



Assalamu Alaykum

Dear Students,

I hope this letter reaches you with the best of health and Iman. Just sending a reflection.

What does it mean to be “religious?” I receive this question many times -- would you consider yourself religious -- and I have trouble answering it. Ultimately, it speaks to the motivations of my actions: either I am serving Allah or my baser, narcissist self. It is a question of how selfless and how self-less I am.

I think of my parents, who are very hardcore in many of their Islamic practices; over the years I have watched them increase in their Islamic practices. My father has been, for example, praying all five prayers in the mosque for a few decades. I think of my teachers, who have chosen lives of simplicity and meager incomes, in order to serve the Divine. I think of those of my peers who have traveled across the world, through Africa, the Middle East, South Asia, and Southeast Asia to acquire knowledge. For some reason, I want to associate religiosity with effort.


Often in our community, we associate religiosity with costumes. If a woman covers her hair, we regard her as more pious than a woman who does not. We often associate a man’s level of piety with the length of his facial hair: somehow, if the beard is longer, we take it to mean that the man is more pious. Further, we also seem to have a measuring stick of piety according to the foreign-ness of the clothing: the more non-Western the clothing, the more it gives the illusion of piety. The more Arab the clothing, the more we tend to associate the bearer with piety, especially if s/he is non-Arab. This particular point is especially interesting because the attire of the Companions of the Prophet -p- seemed to resemble South Asian Shalvar-Kameez more than the modern Arab Thobe.

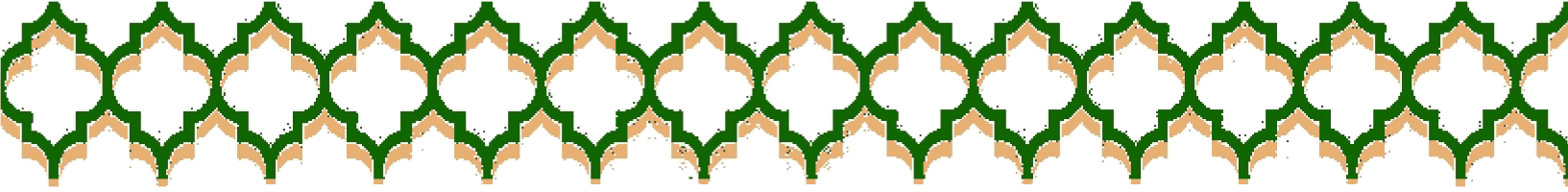
In any case, all of this contributes to the reasons you see me dress the way I do: I don’t want people to start thinking I’m pious, especially if they base my piety on where I shop for clothing. Furthermore, much of my clothes and your clothes might be made in sweatshops. We have a fundamental problem if some “Islamic” object -- be it a scarf, a shirt, a prayer rug, or a set of beads or sweatervest and jeans -- is made from exploited labor.

So, we know that we are not in a position to measure another person’s religiosity. If we see the actions of piety, we should associate them with piety. But, if we do not see those markings, then we should not assume that a person is not pious. So, we can assume a person is pious, but we cannot assume a person is impious. In other words, it is generally okay to assume someone is more religious than us, but it is not as okay to assume that someone is less religious. Generally. So, if you see someone praying, think "Alhamdulillah, may Allah accept their prayers." If, however, you never see someone pray, think (again), "Alhamdulillah, may Allah accept their prayers."

Thus, how do we measure our own piety? For starters, four arenas of life: how much do we serve Allah, how much do we serve others, and how much do we care for what Allah has given us. And, how do we do it.

Measure the quality and quantity of your service to Allah. The first step is to know what Allah wants from you. Then, figure out what you are consistent on, both in terms of quantity and





quality. So, your prayers: figure out how consistent you are in fulfilling them, and figure out how consistent you are in your concentration and devotion in those prayers.

Measure the quality of your character and service to others. So, while you are a student, do you cheat? If yes, then I hope that you do not get into Med School. But, aside from that, the point is that character is also central to Islamic religiosity. You cannot be a good believer and have bad character. Some companions complained to the Prophet -p- about a fellow who would make his prayers yet would go out and rob people. They were told that either his prayers would outweigh the effects of robbing, in his heart, or his robbing would outweigh the effects of praying. Meaning, your actions affect your belief. This category of character implies that we owe truth to others. We also owe trustworthiness to others. And, sometimes, we owe our material possessions to others.

Measure how you take care of what Allah has entrusted you with. This includes your body, wealth, possessions, and if you have children, your children. How much do you take care of these things? How clean are you?

The fourth involves the overall focus on excellence. For everything you do -- religious, secular, important, mundane -- do you focus on doing it in excellence. That is very central to our Tradition. The believer, we are taught, seeks excellence in everything s/he does. Excellence is not something that can be achieved overnight. Excellence is not a process of hitting a grand slam with every attempt. It finds its manifestation through long term patient, persistent perseverance. Except in the case of someone like Mozart, who seems to have written his greatest works in a single draft, the greatest accomplishments in history were the result of tireless hours of effort and perfection.

In sum, the first three speak of submission, compassion, and trust. The opposite of these would involve “submitting” to Allah on our own terms rather than His. Further, instead of compassion, we might fall into vanity. Instead of caring for what we’ve been entrusted with, we might fall into a sense of entitlement. All three wrong approaches are fundamentally narcissist. The fourth speaks of quality and precision. The opposite would be negligence. Many scholars of the heart regard negligence (ghafla) as the biggest of vices, for it allows us satisfaction with mediocrity in our service to the Divine, our character, and our nurturing of what we were entrusted with.

So, am I religious? I don’t know. But I know I have plenty of specifics to improve upon.

And God knows best.

May Allah bless you.

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