

Two Generations of Islamic Scholarship for Inter-religious Understanding

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As a young boy, my father, Dr. Taha Jabir Al Alwani, grew up in Fallujah, Iraq, which was very diverse with ethnicities and religious groups. The neighborhood was mixed with Muslims (Sunnis and some Shiites), Jews, Christians, Sabians, and others. Tolerance, mercy, forbearance and acceptance were the foremost principles that ruled community.

Growing up in an extremely diverse community, which included many different faiths and beliefs, my father, was able to develop an ideology of tolerance. In a community that included Jews, Christians, Muslims—Sunni and Shiite—Sabians, and many other ancient religions, my father was exposed to a wide variety of ideas and principles.

From the beginning, my father was raised in a religious environment that advocated genuine interaction and ta‘āruf (the Quranic-based concept of getting to know one another) rather than ideological biases and prejudices. Qur’an 49:13 “O humankind! We created you from a single (pair) of male and female, and made you into nations and tribes that you may know each other (not that you may despise each other). Verily the most honored of you in the sight of Allah is the most righteous of you. And Allah has full knowledge and is well-acquainted (with all things).

My father’s family came from a merchant background. As a young boy, he was very involved in his family’s business by helping them in the markets. He was able to observe human interaction in its purity. His father and his uncles regularly interacted with people of different faiths, ideologies, and political affiliations, and always with the utmost respect. This ignited a spark of understanding, mutual respect, and acceptance.

He was taught to look past the ideologies, and see people for who they are. The family and the small community was a model that taught him to value human dignity as the Qur’an explained, 17: 70 “And we certainly honored the children of Adam, and carried them on the land and sea and provided for them substance out of the good things of life, and favored them far above most of our creation.”

The family’s experience in the line of business and trade provided my father with a unique view regarding the meaning of wealth. All the merchants and customers with whom they interacted shared a basic value system based on believing in the universal principles and the golden rules.

Healthy competition and business productivity does not mean an increase in individual wealth or profit. In my father's perspective, an unbalanced emphasis on gaining wealth could only lead to greed and selfishness.

My father grew up in an environment that valued collective support. One businessman's trade was not successful unless his neighbor's was also successful, and there was an implied expectation that in order for someone to help themselves, they must also help their neighbor.

If one's business was thriving and growing, the entire neighborhood would benefit from this profit, not only the business owner. Islam expects wealthy and successful individuals to assist those who are in need around them, supporting those dependents who need financial support and contributing to the neighborhood, whether by supporting educational institutions, orphanages, or other charities. This type of mentality curbs the desire of greed and selfishness in the market and promotes a contagious positive human attitude.

The influence of the early years on his scholarly work:

My father's attitude towards religious differences was this: I may disagree with you, but I respect your ideas and I have the responsibility to fully listen to you with an open mind, no matter what stand you take.

Through his Islamic training, that practical experience led him to analyze knowledge and transfer it into his prominent scholarly work on **Ethics of Disagreement**^[1]. He believes that any knowledge which takes people towards conflict, animosity, and turmoil is untrue knowledge.

His work on Fiqh for the minority was based on his view that a small community, who cooperated with each other based on their strong belief that humanity is one family governed by universal and higher values, was the best community. The impetus for his work on Fiqh for minorities was based on his experiences in his own small community in the middle of Iraq.

He believes that the model community is one that cares about every citizen's welfare, safety, and happiness.

His involvement with the other faiths and sects within Islam is based on the Quranic concept of (تأاحل اصل اولم عو اونم ان يذلا) those that believe and do good deeds.

My father can be labeled as a Muslim reformer. The thrust of his intellectual production has been aimed towards reforming Islamic legal thought from its core. In order to keep Islam relevant to the cultural and social realities of Muslims, my father believes that scholars need to be able to access sources directly from the roots, and create new methodologies for interpreting the law.

At the core of my father's intellectual paradigm is the belief that scholars must constantly reassess current Islamic thought and develop new methodologies that help realize contemporary rulings that are authentic and relevant. He was among the founders of the project (*The reconstruction of the Muslim mind: The Islamization of knowledge*). His contribution to the development of this project was immense^[2]. He proposed the following six approaches through which one could reform and revive Islamic legal thought:

- a. Articulating the Islamic Paradigm of knowledge.
- b. Developing a Quranic Methodology.
- c. Developing a methodology for dealing with the Qur'an.
- d. Developing a methodology for dealing with the Sunnah of the Prophet Muhammad as the major source for explaining the Qur'anic text.
- e. Re-examining the Islamic Intellectual Heritage.
- f. Dealing with the Western Intellectual Heritage^[3].

My father strongly believed that scholars were obligated not simply to reform positive law to make it more relevant and applicable to our modern-day needs and cultural realities, but this reform needs to be grounded in the very sources of Islamic law.

Hence, he believed that scholars need to go back to the primary sources of law and derive from them rulings that are faithful to the spirit and objectives of *Sharia* and at the same time relevant to the needs of modern human existence.

His main contribution to the field of Islamic sciences is opening the gateway for the creation of new methodologies that build upon the existing corpus of Islamic tradition. As a reformer, my father does not believe in throwing away the classical Islamic tradition, but believes that we need to build upon it. His respect for the groundwork laid by the Islamic legal tradition in the fields of law, exegesis, theology, etc, is great. At the same time, he strongly believes that Muslim scholars need to go beyond duplicating classical commentaries and texts, and instead produce new commentaries and texts that can chart out a new beginning for the intellectual future of the Muslim Ummah...a future that is a bridge to the past, but not confined by the past.

I leave you with this, a brief remembrance of our once populated neighborhood in Baghdad "*Karaadah al shaqyyah*". The vast area, which was prominently populated by Christians, Shiite, and a small group of Sunnis, bordered the famous street of "*Abu Nawas*," which layed on the beautiful Tigris river. My father was the Imam of a big, Sunni mosque in my neighborhood. His Friday sermons impacted not only Muslims, but attracted others of different faiths. The people were captivated by his moral and social values rather than his religious preference. After his sermons, I noticed people from all walks of life come to sit and talk to him about different issues. In particular, our Christian neighbor, Uncle John, would discuss world issues with my father, regarding religion, philosophy and politics because he confided in him, and deferred to his knowledge, which shows the natural interactions my father perused with other people

throughout his life. This example summarizes my father's dedication towards knowledge, and his precious ability to relate to others through his relations with diverse faces of humanity.

[1] His book Ethics of Disagreement in Islam (Herndon: The International Institute of Islamic Thought).

[2] See the collection of his articles: Shaykh Taha Jabir Al- Alwani: Issues in Contemporary Islamic Thought (London- Washington: The International Institute of Islamic Thought, 1426/2005).

[3] You may read these approaches with more details in his previous book pp26-48.