

Conflict in the Muslim community: the case of the Kramat¹

Debate

M S Sulaiman

Introduction

Differences concerning the *awliya* ﷺ (saints), their status, powers and the nature of their powers of intercession, have for numerous centuries been an aspect of the intellectual and even social life of Muslim communities. In the contemporary lives of Muslims the debate has taken on new angles. On certain levels, the debate has become a battlefield for groups having specific ideological and/or political aspirations. We thus find those supporting a specific political or ideological agenda tending to either support or deny some or other view regarding the above issues. Not unrelated to this facet, is the fact that the kramat debate is also entertained as part of the broader debate between traditional and reformist approaches to Islam. Traditional perspectives tend to attach immense weight to understanding Islam through the eyes of selected luminaries of Islamic society in past ages and tends to regard the approaches and views of these luminaries as definitive of Islam. While reformist approaches tend to subject the approaches and views of post-Prophetic generations to rigorous analysis, they accept only that perceived by them to be consistent with their own understanding of Islam. The former approach lends itself to being supportive of the powers of the *awliya* ﷺ while the latter frequently results in criticism thereof. The kramat debate can be regarded as yet another forum for the “culture of authority versus culture of justification” debate that was ushered in by the new Constitution of South Africa.

Recently, the kramat debate was again thrust to the fore in the Cape Town Muslim community and even spread to other areas in South Africa as evidenced by the publication of related articles in the Durban-based Al-Qalam newspaper. Flash point was reached on the airing of a television broadcast early in 2001 dealing with the kramat on Robben Island in the Western Cape province. Perceiving the broadcast as exaggerating the role and powers of *awliya* ﷺ, one of the local *‘ulama* ﷺ expressed his objections in a Letter to the Editor published in the Cape Argus. Other letters, both

supportive and dismissive, followed. The debate spread to other newspapers, including local Muslim newspapers. Other platforms in the Muslim community such as Friday khutbahs, lectures, Muslim community radio stations, articles, pamphlets and the like, soon came to be utilized as forums for the debate.

Having been an ongoing debate in Muslim society for numerous centuries, it could have been hoped that this time round the debate would have benefited from the allegedly perfect science of hindsight. This was unfortunately not the case. The inspiration for the current article is simply to highlight some of the more obvious methodological concerns that became apparent during the debate. An investigation of this nature has the potential to provide valuable insights into the dynamics of the Muslim community, its strengths and shortcomings.

The Methodological Issues

The use of proofs in support of one's claims is known as the process of *istidla* ﺍﺳﺘﯩﺪﻻ. Two basic conditions are necessary for *istidla* ﺍﺳﺘﯩﺪﻻ to be valid. Firstly, the evidence relied upon must be established to be substantially true and accurate, and, secondly (but of no less importance) the process of understanding these items of evidence, and extrapolating rulings and views therefrom, must be based on sound interpretive considerations. These considerations include basic common sense principles of logic and reasonableness, in addition to the principles of the Arabic language and consistence with the broad framework created by the *Qur'a* ﺍﻟﻘﯘﺭﺁﻥ and *sunnah*. Where differences of opinion arise due to considerations such as these, it must be acknowledged that this is a matter in which the *shari'ah* has left open for Muslims to differ, even though some may have a predilection for one interpretation or another. In the kramat debate, the above considerations were routinely flouted.

In support of *tawassul* (intercession), several events from the time of the Prophet (saw) and the *sah* ﺍﻟﺴﺎﻫﺒﺎﺓ were quoted to prove its validity and acceptability to the *shari'ah*. Seldom, if at all, was a coherent attempt made to determine what the various types of *tawassul* are, let alone investigate whether the texts quoted supported all these forms equally well. All that happened is that a text could be interpreted to mean that a *particular form* of *tawassul* was either acceptable or not and was quoted in an attempt to either endorse or disprove the validity of *tawassul* in general. The defect referred to here

is known in *us Ṭu ʿil al-fiqh* (Islamic Legal Methodology) as: *al-dal ʿil akhas Ḥs Ḥ min al-daʿwa ʿil*. Simply speaking, merely quoting a single text to prove or disprove *tawassul* is not a sufficient response to the issue. Much deeper inquiry is necessary.

