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ALLAMA IQBAL OPEN UNIVERSITY, ISLAMABAD

Course: Ethics of Disagreement (1904) • Level: BS

Semester: Autumn 2026

Assignment No. 1

Total Marks: 100 • Pass Marks: 50

SOLVED ASSIGNMENT GUIDE

(For Study & Reference)

Note: This guide is prepared for study and reference purposes. Students are advised to read the relevant units of the course book, understand the concepts, and then write the assignment in their own words.

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Question 1: Ikhtilāf and Khilāf: Definitions and Implications for Islamic Unity (20 Marks)

Define ikhtilāf and khilāf and explain their implications for Islamic unity.

Introduction

Disagreement is as old as human thought itself, and Islam, far from pretending that its followers will always think alike, developed a whole vocabulary and a whole ethics for handling difference. Two Arabic words stand at the centre of that vocabulary: ikhtilāf and khilāf. Although English translations often render both simply as “disagreement” or “difference of opinion”, classical Muslim scholars used them with noticeably different shades of meaning, and

the distinction between them is not a mere matter of dictionary definitions. It carries direct consequences for how a community understands itself, how scholars treat one another, and whether difference becomes a source of enrichment or a cause of division and hostility.

This answer first defines each term linguistically and technically, then compares them side by side, and finally explains what the distinction implies for Islamic unity (waḥdah). The central argument is simple: ikhtilāf, properly understood, is a natural, often unavoidable and sometimes even valuable feature of intellectual life, whereas khilāf, in its negative technical sense, describes a hardened opposition that resists evidence and threatens the bonds of brotherhood. A community that learns to keep its differences at the level of ikhtilāf, and to prevent them from decaying into khilāf, preserves both its intellectual vitality and its unity at the same time.

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The Meaning of Ikhtilāf

The word ikhtilāf comes from the Arabic root kh-l-f, which conveys the idea of one thing coming after another, taking its place, or differing from it. In its linguistic sense, ikhtilāf simply means difference, variation or non-agreement between two or more views. When two scholars examine the same evidence and arrive at different conclusions, when two readers understand a verse in two ways, or when two communities follow different practices in a matter open to interpretation, all of this falls under ikhtilāf in its broad sense.

In its technical usage among the scholars of uṣūl al-fiqh and theology, ikhtilāf denotes a difference of opinion that arises from evidence and reasoning. Each side has a basis: a text it relies upon, an analogy it draws, a principle it applies, or a reading of the language it prefers.

Such difference is therefore described by many scholars as something rooted in ijtihād — the disciplined effort to derive rulings from the sources. Because sincere ijtihād can legitimately produce more than one result in matters that are probabilistic (ẓannī) rather than certain (qaṭʿī), ikhtilāf of this kind was regarded by the classical tradition as expected and unavoidable. The famous legal maxims and the entire literature of comparative fiqh (al-fiqh al-muqāran) and of "differences of the scholars" (ikhtilāf al-ʿulamāʾ) grew out of the patient recording and respectful study of precisely this kind of difference.

It is important that ikhtilāf, in this positive sense, does not imply enmity. The persons who differ remain colleagues in a shared search for truth. The classical scholars expressed this in the well-known attitude attributed to the early generations: "My opinion is right, but it may be wrong; the opinion of the other is wrong, but it may be right." Whether or not every such saying can be traced to a specific imam, the spirit it expresses is authentic to the tradition: a recognition that in interpretive matters one's own conclusion is a reasoned judgement, not an article of faith, and that the opponent's conclusion deserves to be understood before it is rejected.

Table 1: Ikhtilāf and khilāf compared

Aspect	Ikhtilāf (legitimate)	Khilāf (blameworthy sense)
Cause	Evidence, interpretation, honest ijtihād	Desire, rivalry, obstinacy, ignorance
Field	Matters open to interpretation (ẓannī)	Even certain, agreed fundamentals
Attitude	Respect, humility, willingness to revise	Contempt, labelling, refusal to listen
Outcome	Enriches knowledge; widens lawful options	Splits community into factions

Effect on unity	Compatible with brotherhood and unity	Destroys unity of hearts

The Meaning of Khilāf

Khilāf also comes from the same root and, at the purely linguistic level, overlaps with ikhtilāf. However, many scholars noted a difference of usage. Where ikhtilāf is the general word for difference, khilāf frequently carries the flavour of opposition, contradiction and going against something established. To act "khilāf" of an instruction is to act contrary to it. In scholarly usage, therefore, a number of writers reserved khilāf — or spoke disapprovingly of it — for disagreement that is not grounded in sound evidence, or that persists after the evidence has become clear, or that is driven by motives other than the search for truth.

In this negative sense, khilāf is associated with obstinacy (ʿinād), partisanship (taʿaṣṣub), desire (hawā) and the wish to win an argument rather than to reach the truth. It is the kind of difference the Qur'an criticises when it describes communities that divided after clear signs had come to them, "out of mutual envy and rivalry" (as in Q 2:213 and Q 42:14). The problem in such passages is not that people held different views; it is that they split into hostile factions, made their difference a matter of identity and loyalty, and allowed it to destroy their unity. Later scholars therefore sometimes distinguished between a praiseworthy or tolerated ikhtilāf in branches (furūʿ) and a blameworthy khilāf that contradicts decisive texts, violates consensus on fundamentals, or simply expresses stubborn self-assertion.

