

The Islamic Seminary Foundation: Preserving Prophetic Principles

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Ye have indeed in the Messenger of Allah a beautiful pattern (of conduct) for any one whose hope is in Allah and the Final Day, and who engages much in the Praise of Allah (Al-Azhab, 33-21).

In this inter-connected world, where public discourse about Islam is frequently dominated by ISIS and Islamophobes, it is often extremely difficult for people, young and old, to discern, in order to emulate, the “beautiful pattern, (of conduct)” as noted above. Therefore, it is incumbent upon Muslims everywhere to reclaim from extremists of all types and preserve the Prophetic principles exemplified in the life example of Prophet Muhammad, Peace be upon him. It is in this spirit that a group of Muslims came together and founded the Islamic Seminary Foundation Incorporated (ISF) in the state of Connecticut on September 9, 2011.

The Prophetic paradigm that ISF wishes to preserve and put into practice in modern-day America has at least three salient characteristics. This paradigm is: 1. Qur’ānic in its epistemology, 2. Inclusive in its *weltanschauung* and 3. Contextual in its praxis. A brief explanation of each of these points is offered below, followed by a brief overview of ISF’s activities.

Qur’ānic in its epistemology

Praise be to Allah, Who hath sent to His Servant the Book, and hath allowed therein no Crookedness (Al-Kahf, 18:1).

In reflecting upon the first verse of *Surah Al-Kahf* (which many Muslims read in its entirety every Friday as an important part of following the “beautiful pattern, (of conduct)” or *sunnah* of Prophet Muhammad, Peace be upon him), we see the strong connection between Prophet Muhammad, Peace be upon him, and the Qur’ān as a communication from the Creator. Further, from this particular surah we learn a great deal about: the origins, nature, and ultimate destinations of human beings; the source and limits of human knowledge; and how we should conduct ourselves in this world. What is particularly striking in regard to the latter point is what this surah tells us about how “involved” we should be in this world. Specifically, it is clear that humans can be less engaged in the world as explained in the story of the young men who secluded themselves in a cave (Al-Kahf, 18:9-26) or very engaged as with the story of Dhul-al Qarnayn (Al-Kahf, 18:83-101) who was apparently involved in several major worldly matters in different communities. It appears that the Qur’ān, even though it is the ultimate source of knowledge for how Muslims should act, often provides more than one approach to living in this world.

Inclusive in its *weltanschauung*

O humanity! Reverence your Guardian-Lord, who created you from a single person, created, of like nature, His mate, and from them twain scattered (like seeds) countless men and women;- reverence Allah, through whom ye demand your mutual (rights), and (reverence) the wombs (That bore you): for Allah ever watches over you (Al-Nisaa, 4:1).

The fact that Allah directly addresses all human beings by saying “O humanity” at least 12 times in the Qur’ān (see 2:21-24, 4:1, 4:132-134, 4:174-175, 7:3-5, 7:158, 10:57-60, 22:1-4, 22:5-8, 49:13, 35:3-7, 82:6-19) makes the second characteristic of the Prophetic paradigm clear. That is, the message from God as delivered by Prophet Muhammad, Peace be upon him, as its moral exemplar, is addressed to all humanity. Since the Qur’ān is regarded by Muslims as *the* source of knowledge, Islam’s message and ethos is undoubtedly inclusive. Further, since the Prophet’s example is normative, we can also see this inclusive characteristic expressed in his acceptance of the invitation to become the head of the diverse community in Yathrib. The agreement he made with the non-Muslims (popularly known as “the Constitution of Medina”) lays out the duties, rights, and obligations of its multi religious inhabitants. Further, since Muslims are referred to in the Qur’ān as “witnesses over the nations” (Al-Baqara, 2:143, AYA), it is apparent that the Islamic worldview is an inclusive one wherein various groups “strive together towards all that is good” (Al-Baqara, 2:148).

Contextual in its praxis

Those who believe, and suffer exile and strive with might and main, in Allah's cause, with their goods and their persons, have the highest rank in the sight of Allah: they are the people who will achieve (salvation) (Al-Tawbah, 9:120).

