Assalamu Alaykum

Dear Students,

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

More reflections on what it means to be "religious," especially in distinguishing between imagination and reality.

The Catholic Church has recently installed Blase Joseph Cupich (pronounced SOO-pich) as the Archbishop of Chicago. Most of you have been alive long enough to know him as the third of Chicago's nine Archbishops. I'm a bit older: I vaguely remember the funeral of Cardinal John Cody. But, during my formative years, Chicago's Archbishop was Cardinal Joseph Bernadin. Looking at Wikipedia, I'm surprised that Cardinal Francis George has been Archbishop longer than him. In my mind, even though he has stepped down because of terminal health issues, he's still the new guy.

Bernadin was depicted as a saint -- in all senses of the word -- especially in his final years, as he succumbed to cancer. He had an equanimity in his disposition, regardless of the struggles he faced. He didn't seem to run or hide from problems. Francis George was very active in building bridges with the Muslim community. On the side of the Council of Islamic Organizations of Greater Chicago, I (along with Professors Hermansen and Nizamuddin) am part of a project to connect our scholars with theirs. George's outreach will hopefully have effect and benefit long into the future.

It might be fair to say that Chicago Archbishops have had a huge impact on me personally, in defining the conduct of a religious person. Even though I knew Cardinals Bernadin and George only through television, I saw men who were deep into their faith, who were serious, yet friendly. These were men addressing religion in the contemporary urban world. Most notably, they were comfortable in their skin, in belief. When they spoke (again, on camera) they had an affability in their tone, which was not something I was used to hearing from our own scholars. Of course, when I was growing up, nearly all of our own Muslim scholars were gents from overseas, for whom English was not a strength.

Our society tells us that the "ideal" religious persons are Mother Theresa, the Dalai Lama, and perhaps Pope Francis. In the case of the first, we admired her for giving up her life to serve the impoverished. In the case of the second, we admire his simplicity, perhaps his mastery of the self, as well as his efforts against state occupation. In the case of the current Pope, he embodies service to the poor against systemic obstructions.

In the Muslim majority countries of the world, those "ideal" religious people would be Abdul Sattar Edhi in Pakistan and Fethullah Gulen of Turkey (though he lives in Pennsylvania). Edhi has provided social services to hundreds of thousands. Gulen has transformed Turkey from an aggressively secular environment to one that is now openly Muslim. In American Islam, it is Malcolm X, who "gave his life because he loved us so." I'm not including recent Nobel Laureate Malala Yousafzai because she is still a kid, despite seeming to have far more life experience and backbone than I have.

From a Muslim lens, the Catholic Church is fascinating because it has its continuously running central authority. This does not mean that there is uniformity in opinion; rather, Catholics have as much variance in opinions as any other religious population. The advantage of such a structure, however, is a uniformity across the world at some level of doctrine, as well as an efficiency in accomplishing things. Islam is decentralized, and has been for more than 1300 of its 1400+ years. For such groups as the Ismailis, the Ahmadiyya, and the Nation of Islam, there are central authorities and rules of membership. Within the Shia and Sunni, we find individuals who have not just loyal, but obedient followings. Among the Sunnis, these are usually Sufi Shaykhs, the heads of the various Sufi Orders (Turuq). Among the Shias, these are often Ayatullahs, especially those who are Marja-e Taqlid (Maraji).

But, for the most part, the Muslim world lacks a central authority. The result is a giant conversation, in theory, across the spectrum of ideas and practices. The global soup we call Islam is full of every type and shape of theology, ideology, and practice. The vast majority, however, do indeed fall into a very small set of schools, with most issues getting addressed with just a handful of opinions. But, because there is no central authority, there is no central calibration. Meaning, Islam in this worldly life becomes whatever you understand or want it to become; there is nobody who can stop you, theoretically.

In some places in the world, you might get subjected to violence if your views or practices do not conform to someone else's standards. In Pakistan, Ahmedis, Shias, Ismailis, and Sufis are frequently targeted. In Iran and Syria, Sunnis are frequently targeted. In certain regions in Central Asia, those who are perceived to practice a political Islam are targeted. Some Sufis often target Wahhabis and Salafis. In Iraq, it is not as clear who is not targeted. In civil society, however, if someone wants to do something wacky and call it Islam, they have freedom to do so.

This does not mean that all the different variants of "Islam" will find salvation. Within the major schools, especially the ancient schools, there are centuries of debate over who can earn or be granted salvation (and who cannot or will not). While the agreed upon answer is that "Allah is the judge," the point here is that in my worldly life I might be free to do what I want, but my next-worldly conduct -- according to the vast majority opinion -- will involve answering to certain expectations. Almost every one of the different schools and sects of Islam agrees that there is a Day of Judgment. At least two small minority schools say that the passages in the Qur'an about this Day are metaphor: there is nothing after death.

The point in all this is that the way you live your life -- more than the way you "think" you should live your life -- defines what Islam is to you. You look at your day from start to finish. Your actions and thoughts reveal what Islam is to you. Look at how you spent the past week: that is your answer for what it means to be religious, what it means to be upright, what it means to be proper.

We often live in our imaginations. Most of us would never regard our conduct to be the best of conduct. Instead, we would speak of figures in history, whether we speak of the Prophet -p, the Imams, the Sahaba, or past figures in history as exemplars. Or, we might speak of the best apparent qualities we impose onto contemporary celebrity scholars. Or, we might speak of people in our personal worlds, according to what we perceive to be the best of their qualities. All

of these are in our imaginations. These are real people with real qualities, but we know them only through specific lenses, whether that lens is community, text, or television. A person's Islam might be influenced by divinely-ordained people, sacred text, heroes of past or present. It might even be influenced by non-Muslims, like the Catholics I mention above. But, it is our own conduct, in practice, that reveals what we really think.

Once we start becoming honest with ourselves about what we do and why we do those things, then we can start talking about improvement, Insha Allah. But, what we do and why we do the things we do, meaning what we are consistent at (in positive or negative behavior), is what we in practice embody as acceptable, proper behavior. If we didn't regard it as acceptable or proper, we would try to change it. If we don't at least try to change it, we are saying it is okay.

And God knows best.

May Allah bless you.

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