Some writers, it should be admitted, use the two words interchangeably, and whole books are titled with one word while discussing both realities. The distinction is therefore one of tendency

and emphasis rather than an absolute rule of the language. Even so, the tendency is instructive, because it shows that the tradition judged disagreement not by its mere existence but by its cause, its evidence and its manner.

A Comparison of the Two Terms

The comparison can be summarised in a few points. In origin and cause, ikhtilāf arises from evidence, interpretation and honest reasoning, while blameworthy khilāf arises from desire, rivalry or ignorance. In subject matter, ikhtilāf normally operates in matters open to ijtihād, where texts are probabilistic in indication or transmission, while khilāf in the condemned sense may extend even to matters that are certain and agreed. In attitude, ikhtilāf is accompanied by respect, humility and willingness to revise, while khilāf is accompanied by contempt, labelling and refusal to listen. In outcome, ikhtilāf enriches knowledge and widens the community's options, while khilāf fragments the community into sects and parties. Finally, in moral judgement, ikhtilāf within its limits is tolerated and even appreciated by the tradition, whereas khilāf driven by ego is a spiritual disease to be cured.

Implications for Islamic Unity

The first implication is that unity in Islam has never meant uniformity. The Qur'an commands the believers to hold firmly together to the rope of Allah and not to divide (Q 3:103), and in the same scripture it acknowledges that human beings will continue to differ (Q 11:118). The unity demanded is therefore a unity of foundation, direction and brotherhood — one God, one Prophet, one qiblah, one moral purpose — not an identity of opinion on every derived ruling. The distinction between ikhtilāf and khilāf makes this possible in practice: a community can be

one in its essentials while remaining many in its interpretations. Insisting on uniformity in matters of ijtihād does not protect unity; historically it has usually destroyed it, because it turns every scholarly difference into a test of loyalty and drives sincere people into opposition.

The second implication concerns where the line must be drawn. Because ikhtilāf is legitimate only within the field of interpretive matters, unity requires agreement about what belongs to that field. Matters established by decisive texts and consensus — the pillars of faith and worship in their agreed forms, the clear moral prohibitions, the finality of the Prophet's message — are not open to free difference, and opposition there is khilāf in the serious sense. Conversely, matters in which the early generations themselves differed — details of ritual, transactions, and application — should not be raised to the rank of fundamentals. Much modern disunity comes from confusing these two levels: treating branch differences as if they were foundations, and foundations as if they were negotiable.

The third implication is ethical. If the difference between virtuous ikhtilāf and destructive khilāf lies largely in motive and manner, then the preservation of unity is as much a task of character as of doctrine. Good manners of disagreement (adab al-ikhtilāf) — assuming good faith, representing the other's view fairly, avoiding insult and excommunication, separating the argument from the person — are not decorative additions to scholarship; they are the very mechanism by which difference is kept fruitful. The classical example often quoted is that of the imams who differed sharply yet prayed behind one another, studied with one another and spoke of one another with honour.

The fourth implication is institutional and practical for today. Muslim communities live amid many schools, cultures and opinions, and modern media rewards the harshest voice. Applying

the distinction means: teaching the fiqh of difference in schools and mosques; refusing to make secondary matters a condition of fellowship; using scholarly councils and dialogue to contain disputes; and judging a disagreement by asking the classical questions — does it have evidence? is the matter open to ijtihād? is it conducted with humility? If the answers are yes, the community should protect that ikhtilāf as part of its intellectual health. If a dispute is evidence-free, contemptuous and factional, it should be named khilāf and addressed as a threat to unity, whoever its author may be.

Conclusion

In conclusion, ikhtilāf and khilāf, though born from one root, point to two different realities in the experience of the Muslim community. Ikhtilāf is evidence-based difference within the bounds of interpretation, compatible with brotherhood and often beneficial. Khilāf, in its blameworthy sense, is opposition driven by desire, rivalry or obstinacy, indifferent to evidence and destructive of fellowship. For Islamic unity the lesson is balanced and demanding: do not fear every difference, for some difference is the sign of a living tradition of learning; and do not tolerate every division in the name of difference, for division of hearts is precisely what the Qur'an forbids. Unity is preserved when a community agrees on its foundations, allows legitimate ikhtilāf in its branches, practises the manners that keep argument clean, and refuses to let disagreement decay into khilāf.

Question 2: Linguistic Variation and Differences in Understanding Religious Texts (20 Marks)

Discuss the influence of linguistic variation on differences in understanding religious texts.

Introduction

Religious texts do not interpret themselves. Between the revealed word and the ruling or belief a reader derives from it stands the medium of language, with all its richness and all its ambiguity. Islam's foundational texts were revealed in Arabic, a language of remarkable precision, but also of wide vocabularies, varied dialects, figurative usages and words that carry several legitimate meanings. When the scholars of the community differed over the meaning of a verse or a hadith, a very large share of those differences — as the classical books of uṣūl al-fiqh openly record — traced back not to disrespect for revelation but to the linguistic features of the text itself.

This answer discusses the main forms of linguistic variation that influenced understanding: polysemy and homonymy, general and specific expressions, absolute and qualified statements, literal and figurative usage, grammatical structure, the variant readings of the Qur'an, dialect and usage differences in hadith, and the problems of translation. In each case a classical example will show how one linguistic feature honestly produced two readings, and the answer will close by considering what this influence teaches about humility and method in interpretation.