The famous immigration (*hijra*) of Prophet Muhammad’s, Peace be upon him, fledgling community from Mecca to Yathrib is used to mark the beginning of the Islamic lunar calendar. The Roman Emperor Constantine’s decriminalization of Christian practice in 313CE was a momentous game-changer for Christianity and world history. Similarly, the hijra in 622 CE was also a momentous game-changer for Islam and world history. Given Prophet Muhammad’s, Peace be upon him, acceptance of the invitation to become the head of the multi-religious community in Yathrib, the practice of Islam did not look the same in Medina as it did in Mecca. With Prophet Muhammad, Peace be upon him, as the ultimate arbiter of disputes, the Muslims were no longer a liminal community as they were in Mecca. Of course, some of these differences were due to the fact that the Qur’ān came down in stages over a period of twenty-three years and were addressed to the changing contexts in the two different cities. Nevertheless as noted in Umari’s *Madinan Society at the Time of the Prophet: Its Characteristics and Organization*, it is clear that the social, cultural and political realities of both settings impacted the practice of Islam in those particular places at those particular times. Thus, ISF is not trying to preserve prophetic principles that are frozen in time and space. Rather, we believe that the Prophetic principles have always been contextual in their practice – and that is what we are trying to preserve.

ISF: A brief overview

Thus, have We made of you an Ummat justly balanced, that ye might be witnesses over the nations, and the Messenger a witness over yourselves... (Al-Baqara, 2:143).

From its incorporation in 2011 up until the present, the Islamic Seminary Foundation Inc. (ISF) has viewed the sentiments expressed in this verse of the Qur’ān as an important guide. That is, ISF has consistently focused its efforts on developing a quality education for Muslim American leadership that seeks to nurture this type of “middle community,” one that avoids extremes in faith and practice while serving as a role model for other communities.

Based upon this worldview, ISF has spent the last 6 ½ years consulting with individuals and entities within and outside the Muslim American community. The intent was to develop and shape an institution true to Prophetic principles while being firmly situated in and responsive to the particular challenges we face in this country at this time. From Al-Azhar University to Yale Divinity School, and many large and small institutions in between, ISF has consulted with institutional leadership, faculty, and students to develop a world class American Islamic seminary. In addition, for the past seven years, ISF has held an annual *shura* and in-service training at Yale University. Over the years, through this *shura*, we have consulted with various imams, chaplains, scholars, and other professionals who provide services to the Muslim American community from all over the country and world. While these approaches do not represent a systematic empirical needs assessment for an American Islamic Seminary, the concepts ISF has developed through these convenings and consultations have been very much influenced by these diverse group of thinkers.

Since its inception, ISF has co-sponsored numerous courses and workshops and . Titles of these educational offerings included: “Prophetic Strategies for Working with Youth,” “Contemporary Readings of the Qur’ān,” “Islamic Communities in America,” “Counseling Muslims: The Basics,” “Effective Islamic Chaplaincy in Various Settings,” “Foundations of Effective Organizational Leadership,” Islamic Counseling 101: The Basics,” “Islamic Counseling 101: Couples Counseling,” and “Islamic Counseling 101: Domestic Violence.” In addition, ISF coordinated the Bilal Initiative that was focused on encouraging honest dialog in the Muslim Community about issues of race and prejudice. ISF-coordinated workshops were held at national conferences and meetings of the Association of Muslim Chaplains (AMC). ISF was also a consultant to the Muslim Endorsement Council of CT (MECC) in the development of its standards and processes for the endorsement of Muslim chaplains.

On April 3, 2017, ISF signed a memorandum of understanding (MOU) with the Islamic Seminary of America (ISA) which had been in operation since August of 2016 in Dallas, Texas. All of the then board members of ISA (Sh. Khalil Abdur Rashid, Dr. Abdul Ahad Hayee and Sh. Omar Suleiman) signed the MOU that transferred the name, all assets, and ultimate authority for the operation of ISA to the board of directors of ISF.

In its inaugural year (2016-2017) the Texas-based ISA taught over 400 adults, mentored over 200 youths, led an Umrah trip, sponsored several family oriented social-educational activities and partnered with Southern Methodist University (SMU) in developing and launching a unique Master of Liberal Studies degree program with a self-designed concentration in Islamic Studies. Spearheading all of this was Sh. Khalil Abdur Rashid (now Harvard University’s first full time Muslim chaplain) and his family.

Going forward, the “new” ISA (now managed by ISF) is currently reorganizing in a way that would facilitate expansion of its student base to a national one. As ISF does so, it intends to be firmly rooted in Prophetic principles while acknowledging the impact of the modern American context. In brief, ISF intends to be: Qur’ānic in its epistemology by ensuring our work is based on academic and Islamically rigorous precepts, while being an institution that helps produce a more positive, balanced narrative on Islam and religion in this country and the world; inclusive in its *weltanschauung* by striving to make its offerings attractive and accessible to the rich multi-cultural, economically-diverse mosaic that is the Muslim American community, as well as to people of other faith traditions; contextual in its praxis by being attuned to the spiritual, organizational, and

humanitarian needs of Muslims and others living in America. As ISF relaunched the Islamic Seminary of America and launches this first edition of the *Journal of Islamic Faith and Practice*, we pray that Allah grants us the ability to be a “witness” and “middle community” while supporting all that is good.