Ibid. Letter no. 58; Ibn Abi al-Ḥadīd, *Sharḥ Nahj al-Balāghah*, vol. 17, p. 68.
- ²¹ Ibid, vol. 17, p. 68.
- ²² Ibn Shu‘bah Ḥarranī, *Tuhaf al-‘uqūl*, 1363, p. 135.
- ²³ *Nahj al-Balāghah*, Maxim no. 199.
- ²⁴ Ibid.
- ²⁵ Ibid.
- ²⁶ Ibid. Sermon no. 124.