



Assalamu Alaykum

Dear Students,

I hope this letter reaches you with the best of health and Iman. Just sending a reflection, as the Muslim Chaplain for all of you.

About a week after completing his one and only Hajj (as a pilgrim), the Prophet (may be upon him) headed home. He reached a valley, known as Wadi Rabigh. Within that valley, he reached the pond, Ghadir Khumm. In this event, which is authenticated in sources of both the major sectarian groups, the Prophet -p- is reported to have told us that whoever takes him (the Prophet -p-) as his mawla, that Ali (may Allah be pleased with him) is his mawla. In some narrations, instead of “mawla,” we have a variant, “wali.” We will come back to this in a moment.


I’m making this point to speak not about the differences between Shi’i (Shia) and Sunni, though that is part of the discussion. Rather, to make the point that on campus and in society, we have all different kinds of “Muslims.” For those of you who know what these terms mean, I am Sunni. Within Sunni, I tend to be a Hanafi.

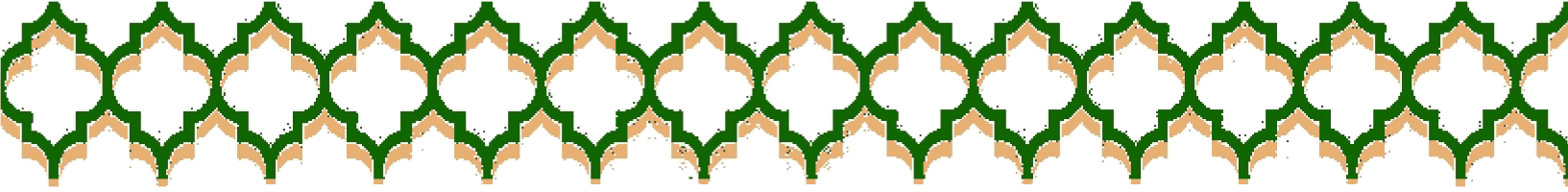
On campus, we have had and have so many different types of Muslims: Sunnis, Shias. Within the general umbrella of Sunnis, we definitely have presences of Hanafis, Shafi’is, Malikis, Salafis. I’m sure we have Wahhabis (and yes, that is a real thing). We have Sufis, Brelvis, Mahdavis. Among the Shias, we have Jafaris (Imamis, Ithna Asharis), Isma’ilis, Bohras. We have Ahmadis. We have had members of the Nation of Islam. I have a friend at a different school who is Ibadi. I’ve also had Alawis among my students over the years. And, of course, we have Muslims who might not fit into any known category. On campus, we even have former Muslims who attend nothing related to Islam, or they attend cultural events.

On paper, for the untrained researcher, it might be difficult to find the differences between many of these groups. Or, the differences might seem -- to the outsider -- to be matters of nitpicking. Another person will see these different groups as a sign of diversity. Yet another will see this as a sign of division. It is in the eye of the beholder.

The real, practical difference, however, is in the spirit and experience of each of these groups; the real difference is in the consciousness of the lay-believer. A Sunni and a Shia, both of the same specific ethnicity, both raised on the same street in Chicago throughout their lives, both going to the same schools Monday through Friday from Kindergarten through College, will have two different experiences in their consciousnesses. In the same way, a Catholic and a Lutheran, both of the same ethnicity, neighborhood, schooling, will have two different experiences in life, especially in their consciousnesses.

The point is that in the population of Muslims, there is a large variety. Now, whether or not you know what these terms mean is not the question here. According to the orthodoxies within these various traditions, some of the other schools mentioned above are categorically not Muslim; if that describes you, I am not asking you to change your beliefs because of social norms or





correctness. You should follow your beliefs as you understand them. You should search within and beyond your beliefs as you feel compelled to do so.

For the campus community, however, those views are not immediately relevant, except in time of prayer (or marriage). Meaning, I am the Chaplain for all of you. Likewise, that prayer space is for all of you. Because of my own studies and because of growing up in Chicago, it is likely that I know your traditions better than you do, but I'm always learning. And, because I'm also a Professor, teaching the academic study of Islam, I would recommend each of you to learn more about your own and about other traditions within and outside of "Islam." You will be surprised by what you do and do not find.


It is especially interesting to see how different communities give different meaning to the same events. In the case of Islam, Christianity, and Judaism, we each have narratives of the Prophet Ibrahim (Abraham), peace be upon him, taking his son to be sacrificed. Some of the moments of the three stories are identical. Some are different. But the meaning and value of this event is different for each of the three Traditions.