Often in the kramat debate the opposing parties relied on certain texts and either conveniently ignored texts that did not support their view or flippantly and somewhat subjectively interpreted these texts away. Where the texts appear to support differing positions, it is often an indication that the opposing views each contain an element of rectitude. Great insight and humility is sometimes required to recognize this fact so as to reevaluate and reformulate cherished views in acknowledgement of our humanness. What is required in cases such as these is to suspend judgement until all texts dealing with the matter being investigated have been identified and adequately researched. This would include a study of the manner in which these texts interact and complement each other with the objective of understanding what has been revealed to us in a manner that does justice to all elements of this revelation. Once this is done a more objective and impartial conclusion can be drawn with regard to the textual position on the subject of investigation.

The most serious case of methodological misdemeanor in the whole of the kramat debate was the distortion of the meaning of the *Qurʾa ʿin* by certain individuals to support their views. The *Qurʾan* states:

“If they had only, when they had wronged themselves, come unto thee [the Prophet] and asked Allah's forgiveness, and the Messenger had asked forgiveness for them, they would have found Allah indeed Oft-Returning, Most Merciful.” *Qurʾa ʿin* 4:64

The verse can be used to indicate the permissibility of approaching the Prophet (saw) so as to ask Allah's forgiveness in the Prophet's presence, even after his worldly demise, and also the permissibility of requesting the Prophet (saw) to ask Allah's forgiveness on the sinners' behalf. The verse cannot, however, be construed to imply asking the Prophet (saw) himself to actually grant forgiveness. Any such interpretation makes grammatical nonsense of the verse. In the verse, the Prophet (saw) is the doer of the action of asking forgiveness; he is not the one being asked².

The verb indicating the asking of forgiveness is furthermore singular. If it were to mean that the sinners asked the Prophet (saw) for forgiveness, it would have been plural as is the verb indicating that they asked Allah for forgiveness. This clearly demonstrates the importance of a thorough and critical understanding of the Arabic language and grammar before embarking on interpreting or even translating the *Qur'a ʿĀn*.

The centrality of the issue of *tawassul* in the kramat debate is demonstrated by the fact that it arises in this context of dealing with the views of earlier Muslim scholars as well. The word *was ʿĀlah* appears in two verses of the *Qur'a ʿĀn*³. Since the words *was ʿĀlah* and *tawassul* are derived from a common root, these verses have often been referred to in the kramat debate to support the permissibility, at least, of *tawassul*. On investigating some of the more reliable *tafs ʿĀr* works to determine how early scholars understood the term *was ʿĀlah* as used in the first verse, it becomes clear that those of the *s Ḥah Ḥa ʿĀbah*, *ta ʿĀbi ʿĀn*, and *atba ʿĀ al-ta ʿĀbi ʿĀn* (the earliest generations of Muslims) who expressed an opinion on this verse, understood *was ʿĀlah* to refer to closeness to Allah, obedience to Allah, love of Allah, good deeds, and the like⁴, in addition to the basic linguistic meaning of anything that can be used as a means to something. This is the position found in most *tafa ʿĀs ʿĀr* (commentaries on the *Qur'a ʿĀn*) to the extent that *Ibn Kath ʿĀr* describes it as a matter in which there is no difference amongst the scholars of *tafs ʿĀr*. It is only in some of the later commentaries, such as that of *al-A ʿĀlu ʿĀs ʿĀ* and *H Ḥaqq ʿĀ*⁵, that we find *was ʿĀlah* referred to in the sense that it is sometimes understood today. There is nothing fundamentally wrong in differing with these scholars provided that their integrity and the value of their views are in principle acknowledged. In the kramat debate the view of these scholars was belittled and made to appear of no consequence. All effort was made to bring out what was perceived to be fatal weaknesses in this view, while what may be the strong points thereof were hardly canvassed. Furthermore, in rebutting this view it was often never indicated that the view was held by several of the *s Ḥah Ḥa ʿĀbah*, *ta ʿĀbi ʿĀn* and *atba ʿĀ al-ta ʿĀbi ʿĀn*, people whose general integrity is not in question and who could not have been influenced by the “enemies of Islam”.