Words with More Than One Meaning

The most famous source of linguistic difference is the word that bears two or more meanings, technically called al-mushtarak al-lafẓī (the homonym or polysemous word). Arabic contains many such words, and when one of them occurs in a text, the interpreter must decide which meaning is intended, usually from context. The stock example in the books of uṣūl is the word qurūʾ in the verse about divorced women waiting for "three qurūʾ" (Q 2:228). In Arabic usage, al-qarʾ was used both for the period of menstruation and for the period of purity between menstruations — two opposite states. The Ḥanafī and Mālikī-related positions divided accordingly, and with them the calculation of the waiting period (ʿiddah) differed. No one accused the other side of ignoring the Qur'an; the difference was created by the word itself and resolved differently by evidence drawn from usage, context and the practice of the early community.

Similar effects arise from words that are general in form (ʿāmm) but may be intended specifically (khāṣṣ), and from commands whose wording does not state whether an act is obligatory or recommended. The imperative form in Arabic commonly indicates obligation, yet context sometimes shows recommendation; jurists differed over many such commands, and their difference was linguistic in method even when its results were practical. Likewise, a statement made absolutely (muṭlaq) in one text may be qualified (muqayyad) in another, and scholars debated whether the qualification of one text carries over to the other — the classic discussion about "freeing a neck" versus "freeing a believing neck" in the expiation verses. Each of these categories filled chapters in uṣūl works such as al-Ghazālī's al-Mustaṣfā and al-Shāṭibī's al-Muwāfaqāt, precisely because language, not whim, generated the questions.

Literal and Figurative Usage

Arabic, like every developed language, speaks both literally (ḥaqīqah) and figuratively (majāz). A word may be used for the meaning it was coined for, or it may be borrowed for a related meaning, as when courage is described through the image of a lion. Disagreement arises when scholars differ over whether a given expression is literal or figurative. This question influenced some of the largest debates in Islamic thought. The interpretation of verses concerning the attributes of God, where one tendency read expressions such as “hand” and “establishment upon the Throne” with a strong commitment to a non-anthropomorphic literalism of a special kind, another resorted to interpretation (taʾwīl), and a third affirmed the words while consigning their modality to God (tafwīḍ). Whatever position a student adopts, it is historically accurate that the dispute was substantially a dispute about how the Arabic language works when its subject is God.

In law, the literal-figurative question decided everyday rulings. The prohibition of approaching prayer while intoxicated, oaths sworn by expressions that customarily meant divorce, and contracts concluded in words that could be read as direct statements or as allusions (kināyah) all required a judgement about usage. The Ḥanafī distinction between explicit (ṣarīḥ) and allusive expressions in divorce, for example, is entirely a piece of linguistic analysis applied to real marriages. Linguistic variation here is not an academic ornament: it determines whether an oath binds, a sale is valid, or a marriage has ended.

Grammar, Syntax and the Readings of the Qur'an

Grammar governs meaning in Arabic with unusual force because case endings and sentence structure decide who acts, what is described, and what a pronoun refers to. A celebrated example is the verse of ablution (Q 5:6), where the word "your feet" (arjulakum / arjulikum) was transmitted with two canonical vowelings: the accusative, which joins the feet to the objects that are washed, and the genitive, which joins them grammatically to the head that is wiped. The well-known difference among the schools about washing or wiping the feet is rooted in the interaction of these readings with the Sunnah, and it cannot even be described without grammar. Similarly, differences over the reference of pronouns, the scope of exceptions (istithnā') following long sentences, and the effect of particles such as wāw (and/or) and the lām of purpose produced rulings that diverged while each side quoted the same revealed sentence.

The canonical readings (qirā'āt) themselves are a form of authorised linguistic variation. The Prophet taught the Qur'an in a manner that accommodated the dialects of the Arab tribes, and the readings transmitted from him sometimes differ in a word, a vowel or a form in ways that expand rather than contradict meaning. The reading of Mālik (Master) versus Malik (King) in the Fātiḥah is a simple example: both are true descriptions of God on the Day of Judgement, and the variation enriches the believer's understanding. Jurists occasionally derived complementary rulings from paired readings, treating the second reading like an explanatory text. Linguistic variation at this level was therefore not an embarrassment to the tradition but part of its preserved heritage, governed by the strict science of transmission.

Dialect, Usage and the Language of Hadith

The Arabs of the Prophet's time did not all speak identically. Tribal dialects differed in vocabulary and idiom, and the Prophet addressed different delegations in terms they understood. Reports have reached us in which a word used by the Prophet belonged to a particular dialect or carried a local sense, and later commentators had to recover that sense through the dictionaries and poetry of the Arabs — the discipline known as gharīb al-ḥadīth. Where a narrator transmitted the meaning rather than the exact words (al-riwāyah bi-l-maʿnā), a further layer of variation entered, since two trustworthy narrators might clothe one saying in two different expressions, and jurists then had to weigh the legal implications of each wording.

Customary usage (ʿurf) also changed across regions and centuries, and because so many legal texts are addressed to people in their ordinary speech, a word's customary meaning in Madinah might not equal its customary meaning in Kufa, Baghdad or Cordoba. The schools' different treatments of oaths, endowments and commercial terms frequently reflect this regional linguistic reality. A word like "meat", "fruit" or "house" in an oath was judged by what the swearer's community understood by it; thus the same revealed principles yielded different applications where the language of daily life differed. Linguistic variation therefore operated not only inside the revealed texts but also between those texts and the living speech of the communities that received them.