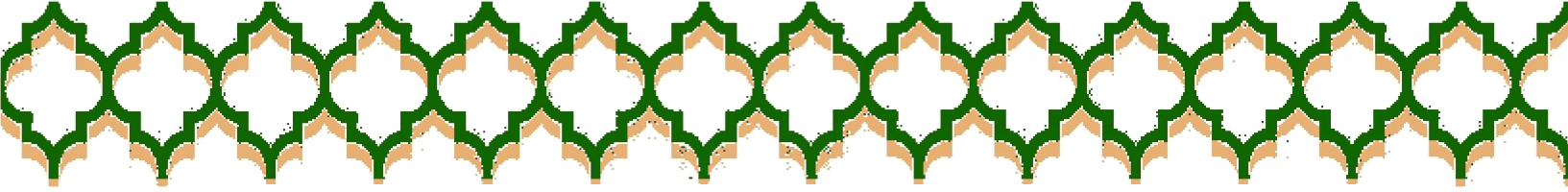
This weekend is the anniversary of the Prophet's -p- sermon at Ghadir Khumm. The Prophet, may peace be upon him, is reported to have said that whoever takes him (the Prophet) as his master, then Ali is his master. The variant is that whoever takes him as his intimate friend, then Ali is his intimate friend.

In Shia tradition, it is a major moment during which the Prophet -p- announces Ali, may Allah be pleased with him, as his successor. In Sunni tradition, it is a statement about the greatness of Ali, may Allah ennoble his face. In Shia tradition, it is not the only such reference about the importance of Ali. In Sunni tradition, it is not the only reference about the importance of Ali, yet it is one of a number of references about the greatnesses of a number of the closest Companions (Sahaba) of the Prophet, may peace be upon him. Again, where this event holds prominence in your outlook is up to you; this letter is not trying to convince you to change anything.

The meaning of this event in the two traditions also gives hint to the nature of some common disagreements between members of the groups, related to their consciousnesses. Whether or not any of these sentiments are accurate is besides the point: they are common. It is a common sentiment among some Shias that some Sunnis abandon the Prophet's -p- family, thus they abandon him. Likewise, it is a common sentiment among some Sunnis that some Shias curse the Sahaba. Because Sunnis commonly see themselves as the default of Islam, some wonder why Shias seem (from Sunni perspectives) to splinter off. Because Shias see themselves as uniquely loyal to the Prophet's -p- house, they see (in Shia perspectives) Sunnis as selfishly usurping the rights of his family, may peace be upon him and may Allah be pleased with them.

It is also common for lay-believers of either side to get unintentionally paternalistic and competitive against the others, mistakenly believing that they are better, more pious, or more upright than members of the other side. Likewise, it is common for some to quote texts from each other to legitimize their own points.





But, it is also common among the two groups not to care, especially when there is not a political necessity to do so. In many Muslim populations, the differences of Sunni and Shia play out as cultural differences, but not as social differences, especially because the variances even within these two sectarian methods are vast. But, when there is a political necessity (i.e. mass violence against a group), then the religious identification might be a ticket to a mass grave.

Still, the result of both of these processes of stereotyping and othering is something worth noting: the tension that some Sunni might feel as a default sentiment toward some Shia, or that some Shia might feel as a default sentiment toward some Sunni is something rather common between them. Both tensions are an expression of love for the Prophet, may peace be upon him. When you love someone, especially as passionately as a Muslim loves the Prophet (may peace be upon him), then you love what he -p- loves, passionately. And, if the beloveds of the beloved are not given their due, then it provokes a visceral, emotional response. I am not saying that the tensions are justified, for usually they are not. But they are understandable, until they become institutionalized (at which point they become harmful). But, regardless of which of these many traditions that lay claim to Islam is or is not authentic, it cannot be denied that almost all of them place the Prophet -p- at the center of our outlooks and services toward Allah.

We will talk about some of these issues more in the near future, Insha Allah, but in closing I have to make one more point. As you know, because I speak about Islam at various places, religious and secular, I also get exposed to the various sentiments toward us. Simply put: Islamophobia is back with full force. Through the lens of Islamophobia, nobody cares what type of Muslim you are, or how religious you are. As too many Sikhs know, the Islamophobes don't even care if you are Muslim, as long as you "look" Muslim. While only Allah will decide which approach(es) to Islam are acceptable, the Islamophobe seeks out all in his/her crosshairs to attack. Thus, if your approach to your beliefs requires you to call out another person who considers him/herself Muslim, understand that there is someone else targeting both of you.

But, I say to each of you, Insha Allah, you are each safe with me. Consider the Muslim prayer space as a safe space, especially when I'm there. Consider my office in particular, and Campus Ministry in general to be a safe space.

Allahumma salli 'ala Muhammad, wa 'ala aalihi, wa as'habihi, wa barik wa sallim.

Oh, Allah, we call upon you with all Your names, to shower your blessings upon the Prophet, and upon his family, and upon his companions, and bless them and extend greetings to them.

May Allah bless you.

Omer Mozaffar
Muslim Chaplain
Loyola University Chicago