A particularly distasteful case of intellectual dishonesty is the attempt to discredit views by attributing them to a discredited group, claiming that this group is the first to have innovated such views. It is well known that groups and even people that differ with each

other tend to judge their opponents somewhat harshly. In the kramat debate, views were discredited as being *wahha ʿab ʿs* innovations but on investigation are found to be ancient views adopted and adapted – whether rightly or otherwise – by the *wahha ʿab ʿs*. Yes, the extreme interpretations the *wahha ʿab ʿs* may have of these views need to be addressed, but in an objective and mature fashion based on analysis and debate of the proofs they have for their extreme views.

Outlining historical events, no matter how bitter, is just that: information about historical events. While our enemies as persons might stand discredited by their evil history, that, in itself, is insufficient to discredit their views, which can only be discredited by a sound rebuttal of the proofs for these views. It surely requires no great skill to realize that our worst enemies may be the vehicles of truth, and guilt by association is hardly a strong principle of judicial function. Those actually guilty of historical evils must suffer the consequences thereof. Whatever *ideas* they might have must be tested against the standard that all other ideas are tested. Despite the blood on the hands of the *khawa ʿ ʿrij*, the *muʿtazilah* and others, even some of the *s ʿah ʿa ʿbah*, we are still able to discuss their views and attitudes objectively without any loss of passion in the process. Is not this attitude worthy of being cultivated by the leaders, orators and writers of any community?

Truth is not the monopoly of any individual or group. A view cannot be rejected only because of the identity of the person expressing it. The *Qurʿa ʿn* itself, in rejecting the views of the unbelievers, challenges them to pass the test of evidence and does not simply suffice with the fact of their disbelief:

Say: "Produce your proof if you are truthful." *Qurʿa ʿn* 2:111

In the kramat debate the issues were sometimes allowed to be obscured by arguments directed at the person of those expressing opposing views with the apparent motive of prompting animosity towards these individuals. The focus of animosity to the opposing views was allowed to be based, to some extent, on animosity to the personalities concerned rather than mature and objective discussion of the views and the evidence in support thereof. In the kramat debate several examples of this type of argument became apparent, including the following: name-calling, failure to recognize the basic integrity of one's opponent, haste in judging people to be in or out of the fold of Islam. This type

of argument was also manifested in vulgarity and excessiveness in speech, and touting of conspiracy theories.

Conclusion

In conclusion I wish simply to reiterate that the sole objective of this essay is simply to highlight the methodological errors and inconsistencies that became apparent in the kramat debate in the hope of contributing to the more objective and mature discussion of issues affecting the Muslim community. The above is a very cursory attempt to realize this objective and there remains room for a more systematic treatment of the above issues.

It is important to recognize that many of the issues so passionately debated by Muslims are matters of *ijtiha* and, as such, there must be acknowledgement that the *ijtiha* of different people will no doubt differ. These differences must be accepted as part of the quest to come closer to the truth and no matter how convinced people may be that they are right and others are wrong, *ijtiha* always has the potential to be wrong.

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Qur'aanic translations are adapted from Yusuf Ali's translation.

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H² aqq⁵, Isma‘⁵l. 1330ah. *Ru* ⁵*h* ⁵*al-Baya* ⁵*n*. (Mat² ba‘ah ‘Uthma³niyyah: Da³ Sa‘a³dat).

Endnotes

¹ A shrine usually attached to the grave of a person reputed to be a *waliyy* (saint).

² See, for example, *Abu* ³*H* ³*ayya* ³*n*, vol. 3, pp. 295-296, and *H* ³*aqq* ⁵, vol. 2, p 231.

³ *Qur’a* ³*n* 5:35 and 17:57.

⁴ See, for example, the commentaries of *Qur’a* ³*n* 5:35 in *al-T* ³*abr* ⁵, vol. 6, p. 225-227, *al-Zamakh-shar* ⁵, vol. 1, p. 336, *al-Ra* ³*z* ⁵, vol. 11, p. 224-226, *Abu* ³*al-Sa’u* ³*d*, vol. 3, p. 32, *Abu* ³*H* ³*ayya* ³*n*, vol. 3, p. 485-486, *Ibn Kath* ⁵*r*, vol. 2 p. 563-565, *Al-A* ³*lu* ³*s* ⁵, vol. 3, p. 124-129, *H* ³*aqq* ⁵, vol. 2, pp. 387-388, *al-As* ³*faha* ³*n* ⁵, p. 523-524.

⁵ *Al-A* ³*lu* ³*s* ⁵, vol. 3, p. 124-129, *H* ³*aqq* ⁵, vol. 2, p. 388.