

Suhba Papers III:

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

The first time I visited a mosque, I had about as perfect an experience as one could hope for. I was a scraggly, longhaired guitar player in search of the Truth, ready to put into practice the beliefs that I had been acquiring over a few years of independent study. I met an exceptionally kind student from MIT who showed me where to put my shoes, and then I headed into the prayer room. Someone said “As Salaamu Alaykum” and I responded “solemn” or “Salem” or something like that. “Ah, we have a guest,” said one of the men in the mosque, and I was politely greeted and escorted to the main office where I could meet the Imam.

A few theological conversations and a tray of cookies later, I was pronouncing the Shahada (the testification of faith that enters one into Islam) before witnesses, despite my insistence that I had already done so in my heart. Then I began hanging out at the mosque, meeting all kinds of Muslims, and vividly experiencing many of the joys and pains, strengths and shortcomings, of Boston’s Muslim community in the late 1990s.

In addition to being thoroughly amazed by Islam’s beauty manifested in the manners and practices of some truly incredible people, I was also shocked and surprised by some of the things that I was being told to do or not do, and especially the manner in which I was being told. Why was it that the local Imams would tell me that I could keep playing my guitar, while some of the voices in the mosque or on the internet were saying that to do so would be a sin? Why were some of the mosques celebrating the *Mawlid* (commemorating the birth of the Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him)) while others were not? Why were there different groups proselytizing for their various organizations or methodologies, each criticizing or downplaying the importance of the other? I had come looking for the Truth, having found it crystal clear in the Qur’an, but had found a community as divided as it was beautiful.

Upon realizing that unity was central to Islam, that an uplifting and positive community was crucial to one’s spiritual path, and that people had different conceptions of what a proper community should look like, I realized that two things were needed in my life: a spiritual comfort zone, and a philosophy of or approach to community that balanced the need for authentic practice with the reality of variation in definitions of and adherence to authentic practice. In reality, I believe this is what many of us need.

In the **previous installment** of the Suhba Papers¹ I discussed the importance of finding the right *suhba* or company that inspires and supports one in their spiritual path, while avoiding the creation of sects or cliques. This, as discussed previously, can be achieved through the creation of comfort zones or environments and activities that are spiritually uplifting to you and others

¹ Suhba Papers II: Community Unity and the Importance of Suhba (the company you keep): <http://www.islamamerica.org/ArticleLibrary/tabid/55/articleType/ArticleView/articleId/175/Default.aspx>

who share similar interests and needs, while making an effort to find common-ground opportunities where all can gather (i.e. those environments and activities on which all agree, such as daily prayers, *iftars* (fast-breaking meals), potlucks, or the likes).

There are two crucial components to finding a comfort zone while staying active in the greater community, namely Good Character and knowing the etiquette of disagreement. The former will be discussed in the next installment of the Suhba Papers, while the latter, though indeed a subsection of Good Character, is discussed in what follows. There are many useful articles, lectures, and recordings available today that hash out the details of the subject at hand, what I am offering here is a summary of some of the most useful points.

Consensus and Disagreement (Ijma' and Ikhtilaf)

There are matters upon which the Muslims have unanimously agreed, and there are matters upon which they disagreed. Those matters of total consensus are indispensable aspects of Islam, the denial of which is tantamount to disbelief. Matters of disagreement can be of many types, but most importantly they can be either valid or invalid. Valid disagreements can be of many types, including strong opinions and weak opinions.

There are a number reasons why there are disagreements. One reason is that there are primary sources (such as the Qur'an and certain *hadiths*) whose transmission from the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) are absolutely established (*qat'i al-wurud*), and those whose transmission from the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him) is of varying probability (*dhanni al-wurud*). The degrees of probability, with regard to *dhanni al-wurud* sources range from extremely likely to extremely unlikely. The sciences of *hadith* deal with determining these degrees of probability with regard to the reported sayings, actions, and tacit approvals of the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allah be upon him). Sometimes scholars disagreed as to whether a given source's probability of authenticity was extremely likely, pretty likely, not very likely, extremely unlikely, or even impossible (i.e. forged).

Another reason for valid disagreements is that the above-mentioned sources, whose levels of authenticity vary, could also vary in their interpretability. That is, some of them are absolutely clear in meaning and admit only one interpretation (*qat'i al-dalalah*) while others admit varying valid interpretations (*dhanni al-dalalah*), and thus create possibilities for varying interpretations. Furthermore, even if a source is agreed upon as being valid and there is agreement with regard to its interpreted meaning, there may be disagreement on how the interpretation is to be applied.