Translation and the Modern Reader

For most Muslims today the first encounter with the texts is through translation, and translation multiplies linguistic variation. Every translation is an interpretation: the translator

must choose one meaning for a polysemous word, decide the reference of pronouns, and decide whether to keep a metaphor or explain it. Readers of two different English translations of the same verse may therefore "disagree" without either of them having seen the Arabic. Classical scholars anticipated the underlying issue when they insisted that legal derivation requires competence in Arabic; modern curricula repeat the point by teaching uṣūl students the chapters on signification (dalālāt al-alfāẓ): how expressions indicate meaning by correspondence, implication and inference. The lesson is not that ordinary believers may not read translations — translations are a mercy and a necessity — but that contested rulings should be traced back to the Arabic and to the linguistic analysis of qualified scholars rather than settled by comparing translations.

The influence of language also explains a healthy feature of the tradition: its investment in linguistic sciences. Grammar (naḥw), morphology (ṣarf), rhetoric (balāghah) and lexicography were cultivated as religious sciences because the community understood that guarding the language was part of guarding the revelation. The great commentaries devote pages to parsing a single sentence, and this was not pedantry; it was the recognition that a vowel can change a ruling and a metaphor can change a theology.

Conclusion

In conclusion, linguistic variation has influenced the understanding of religious texts at every level: single words with several meanings, general and absolute expressions, literal and figurative usage, grammar and canonical readings, dialect and customary speech, narration by meaning, and modern translation. The classical examples — qurūʾ in the waiting period, the

vowelings of the ablution verse, the readings of the Fātiḥah — show that many celebrated disagreements were born in language itself. This recognition carries two lessons. Negatively, it forbids the hasty charge that a differing scholar has abandoned the text, when in fact he may be reading the same text through another legitimate possibility of its language. Positively, it summons students to learn the linguistic tools of the tradition, so that their differences, when they come, are the disciplined differences of people who know exactly where and why they diverge.

Question 3: Constructive Disagreement and Its Intellectual Benefits (20 Marks)

Explain the concept of constructive disagreement and its intellectual benefits.

Introduction

Not all disagreement is equal. The same difference of opinion that ruins a friendship in one setting refines an argument in another, and the difference between the two outcomes lies less in the subject matter than in the spirit and method with which the disagreement is conducted. Modern educational and organisational literature calls the fruitful kind “constructive disagreement” or “constructive controversy”, and Islamic scholarly culture possessed the concept long before the modern label, under headings such as adab al-ikhtilāf (the manners of disagreement), munāẓarah (regulated debate) and the etiquette of ijtihād. This answer explains the concept, distinguishes it from destructive conflict, identifies its conditions, and sets out its intellectual benefits: the testing of evidence, the discovery of error, the refinement of concepts,

the growth of knowledge, the training of minds, and the preservation of a living scholarly tradition.

Constructive disagreement may be defined as a difference of view between persons who share a commitment to truth, who argue from evidence, who observe the manners that keep inquiry honest, and who remain willing to revise their position when a stronger argument appears. Its opposite is not agreement but destructive disagreement: argument as combat, in which the aim is victory, the opponent is treated as an enemy, and evidence is used selectively as ammunition. The first kind builds knowledge; the second merely builds factions.

The Concept and Its Foundations

Three foundations hold up the concept. The first is a shared goal higher than either party: both sides want to reach what is true or what God intends, not simply to prevail. In the classical debating literature this was expressed by the rule that the seeker of truth is like a man looking for his lost animal — he is equally pleased whether he finds it in his own hands or in the hands of another. The second foundation is evidence. Constructive disagreement is disagreements about proofs, texts, definitions and inferences; it can be followed, checked and answered. When a dispute has no shared evidence and no agreed criteria, it cannot be constructive, because nothing in it can move either side. The third foundation is character: honesty in quoting the opponent, patience in listening, courage to concede, and refusal to use mockery, distortion or personal attack. The Qur'anic instruction to argue "in the best manner" (Q 16:125) and to dispute with the People of the Book "except in the way that is best" (Q 29:46) supplies the moral frame, while the Prophet's saying that a person who abandons argument even when

he is in the right is promised a house in Paradise dignifies restraint as a spiritual virtue, not a weakness.

Constructive disagreement also presupposes a realistic view of human knowledge. In matters where evidence is probabilistic, more than one conclusion can be reasonable, and disagreement is therefore information: it tells the community where certainty ends and interpretation begins. A culture that understands this will institutionalise disagreement — in seminars, peer review, scholarly councils and courts with dissenting judgements — rather than treating every dissent as disloyalty. The madrasa tradition did exactly this when it taught fiqh comparatively, recording the positions of the schools side by side with their proofs, and when it trained students in jadal (dialectic) as a formal discipline with rules about definitions, concessions and burden of proof.

