

## Continuing the Shia-Sunni Dialogue

### Editor's Note:

***“Darkness cannot drive out darkness: only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate: only love can do that.” – Martin Luther King jr.***

These are grave times in Pakistan. Every day you hear stories of pain and violence. The recent events that have eclipsed Rawalpindi have left us all in shock. The pain is real; the wounds are only deepening. However, in this darkness, let us not point fingers at each other, start relentless blame-games that will only cause more pain... The events themselves are still unclear. There are so many different first-hand accounts, so many different “truths” to what happened that day.

One thing is clear, we need to exercise caution in what we share as the truth. In these times of uncertainty, let us not be divided amongst each other. Let us not make this a sectarian conflict. For centuries, Shias and Sunnis have coexisted peacefully in this region. Even today we hear of harmony:

[http://www.bbc.co.uk/urdu/pakistan/2013/03/130321\\_shia\\_sunni\\_harmony\\_village\\_tim.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/urdu/pakistan/2013/03/130321_shia_sunni_harmony_village_tim.shtml)

It is difficult to see another's point of view when we're blinded by our misconceptions. Sometimes we become so caught up with “our way or the highway,” that we fail to acknowledge “the other.” Let us not make our brothers (and sisters), “the other.”

This Muharram, as a Sunni I was deeply saddened to hear the same stereotypes perpetuated against Shias. It is tragic that we as a society have become like scattered moths. It is in times like these when we must band together and attempt to learn from each other. There are so many untruths that Sunnis hear about Shias, and Shias hear about Sunnis. It is not my intention to start a theological debate here; only learned scholars from both communities are well-equipped to handle those questions. But what we can do is listen to each other, have an open mind, and ASK QUESTIONS instead of assuming things that are not even true.

Maha Kamal

**“And hold fast to the Rope of Allah, and be not divided among yourselves”  
Quran 3:103**

## **Some common stereotypes addressed by a Shia volunteer:**

As part of this process, one of our volunteers, **Syed Hamza Ali**, attempted to answer some common stereotypes that were asked in a general survey in the community.

### **About Hamza :**

29 year old Hamza is from a very traditional Lahori family, who are strongly Shia. His grandparents are from the walled city in original Lahore, where they still have a haveli that is still part of the main Muharram juloos on the 9<sup>th</sup> of Muharram. He graduated from the Lahore University of Management Sciences (LUMS) in 2008, where he wrote papers exploring Sectarian violence, and has looked at Muharram processions from an anthropological perspective. He moved to Berlin, Germany to study advertising from Miami Ad School, and is currently working for an advertising agency in Paris, France.

*“I'm often at the end of Shia-Sunni debates with friends; I thought I'll try to answer a few questions that were posted. Of course, I'm not scholar but some questions are very general and don't need ijtehad. Of course, generally minorities tend be more tightly knit and more informed about themselves, as they feel the need to protect themselves from the majority. So being a Shia, I believe we feel obliged to be a little more informed so we can answer some of these questions.” - Hamza*

## **Why some of them do not show respect for the Prophet's(PBUH) family and the four caliphs?**

Shias have undying respect for his (pbuh) family of course. They believe they are a part of that family. Indeed most 'Syeds' are in fact from that family and their family trees can be traced back to the Prophet (pbuh). As far as the caliphate is concerned, that's where the divide in Shia-Sunni begins from. Shias believe in the event of Ghadeer, which happened at the last Hajj of the Prophet (pbuh) in which he gathered all the pilgrims and declared at the spot called Ghadir that Hazrat Ali (a.s) will be his successor. Of course, there's debate and disagreement about that. It has been debated for centuries so we can't expect to resolve it. But I do recommend going deep into this topic. It's very interesting to explore.

## **Why is there a stark contrast between your personalities (being more offensive, more active religious preaching etc) during the rest of the year and during Muharram?**

I believe this is true for most muslims in Pakistan and maybe all over the world. We tend to be very different in holy months. e.g. the same person is the most pious person in the history of man in Ramazan compared to other months. Likewise, some or most shias tend to be more 'islami' or more 'shia' in muharram. Of course a lot of us don't even pray regularly but believe that somehow this might compensate for it. There are a lot of things which I believe are wrong that we do but that's a long debate. Ideally, we would be equally religious throughout the year. But it's convenient for us to at least be religious in holy months

## **Why do you think Sunnis don't celebrate Ashura with the same religious zeal as you do?**

Now, this I think is a very very important question and I hope you highlight this in some post. For every Majlis (those which require a loud speaker) and every procession, a person needs to obtain a license from the government. You would be astonished to know that a lot of the very old traditional ones are in fact in the name of Sunnis. Believe it or not, Sunnis were actually more active than shias in observing muharram. My grandfather was sunni and the rest of my family is shia, but my grandfather was actually more of a shia than everyone else. What happened was that, after the Islamisation of Zia's regime, the extreme wahabi version was imported from Saudi. Which radicalized our country. Shias were labelled kafirs and naturally sunnis slowly started to distance themselves. (In my opinion) Shias felt offended naturally, and started observing ashura more radically in protest. From there on we started seeing some very strange rituals which became a part of muharram processions. Even, now I'm sometimes shocked to see some things during muharram which are more indian than anything else. Anyway, to sum up, sunnis were a part of it, very much the centre of it, but after the 80s the fate of this country was single handedly murdered by the one person who did the most damage to us. Also if I may add the word 'celebrate' is probably not appropriate to use with Ashura. It's definitely not a celebration but an observation.