Still another reason for valid disagreements is that scholars differed in the methodologies they developed to process and apply the various sources of Islamic belief and practice. They differed on how to relate those sources that were absolutely established with those which were not. They differed in classifying the various sources, as mentioned above, such as whether a *hadith* was rigorously authenticated, well authenticated, weak, or forged. This is not to say they did not come to near consensus on some matters, they did. There were majority opinions and minority opinions in various fields.

The first step in understanding the etiquette of disagreement in Islam is to understand its source, partially summarized above.

The next step is to have an approach to this spectrum of consensus and disagreement in one's own life. I call it a fatwa filter. My fatwa filter works something like this: I try to follow the dominant opinions in one school of law in my life, drawing from other strong opinions in other schools in times of hardship or if doing so may be of some benefit to another (i.e. not for the sake of my *nafs* (ego)). Another approach is to follow the dominant opinions in one school, and to draw from less strong—yet valid—opinions in the same school, for methodological consistency. In either case, one should avoid mixing and matching varying opinions in the component parts of an action in such a way that the whole would not be considered valid by anyone (i.e. *talfiq*).

People are of different levels, and taking an excessively strict approach to the variances between scholars can cause one person to break and fall into matters that are considered forbidden by consensus, while for another, taking an excessively lenient approach could have the same end result. Finding one's own balance of strictness and ease is an individual matter, best accomplished with sincerity, honesty with one's self, and the consultation of scholars who understand one's times, locale, and community.

The next step is to apply this knowledge to others in a way that contributes to community unity without denying the responsibility to command the good and forbid evil. The trick to this is, as some scholars have mentioned, to be strict with oneself, but easy with others, hoping for example, that the bad actions that one thinks one sees on another's limbs is in fact excused by a valid scholarly opinion, even if weak.

This leads to the subject of commanding the right and forbidding the wrong. There are some people who think that once they read a fatwa on a website or hear an Imam relate a fatwa about a given action, that it is their duty to go around commanding it or forbidding it to everyone they come across. This is rarely the case, as the act of commanding the right and forbidding the wrong has many preconditions of which a few are worth mentioning in this context, namely, having proper knowledge that an action is in fact forbidden by consensus, rather than being an issue on which scholars have disagreed. In the absence of this knowledge, it is best to disapprove of the action or inaction (not the one performing or not performing it) in one's heart, and consult a proper scholar before saying anything. When one is certain that an action is forbidden by consensus, or at least according to the school that both are following, then one should know how to properly inform another of this fact. Some situations call for gentleness or levity, while others may call for tough-love or somberness. In some cases, it is better to leave a person to his or herself, if saying something would lead to greater harm. If one does not know what the situation calls for, one should, as always, consult a scholar. Does not the Qur'an say "ask the people of the remembrance if you know not"? Quite often, the responsibility to command or forbid falls on the shoulders of the scholars, not the average person, as the requisite knowledge of a given situation is often not easily obtained.

In addition to proper knowledge of an issue's ruling and the proper means of censuring or advising another, other conditions of commanding the right and forbidding the wrong include sincerity, patience, humility, and godfearingness. These conditions, and those mentioned earlier, all point to the importance of the next component crucial to finding a comfort zone while staying

active in the greater community, namely Good Character. The next installment of the Suhba Papers will address this oft-neglected subject.

Conclusion:

Every situation is different, and a general article such as this one is not meant to give absolute and universal guidelines that could be applied in all places and times. However I hope that this calls attention to the importance of knowing the reasons for differences in opinion and practice, as well as the importance of having proper etiquette in disagreement and how this relates to commanding the right and forbidding the wrong.

If we are to avoid permanently withdrawing to our comfort zones—the creation of which may be necessary for our own individual spiritual development—and neglecting the Qur’anic call to community unity, then we must have a proper understanding of and a workable approach to the differences in our communities that stem from both scholarly disagreement or varying degrees of adherence and practice. This short article is hoped to be a start. For further reading on the reasons for and etiquette of disagreement, the following links are provided as a next step.

- <http://www.shariahprogram.ca/articles/Etiquette-Disagreement.shtml>
- http://www.astrolabe.com/product/2885/Etiquettes_of_Disagreement.html
- http://www.witness-pioneer.org/vil/Books/TA_edi/Default.htm
- http://www.astrolabe.com/product/952/Reliance_of_the_Traveler.html