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Distinguishing Constructive from Destructive Disagreement

Several contrasts make the distinction practical. Constructive disagreement addresses ideas; destructive disagreement addresses persons, lineages and motives. Constructive disagreement states the opponent's case in its strongest form before answering it; destructive disagreement caricatures it. Constructive disagreement narrows the area of dispute until the exact point of difference is isolated; destructive disagreement keeps widening the dispute until everything, including the opponent's faith and sincerity, is in question. Constructive disagreement can end in agreement, in a synthesis, or in a clearly mapped, peaceful difference; destructive disagreement can end only in exhaustion or rupture. Constructive disagreement is also marked by proportion: it treats minor matters as minor. A discussion of a branch ruling that ends with

declarations of unbelief has failed the test of constructiveness regardless of the learning displayed in it.

Motivation is the deepest dividing line. Scholars of the tradition warned that the desire for prominence (al-jāh), love of victory and envy are the hidden engines of sterile controversy, and they advised students to examine their intention before entering a debate. Modern psychology, in its vocabulary of confirmation bias and motivated reasoning, confirms the same insight: people who argue to win process evidence differently from people who argue to learn. Constructive disagreement is therefore partly a technique and partly a discipline of the soul.

Intellectual Benefits: Testing Evidence and Correcting Error

The first intellectual benefit is that disagreement tests evidence. A claim that has never been challenged may simply never have been examined. When an opponent presses on the weak link of a chain of transmission, the ambiguity of a word, or the hidden assumption of an analogy, the original scholar must either repair the argument or abandon it — and in both cases knowledge advances. The history of Islamic learning is full of such correction: grammarians refined their rules through controversy, hadith critics exposed weak narrations under the pressure of rival scrutiny, and jurists withdrew or qualified opinions when a stronger proof was presented. Imām al-Shāfiʿī's revision of many of his positions after moving from Iraq to Egypt — preserved in the distinction between his "old" and "new" doctrines — is honoured by the tradition precisely because it models a scholar for whom being corrected by evidence was a triumph, not a humiliation.

Error correction scales up from individuals to institutions. A scholarly community with vigorous internal criticism develops antibodies against collective mistakes: commentaries correct textbooks, marginal notes correct commentaries, and later syntheses sift earlier debates. The very structure of classical books — text, commentary, super-commentary, gloss — is an architecture of constructive disagreement spread across centuries. Without such structured dissent, errors do not disappear; they merely become unchallengeable, and unchallengeable error is the definition of intellectual decay.

Intellectual Benefits: Refinement, Discovery and Growth

The second set of benefits concerns refinement and discovery. Debating a position forces its holder to define terms precisely, and many disputes dissolve or sharpen once definitions are fixed; the uṣūl literature's opening insistence on defining every technical term is a monument to this benefit. Disagreement also generates new questions. A critic asks what happens at the boundary of a rule, and the attempt to answer produces distinctions — between the general and the specific, the condition and the pillar, the literal and the intended — that become permanent tools of the discipline. Whole branches of knowledge owe their existence to controversy: the science of the principles of jurisprudence matured amid inter-school debate, the theology of kalām developed by answering opponents, and the science of narrator criticism grew from the need to adjudicate competing reports.

Disagreement further protects against premature consensus. When a view becomes dominant merely because it is old, prestigious or repeated, a dissenting voice performs the service of demanding the evidence again. Some dissents fail, and their failure strengthens the consensus

by showing it can answer its critics; some succeed, and the community is saved from entrenching a mistake. Either way the community knows more afterwards than it did before. Related to this is the benefit of option-widening: in law especially, the recorded disagreement of qualified scholars gives later generations a repertoire of reasoned solutions for new circumstances. Jurists facing unprecedented financial, medical and technological questions today regularly find that a minority classical view preserved because disagreement was recorded rather than suppressed, fits the new case best.

Finally, constructive disagreement trains minds. A student educated only in one position learns conclusions; a student educated through comparison learns reasoning. He sees how the same texts can be weighed differently, learns to rank evidence, and acquires the intellectual humility that comes from discovering that brilliant people have stood on both sides of his questions. This training produces scholars who can think independently without arrogance — the exact combination every healthy tradition needs. At the social level, it also inoculates ordinary believers against manipulation: a community accustomed to hearing evidence argued on both sides is harder to frighten into extremism by a single loud voice.

Conditions and Limits

The benefits are real only under conditions, and naming the conditions is part of the concept. The participants must be qualified in the field they dispute, or must dispute as learners under guidance; uninformed controversy produces heat without light. The subject must be one in which disagreement is possible — matters of certain knowledge and agreed fundamentals admit discussion for teaching, but not genuine contest. The setting matters: classical scholars

preferred structured, often private or scholarly settings for delicate debates, because public spectacle rewards performance over truth, a warning that applies with doubled force to social media, where algorithms amplify the most inflammatory framing. And the disagreement must be allowed to conclude: the point of munāẓarah was a result — agreement, clarification or respectful closure — not an endless performance of difference.

Conclusion

In conclusion, constructive disagreement is difference disciplined by a shared love of truth, argued from evidence, governed by manners, and held open to revision. Its intellectual benefits are extensive: it tests evidence, exposes and corrects error, refines definitions, generates new knowledge, keeps consensus honest, preserves a repertoire of reasoned options, and trains minds in reasoning and humility at once. The Islamic scholarly tradition, at its best, embodied this concept in its comparative teaching, its debate literature and its reverence for scholars who changed their minds under proof. Recovering that discipline today — in classrooms, mosques, media and online spaces — would convert many of the community's most damaging quarrels into its most productive intellectual activity.

Question 4: Disagreement in the Prophetic Period: Examples and Outcomes (20 Marks)

Analyze examples of disagreement from the Prophetic period and their outcomes.