## **What is your method of praying and why don't you observe the same fast timings as ours?**

We essentially offer the prayers the same way. There are small differences. For a prayer there are some essentials which we have to do. These are same for sunnis and shias. But then there are some recommended things which are essentially where the differences lie. One major talking point is the position of the arms. For this I just have one thought, our Prophet (pbuh) prayed a countless times during his life time. And indeed he prayed in congregation a lot. There were plenty of people who prayed with him and learned how to pray from him. And prayer being the 2nd most important thing

in our believe after Wahdat of Allah, I would like to believe that those ppl would've really written it down how to pray properly. So what I personally deduced was that maybe our Prophet (pbuh) sometimes prayed with his arms open and sometimes prayed with his arms tied. Maybe that's why we all have different ways. Just my opinion of course

As far as fasting is concerned, we open our fast a few minutes later. The reason for that is that the ayah in the quran related to opening the fast says something like "take your fast into the night". And here there is a difference in interpretation among Sunni and Shia scholars. Some believe into the night means at the exact moment of dusk, while some believe it means to wait a little till it becomes dark and theres no visible redness of the sun.

**I want to know why they express their grief through striking each other with sharp pointy things. What's the point? One isn't supposed to mourn the death of even a relative for more than 3 days. So then why do they continue to do so centuries later. I understand their grief. It is mutual but they needn't observe it in such a way that has not been shown by our prophet or ordered by Islam.**

This a very long debate. Some people believe its completely un-islamic to mourn like we do. Some people believe it's very islamic and we should mourn like this. My only suggestion/thought is it's easy to believe if someone tells you something like (e.g. "don't mourn more than 3 days") but maybe there is no such thing in Islam where our prophet (pbuh) specified a number of days for mourning. Anyway, the reason we make such a scene is obviously to keep the message alive. I believe if we don't make such a scene it will slowly die. And in a few decades or maybe more, we'll completely forget the importance of Muharram.

But I do agree we need to change a few things we do. Zanjirzanni, is something I dont personally agree with. And I can assure you that this debate has been going on within Shias for a while as well.

**Why do you hate the Sahaba even though they were the closest to the Prophet(s)? Why can't we agree that Abu Bakr(r) was a rightful Khalifa. Ali(r) agreed after all."**

Yes, this a the biggest debate. There's a lot written on this topic. picking up a few books would give you a better picture. Hazrat Ali (a.s) agreed in the end but there were a lot of events before that.

(**Editor's note:** see this Fatwa by Ayatollah Khamenei which bans any insult on the sahaba on [http://www.dailymotion.com/video/x17asqe\\_world-shia-leader-ali-khamenei-fatwa-on-insulting-sahaba-r-a\\_news](http://www.dailymotion.com/video/x17asqe_world-shia-leader-ali-khamenei-fatwa-on-insulting-sahaba-r-a_news) )

## **Why do you think Quran had 40 paras (volumes)? And what happened to the 10 absent paras?**

Nope. This is completely wrong. We read the same Quran. In fact, my family and even my mother learned Quran from Sunni Maulvis more than Shia ones.

## **I think one of my burning questions for the ordinary middle-class Shia would be about their own understanding of the conflict: do they feel safe pursuing a future in Pakistan? Do they think of the extremist killings as prejudice that is steeped within society?**

I'm afraid it has become a massive problem, as we've seen from the riots in pindi this year. I also believe that it's largely political. I don't believe any Muslim/Humanbeing really kills another person because he believes in something else. Just my opinion, of course. I believe that's mostly political. And unfortunately it has become almost unlivable in some areas. I moved out of Pakistan earlier this year. Half my family lives outside of pakistan now. There was a time in the 90s when it was equally bad. At that point, most Shias removed their names from the gates. It has come to the same now. I wish it wasn't like this but yes most shias have started to move out or at least give it a serious thought. I was lucky enough to be able to afford moving out but there are millions who can't. Don't get me wrong I love pakistan and I love lahore. This was my 1st muharram in 29 years of my existence that I wasn't in *Mochi* gate, a part of the main muharram procession from *Nisar haveli*. It fault awful to not be there. But the last few years when I was there, I kept hoping and wishing I was in a safer place. And I was constantly thinking something would blow up. It's sad but its a reality we now live in.

But I'm so glad that this discussion is beginning to bother anyone and people are talking about this. Because for decades we have put this under the carpet.

I wish you all the best. Please feel free to contact me or any/many Shias out there. It's always better to talk and remove misconceptions than to believe ridiculous things like putting children in halems.