

The Suhba Papers: The Company You Are and the Company You Keep

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In the Name of Allah the Compassionate the Merciful. All praise is due to Allah, and may the peace and blessings of Allah be upon His beloved messenger.

"I was only sent to perfect good character"

The Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him)¹

There is, perhaps, a tension between one's striving to feed, uplift, and save one's soul and the recognition of one's own imperfection and humanity. This tension is manifested at the community level in the individual's need for a like-minded community in which one can feel at home, authentic and true in one's practice, and spiritually uplifted in both states and practice. If this tension is not resolved, the results are often tragic.

One of the great tragedies of the past decade for Muslims in the West, and presumably the decades that preceded it, was the disintegration of some communities that were based on very narrow parameters for defining one's orthodoxy and legitimacy. The failure of other efforts at forging united Muslim communities in America—no less tragic—partially stemmed from having no real sense of limits, no convincing ability to express the borders of Islamic belief and practice. But beyond these essentially methodological challenges was perhaps a failure in Islamic education, namely, a failure to teach and make as a priority the Qur'anic and Sunnaic guidelines for social interaction at the community level.

The tragedy of these failures, and the failures of other efforts between these two aforementioned extremes, is not necessarily the failure of the ideological missions of these groups, but rather the social tragedy. The sense of elation and camaraderie of working with a group of like-minded people towards a common goal is painfully missed when infighting, argumentation, and disintegration set in. In some cases, this common-cause and sense of camaraderie was what kept a person in the mosque and out of trouble. The shock of its disintegration, and the lack of a suitable substitute, in some worst-case scenarios, led to leaving the community and all but the basic practices of Islam or even outright apostasy.

Many people want mosques or community organizations that reflect their views of "true Islam", which usually entails a particular balance between proper adherence to one's religious perspectives (beliefs and practices) and proper acceptance of one's religious imperfections. Sister Zubayda, for example, wants a mosque where the men dress properly, instead of showing up in their soccer uniforms, and where the ladies don't make her feel like a strumpet for wearing a pink hijab. Brother Ahmad wants a mosque where

¹ Found in Imam Malik's *Muwatta'* and Imam Ahmad's *Musnad*

there's not too much "back-home" politics in the khutbas, and where no one tugs his beard to see if it's the proper length.

When Ahmad or Zubayda decide that their mosques are too strict about issue X and/or too wishy-washy about issue Y, they might abandon it in search of another mosque, center, or community which has the right balance. The problem is, rarely does one find agreement on the proper balance of Xs and Ys. If we add cultural differences and preferences to the equation, the opportunities for communal disintegration grows exponentially.

I respect that there are many people who just feel more at home in their Turkish/Somali/Bosnian/Egyptian/Moroccan/Ugandan/Salafi/Sufi/Hanafi/Shafi'i/Ikhwanī/Tablighi/MSA etc. mosques and groups. As Dorothy aptly stated in *The Wizard of Oz*, "there's no place like home." But we need to be able to transcend these affiliations for the greater good, though without sacrificing our own positions, beliefs, and practices.

Through a series of short articles, I would like to present some suggestions based on my studies of Islam and my experiences as a Muslim in America, which I believe could, if properly implemented, have a profound effect on the quality of our experiences within our various Muslim communities.

The subjects treated will be as follows:

Community Unity and the Importance of Suhba (the company you keep).

Conflict Resolution: The Etiquette of Disagreement and Finding One's Comfort Zone

Good Character: A Qur'anic Imperative and Community Necessity.

Ihsanic Gatherings: Implementing Spiritual Perfection in Community Gatherings

I have called this series of articles "Suhba Papers", basing myself on the Arabic term Suhba, whose meanings include friendship, comradeship, company, friends. The series of articles all boil down to the importance of being good company, seeking good company, and being unified despite our differences.

We will begin with a discussion of balancing the religious and social need for community unity and the importance of keeping (and being) spiritually uplifting company. The Qur'an and the Sunnah contain significant injunctions regarding staying unified and avoiding fragmentation, but at the individual level, these injunctions become more challenging with the need for keeping the company of those who can strike a balance between calling one to better oneself while graciously accepting one's shortcomings.

Next, we will move on to the tricky subject of dealing with disagreements in legal and theological issues within Islam, without compromising one's own opinions and practices. The scholars of Islam have divided religious matters into two main categories: those over which there is total consensus, and those over which there are varying degrees of legitimate disagreement. How these categories are approached at the scholarly level will be discussed, as well as how the existence of scholarly disagreement can be a source of community harmony, rather than dissonance.

Even if all cultural and scholarly disagreements were to miraculously disappear, there is still the problem of our own human faults and failings which affect all communal endeavors. Therefore the next installment will treat the Qur'anic and Sunnaic command to good character, with a focus on how the failure to fulfill this command is often the hidden weakness in many community endeavors.

Finally, we will treat several practical solutions that can be easily put into practice that can help to create a sense of unity within our communities, without compromising our diversity.

The Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) said that he was only sent to perfect good character. Thus, this series of articles is intended to call attention to the fact that changing our world, begins with changing ourselves and our local communities. Changing ourselves does not only entail increasing in worship and decreasing in the obvious sins so prevalent in our societies. Changing our communities does not only entail calling people to the prayer and forbidding them from the major sins. Rather, it also entails taking on the Prophetic states and traits—such as patience (sabr) and good manners (husnul khuluq)—in our personal and communal lives. In fact, these articles are arguing that applying the Qur'anic and Sunnaic injunctions regarding getting along despite our differences should be raised to one of the highest priorities in our communities, right up there with education, political activism, disaster relief, charity, and calling others to Islam. The success of these aforementioned community priorities are dependent on our ability to work together, and our ability to work together is largely dependent on our perfecting the strength and content of our character.