Introduction

The lifetime of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) is the founding period of the Muslim community, and it is sometimes imagined as a time of perfect unanimity. The sources show something more instructive: a community in which Companions occasionally understood instructions differently, offered competing judgements, and even debated sensitive questions — while the Prophet was present to correct, approve, or let both courses stand. These incidents are not embarrassments to be hidden; the classical scholars preserved and analysed them because they teach how disagreement should behave. This answer examines the leading examples — the prayer at Banū Qurayẓah, the captives of Badr and the consultation before it, the Treaty of al-Ḥudaybiyah, the dispute over the Prophet's instruction in the expedition of the "pen and paper" genre of reports and related consultation incidents, and disagreements among Companions in judgement and administration — and draws out the pattern of their outcomes.

A methodological note is needed first. In the Prophetic period, disagreement had a unique feature: a living authority could settle it finally. Differences after the Prophet's death had to be managed by method; differences in his presence were often resolved by his verdict. Precisely for that reason, the cases in which he did not impose one view, but approved two different actions, are the most significant precedents for the legitimacy of interpretive difference in later generations.

The Prayer at Banū Qurayẓah: Two Readings, Both Approved

The most celebrated example occurred during the expedition against Banū Qurayẓah after the Battle of the Trench (5 AH). The Prophet instructed the Companions: "Let none of you pray ʿAṣr

except at Banū Qurayẓah" (reported in al-Bukhārī and Muslim). The party set out, and the time of ʿAṣr began to pass on the road. One group read the instruction literally: the Prophet had tied the prayer to the destination, so they delayed it until they arrived, even though the sun was setting. The other group read it purposively: the instruction, they reasoned, was meant to urge speed, not to postpone a prayer beyond its time, so they prayed on the way and then hurried on. When the matter was mentioned to the Prophet, he rebuked neither group.

The outcome is a charter for the ethics of disagreement. Two readings of one sentence — one attached to its wording, one to its intent — were both accepted, because both groups were obeying as they understood, and neither treated the other as disobedient. Later jurists built directly on this precedent: it became a standard proof that a mujtahid who exerts himself on an ambiguous text is not sinful even if his conclusion differs from another's, and the case is still quoted in discussions of literalism versus purposive interpretation (maqāṣid). The disagreement produced no faction, no lasting label and no punishment; its outcome was a principle that has governed Islamic legal tolerance ever since.

Consultation and Captives: Badr and Its Aftermath

Before the Battle of Badr (2 AH), the Prophet consulted his Companions about engaging the Quraysh force, and voices differed in emphasis — the Muhājirūn speaking through senior figures and the Anṣār, through Saʿd ibn Muʿādh, confirming their pledge to fight even beyond Madinah. The outcome of open consultation was a unified decision owned by the whole community, and the episode is cited with the Qur'anic commands to consult (Q 3:159; Q 42:38) as the Prophetic model of shūrā: difference aired before decision, unity after it.

After the victory, a sharper disagreement arose over the prisoners of Badr. Abū Bakr advised taking ransom and releasing them, hoping that wealth would strengthen the Muslims and that the captives might one day embrace Islam. ʿUmar advised execution, arguing that these were the leaders of opposition who had driven the Prophet from Makkah, and that kinship should not soften judgement. The Prophet adopted Abū Bakr's view, and ransom was taken. Then revelation came in Sūrat al-Anfāl (Q 8:67–69) indicating that the sterner view had been nearer to what the moment required, while also declaring lawful what had been taken and forbidding a repetition of the mistake. The outcome deserves careful analysis. First, both counsellors argued from the community's welfare, not personal interest. Second, the Prophet decided, and ʿUmar — whose view revelation vindicated — did not form a party around his vindication, just as Abū Bakr was not disgraced by the correction. Third, the incident permanently taught the community that even the best-intentioned ijtihād of senior Companions could be corrected, which kept later ijtihād humble. Disagreement here functioned as counsel before authority and as education after it.

Al-Ḥudaybiyah: Discontent Contained by Leadership and Revelation

The Treaty of al-Ḥudaybiyah (6 AH) produced the most emotionally intense disagreement of the period. When the Prophet accepted terms that appeared humiliating — returning to Madinah without performing ʿumrah, striking his title "Messenger of Allah" from the document at the envoy's objection, and agreeing to return Muslim defectors — many Companions were distressed. ʿUmar came to the Prophet and then to Abū Bakr with searching questions: are we not in the right? Why accept humiliation in our religion? Abū Bakr's answer — hold fast to the

Prophet's stirrup, for he receives revelation and will not be abandoned — modelled how a trusted colleague can contain a comrade's dissent without denying its feeling. When the Prophet then ordered the Companions to sacrifice and shave, initial hesitation dissolved after he acted on Umm Salamah's counsel and performed the rites himself first.

The outcome vindicated patience on a grand scale. Sūrat al-Fatḥ declared the treaty a "clear victory" (Q 48:1); within two years the truce enabled the message to spread, delegations arrived, and Makkah opened with minimal bloodshed. For the study of disagreement, Ḥudaybiyah teaches several lessons: that even sincere, senior dissent can misread a situation because it lacks the leader's full information and mandate; that dissent expressed through proper channels, in questions rather than mutiny, does not break a community; that wise leadership answers emotional disagreement with action and example, not only argument; and that time is part of judgement — the Companions themselves later counted the treaty among Islam's greatest triumphs. The disagreement was real, recorded in the most authentic sources, and yet it strengthened rather than split the community because its manners held.

