Controversies vs Arguments

Debates, disagreements, controversies, split views – no society is devoid of these phenomena. When controversies sprout in a society they can impact it in two major, extreme ways: either push the society towards progression and advancement, or regress the society to make it fall lower than its previous state. The ultimate fate of the society led by the rise of controversies is absolutely dependant on the method by which these disagreements are handled or dissolved by the members in the society.

Our lives depend upon the little Islamic societies we thrive on, and many of our controversies revolve around Islamic precepts. The author's humble knowledge and opinion, compels her to think that there hasn't been a single period of time in Islamic history wherein controversies and difference of opinion did not exist. Why do controversies arise? When do they become arguments? Where do we draw the lines to avoid them? These are some serious questions to consider for the followers of the most perfect religion blessed to mankind.

If Islam is a Perfect Religion, Why Do Controversies Arise?

Islam is perfect, but Muslims are not. Lack of knowledge, varying intellectual capacities, differing experiences and emotional states are some of the factors that become the breeding ground for controversies. The controversies that can potentially hamper our societies are those that become mixed with emotions.

Let us take an example of a scientific community i.e. a community comprising of scientific researchers. Controversies and differing theories to scientists, referred to as paradigm shifts, are very normal and are in most cases taken at a constructive level to create a "scientific revolution" (The Copernican Revolution for example.)

Rarely ever do we see scientists bringing in their emotions into their research and making claims like: "I feel global warming is happening, therefore it is" or "I've invested my heart and soul into my research, therefore it should be accurate." A scientific community would fail if it based its decisions on the emotional states of researchers.

If we would like controversies to take a constructive route, the first best thing for us is to take an objective approach by not letting our ego and eventually emotions get involved. Of course, we are human and emotions are inevitable, however the necessity of blocking negative emotions and ill-feelings is of crucial importance as we must care about the Islamic society entrusted to us by the Imam of our time (May Allah hasten his reappearance.)

When Does a Controversy Become an Argument?

An argument is the negative phase of a controversy that ultimately brings down our society; the infallibles (as) have on repeated occasions sternly reprimanded us to keep away from arguments. The Chief of Martyrs, Imam Hussain (as) has said, “Beware of controversy, because it discomfits the heart, gives rise to hypocrisy, and creates ill will within the heart."

Studying this hadith makes it evident that three factors make controversies dangerous: uneasiness of hearts, creating ill feelings, and sowing the seeds of hypocrisy. No matter how sincere our intentions are, if upon analyzing ourselves we feel unsure of slipping into any one of these three situations, we must beware (as the Imam (as) instructed) and make every effort to avoid the potential argument that is bound to cause destruction. An important aspect to notice here is the fact that before damaging the society, arguments first cause destruction to our individual precious souls.

Sorting Out Controversies: Where Do We Draw the Lines?

Enjoining the good and forbidding the evil is an obligation upon all of us. However unlike other types of religious obligations, these two are not unconditional i.e. the obligation is lifted when we see the danger of dispute and enmity.

The best warner to mankind, the initiator of the act of enjoining good and forbidding the evil, our beloved Prophet (saw) has been told by the Almighty, “We have not set thee as a keeper over them, nor art thou responsible for them.” [Quran 6:107] Once we have disposed our duties of inviting people to good following the Quranic method, we are not to stretch it further because it is sure to take the form of a distasteful argument!

When we look into the lives of our esteemed scholars and Maraje-Taqleed, we get a clear image of how controversies must be approached. It helps us to sort out controversies that are to be taken seriously and those that are not. Differences of jurisprudential issues exist on a very broad scale among our scholars and these differences are not only tolerated but treated with honor and dignity.

Unless the issue at hand involves blasphemy against God, or direct rejection and insult of Prophethood and Wilayat, we must not only be tolerant but take all measures against sowing seeds of hatred and disunity. The sacrifices offered by the infallibles at every step of their lives to guard Islamic unity should be ample inspiration for their Shi’as to manifest such tolerance in their daily lives.

The Quran [49:10] exhorts the believers:

"Without doubt the believers are brothers of one another so then make peace and harmony

between your brothers and have consciousness of Allah so that maybe He will show you mercy."