



A National Standard-Bearer for Islamic Chaplaincy

Key Issues for Chaplaincy Endorsement: Imam Zaid Shakir's Responses to Critical Questions

Muslim Endorsement Council

To ensure fairness in evaluating candidates for chaplaincy endorsement, the board of the Muslim Endorsement Council, Inc. (MEC) asked renowned and respected scholar Imam Zaid Shakir about some contemporary issues confronting the American Muslim community. These issues are critical for MEC's work in assessing chaplains for endorsement and supporting them in their approach when they encounter these issues, regardless of their work settings, in a consistent manner backed by Islamic scholarly consensus. Imam Zaid graciously shared his insights and provided thoughtful responses. It is our honor to present a summary of his responses on key questions related to identity, *'aqīda* (creed), and LGBT+ below.

The first question posed was about the scholarly definition of a Muslim. Imam Zaid replied that a Muslim is someone who willingly accepts and follows everything of the theological, legal, and ethical import made known to humanity by Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings upon him). This definition emphasizes the breadth of Islam as a way of life that encompasses all aspects of a person's life and guides his/her spiritual and worldly endeavors. One might ask a follow-up question: *Who* determines what the Prophet taught us to be of import? This leads us to the second question posed to Imam Zaid.

To this second question—what constitutes an acceptable school of thought when it comes to the diverse interpretations of Qur'ān and Sunna within Islam—he underscored the centrality of both as the primary sources of theology, law, and ethics for Muslims. He emphasized the fundamental theological beliefs of Islam, including Allah's Oneness and incomparability, the finality of Muhammad's prophethood, and the realities of the hereafter. Additionally, he outlined the significant legal injunctions and ethical teachings that constitute the basis of the Islamic faith and practice.

When asked who constituted the American Muslim community, Imam Zaid provided a nuanced understanding that acknowledges its geographical reality; however, in theological terms, there is only the global *umma*. He described the latter as a rich tapestry of beliefs and practices unified by a common overarching faith—the basics of

this common faith are as specified in his answer to the previous question. He added that it is comprised of Sunni, Shi'i, Ibadi, and other legal and theological schools of thought.

As for the general framework for assessing *'aqīda*, Imam Zaid outlined a comprehensive approach to understanding and evaluating the Muslim's theological beliefs via the Ahl al-Hadith, Ash'aris, Maturidis, and other theological schools. He adds that due to the Qur'ān and ḥadīth's primacy and evidentiary nature vis-à-vis the *'aqīda*, rejecting either one or both of them means rejecting Islam altogether.

Lastly, Imam Zaid was asked about the scholarly stance on homosexual and transsexual Muslims. While acknowledging the reality of same-sex attractions, that Muslims may suffer from gender dysphoria, or be challenged in other ways in terms of gender identity, he stated that these feelings are very real tests from Allah and, as such, do not constitute sins in and of themselves. However, engaging in forbidden acts or declaring these forbidden acts to be lawful is sinful, and those who do so or advocate for them are considered to have left Islam. The acts which are considered forbidden, as it relates to gender identity and sexual orientation, have been outlined by a plurality of Islamic scholars.¹

Imam Zaid highlights the importance of providing compassionate pastoral care for individuals struggling with their gender identity and/or same-sex attractions, one that complements traditional Islamic methods of treatment.

His responses provide invaluable guidance to MEC, and his insights provide a deep and broader understanding of Islamic principles and practices that will help us navigate the complexities we face when assessing chaplaincy candidates and supporting endorsed chaplains who mirror our diverse Muslim community. We and our chaplains must uphold these basic Islamic teachings and ensure that our chaplains embody its values and ethics.

We are grateful to Imam Zaid Shakir for sharing his wisdom. We thank him for his dedication to the American Muslim community and to MEC. His contributions enrich our understanding and strengthen our commitment to fostering a fair approach to Islamic chaplaincy endorsement.

¹ See for example two articles by Mobeen Vaid for an exploration of how Sunni Islamic scholarship has treated the topics of homosexuality and gender non-conformity: Mobeen Vaid, "Can Islam Accommodate Homosexual Acts? Quranic Revisionism and the Case of Scott Kugle," *American Journal of Islam and Society* 34, no. 3 (July): 45–97, <https://doi.org/10.35632/ajis.v34i3.352>; and Mobeen Vaid, "And the Male Is Not like the Female: Sunni Islam and Gender Nonconformity," *MuslimMatters*, July 24, 2017, <https://muslimmatters.org/2017/07/24/and-the-male-is-not-like-the-female-sunni-islam-and-gender-nonconformity/>.