Judgement, Delegation and Everyday Differences

Other incidents show disagreement in delegated judgement. When the Prophet sent Muʿādh ibn Jabal to Yemen and asked how he would judge, Muʿādh described a hierarchy — the Book of Allah, then the Sunnah, then his own reasoned effort (ijtihād) — and the Prophet approved, thereby authorising independent reasoning where texts run out, the very space in which future disagreement would live. In administration, Companions occasionally differed with instructions from appointed commanders, and the Prophet's reported guidance that there is no obedience

to a created being in disobedience to the Creator set the boundary: disagreement with a human order is legitimate, even obligatory, at the point where it contradicts revelation — a principle that protects conscience without licensing rebellion over preferences.

There were also differences of temperament and assessment in the Prophet's household and circle that the sources treat matter-of-factly, and cases in which a Companion's independent action on campaign — such as a commander's controversial disciplinary order around a fire, later laughed about by the Prophet while its principle was corrected — show the pattern of correcting the rule while preserving the person. The well-known report of the "pen and paper" request near the end of the Prophet's life, in which those present differed over whether to bring writing materials to an ailing Prophet, is handled by scholars with particular care because of its later theological uses; for the ethics of disagreement its sober lesson is that moments of grief and ambiguity test a community's manners most severely, and that later generations sin against the incident when they weaponise it against the Companions rather than learning humility from it.

The common outcome across these cases is notable: no Companion was excommunicated, demoted in the community's memory, or permanently labelled for a difference of judgement. Correction, where revelation required it, was accepted; latitude, where the matter allowed it, was granted. The community emerged from its disagreements with more principles, not more parties.

Conclusion

In conclusion, disagreement in the Prophetic period was neither absent nor anarchic. At Banū Qurayẓah it produced the enduring principle that two sincere readings of an ambiguous instruction can both be accepted. At Badr it functioned as counsel, and its correction by revelation taught humility to the greatest generation. At Ḥudaybiyah it tested loyalty and patience, and its outcome transformed an apparent defeat into the doorway of victory. In delegation to Yemen it received a method — Book, Sunnah, then reasoned effort — that would structure all later ijtihād. The pattern of outcomes is consistent: disagreement conducted with sincerity, through proper channels, and submitted to legitimate authority enriched the community's law, strategy and character. That is why the classical scholars studied these incidents not as problems in the biography of the Prophet, but as the first textbook of the ethics of disagreement.

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Question 5: Disagreement and Mercy in Islamic Thought (20 Marks)

Discuss the relationship between disagreement and mercy in Islamic thought.

Introduction

Islam describes itself, and is described by its scripture, as a mercy: the Prophet is sent "only as a mercy to the worlds" (Q 21:107), and the Qur'an is a healing and a mercy for the believers (Q 17:82). It may therefore seem paradoxical that the history of this merciful religion is also a history of vigorous disagreement among its scholars. The Islamic tradition, however, did not experience the two as opposites. At its reflective best, it taught that legitimate disagreement —

difference arising from evidence in matters open to interpretation — is itself a vehicle of mercy: it widens the law's capacity to serve different people, times and places, and it trains the community in the merciful virtues of humility, patience and good opinion of others. This answer explores that relationship through the famous saying about disagreement and mercy, the flexibility of the law, the Prophetic precedents, the etiquette that mercy imposes on disputants, and the limits at which mercy requires disagreement to stop.

A careful answer must begin with honesty about sources. The saying "The disagreement of my community is a mercy" (ikhtilāfu ummatī raḥmah) is quoted everywhere in later literature, yet hadith critics have long noted that no sound chain of transmission establishes it as a verbatim statement of the Prophet; some classified its chain as weak or untraceable, while many scholars defended its meaning as true even if its wording is not firmly attributed. The distinction matters, because the topic of this answer — the relationship between disagreement and mercy — can be established from firmer evidence: the Qur'an's own acknowledgement of human difference, the Prophet's approval of divergent readings, and the observable functioning of the law across fourteen centuries. The meaning of the saying, tested against that evidence, is what this answer examines.

Disagreement as an Extension of the Law's Mercy

The first connection is legal and practical. The Sharīʿah governs prayer, fasting, trade, marriage, inheritance and crime for desert nomads and city merchants, for the healthy and the chronically ill, for the seventh century and the twenty-first. A single frozen interpretation of every probabilistic text would make the law brittle: people would constantly face rulings they

cannot practise, and hardship (ḥaraj) — which the Qur'an says God does not intend for the believers (Q 2:185; Q 22:78) — would multiply. The recorded disagreement of qualified jurists functions as stored flexibility. Where one school's reading eases the traveller, another's eases the sick person, the debtor, the new Muslim or the minority community, the believer benefits from the breadth of the tradition without anyone having violated a text. Classical and later jurists explicitly described this breadth as a mercy and a relief (saʿah) for the community, and the maxim that leaving a disputed matter's strictness for its legitimate latitude can serve the law's purposes runs through the literature of legal maxims (al-qawāʿid al-fiqhiyyah).

This mercy operates across time as well as across persons. Because disagreement was recorded rather than erased, later generations inherit options their own age may need more than the age that produced them. Medical questions about fasting, financial questions about modern contracts, and questions of worship in extreme latitudes have all been answered partly from preserved minority views. A tradition that had enforced uniformity would have faced each new century with fewer resources; a tradition that treasured its reasoned diversity faces novelty with a library of tested possibilities. In this precise sense, yesterday's disagreement becomes today's mercy.

Mercy in the Manner of Disagreeing

The second connection is moral: mercy governs not only what disagreement produces but how it is conducted. If the opponent is a fellow seeker of God's ruling, then mercy requires interpreting his position charitably, assuming his sincerity, and remembering that the Prophet taught that a mujtahid who strives and errs still receives a reward, while the one who strives

and is correct receives two (reported in al-Bukhārī and Muslim). A doctrine in which even the mistaken scholar is rewarded by God leaves no room for treating him as an enemy of God. From this root grew the celebrated manners of the imams: al-Shāfiʿī's statement that he never debated anyone without praying that truth appear on the other's tongue if it was with him; the mutual respect between Abū Ḥanīfah's, Mālik's and al-Shāfiʿī's circles despite real differences; and the refusal of the early scholars to anathematise opponents in matters of interpretation.

Mercy also appears as gentleness toward ordinary people caught between scholarly views. The tradition discourages burdening laypeople with the harshest available opinion in matters of legitimate difference, and it discourages publicising disputes in ways that confuse or frighten them. Fatwa ethics therefore include attention to the questioner's condition — a principle al-Shāṭibī and Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyyah discuss in terms of the changing of fatwa with time, place and circumstance. Disagreement handled without this mercy becomes a spectacle in which scholars win points while ordinary believers lose confidence in their religion; disagreement handled with it becomes pastoral care.

Theological Grounds: Why Difference Itself Is Not a Curse

Theologically, the Qur'an places human difference inside divine wisdom rather than outside it: "Had your Lord willed, He would have made mankind one community; but they will not cease to differ, except those on whom your Lord has mercy — and for that He created them" (Q 11:118–119). Commentators have long debated the exact reference of "for that", but many read the verses to teach at least this: difference is woven into the human condition by the Creator's permission, while mercy is the divine gift by which difference need not become

damnation or war. Another verse states that God made peoples and tribes different so that they may know one another (Q 49:13), locating the purpose of diversity in knowledge and recognition, not domination. Diversity of languages and colours is itself listed among the signs of God (Q 30:22); since much scholarly disagreement, as the discussion of linguistic variation shows, grows from language itself, the text invites believers to see even interpretive diversity against a background of divinely permitted human plurality.

None of this makes all opinions equal or all disagreement good. The same Qur'an condemns division into sects, disputes driven by envy after knowledge has come, and argument about what one does not know. The mercy reading of disagreement is therefore discriminating: disagreement is a mercy when it is the by-product of sincere interpretation within the bounds of revelation, and it forfeits that description when it becomes factionalism. Scholars who quoted the famous saying almost always paired it with this qualification, and some preferred to express the whole idea in the safer formula that the community's agreement is a proof and its reasoned disagreement is a breadth and a mercy, provided hearts remain united.

When Mercy Requires Limiting Disagreement

The relationship runs in both directions: just as disagreement can serve mercy, mercy sometimes requires disagreement to be restrained. Mercy to the community means not publicising a valid but confusing minority view where it will predictably cause chaos; the jurists' principle that the ruler or judge may adopt one legitimate view for public administration (so that courts give consistent judgements) is an act of mercy toward litigants, not a betrayal of scholarship. Mercy to an erring person can mean correcting him privately before publicly,

gradually rather than harshly, and with the door of return left open. Mercy to oneself means abandoning a debate that is corrupting one's own heart, even at the cost of "losing" it. And mercy to the truth itself means refusing false tolerance where a matter is certain: compassion does not require pretending that clear prohibitions are optional, and the scholars who were gentlest with interpreters were firmest about foundations. The mature tradition thus holds together what slogans separate — breadth in interpretation, gentleness in manner, and firmness in essentials — and calls the combination, as a whole, mercy.

For contemporary communities the practical yield is considerable. Mosques and families divided over school-level differences in worship style, moon-sighting, or cultural practice can reframe their disputes by asking the mercy questions: Is this matter one of legitimate ijtihād? Whom does my strictness burden? Whom does my manner wound? Would the imams whose names we invoke recognise our behaviour as theirs? Communities that learn to ask these questions discover that the disagreement itself was rarely the problem; the absence of mercy in handling it was.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the relationship between disagreement and mercy in Islamic thought is deep and reciprocal. The famous saying that the community's disagreement is a mercy cannot be firmly established as a Prophetic wording, but its qualified meaning is borne out by the Qur'an's teaching on human difference, by the Prophet's approval of divergent sincere readings, by the reward promised even to the erring mujtahid, and by fourteen centuries in which recorded juristic diversity has eased the lives of believers in every land and age. Disagreement is a mercy

when it stores flexibility in the law, when it is conducted with charity toward opponents and gentleness toward ordinary people, and when it remains within the bounds of interpretation. And mercy, in turn, disciplines disagreement: restraining its publicity when it would confuse, correcting its errors without cruelty, and refusing to extend its licence over the certainties of the faith. Held together in this way, disagreement is not the opposite of the religion of mercy; it is one of the places where that mercy becomes visible.

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