

Telling my Story – Zameer

Growing up as a Shia Muslim, I always had an inferiority complex and did not speak much about the truth claims I hold to. Experiencing moments of bullying for my views made me withdraw into my shell even more. In my experience, Shia Muslims were expected to be on the defensive and justify their views in light of a Sunni dominant narrative. It is sometimes difficult to hold beliefs that the majority of people in your religious community may find inherently offensive. To this day, this self-censorship is something I still practice but have also learnt to pick the right time and manner to say what I think about a topic. Wisdom is not about having knowledge but about how you use your knowledge.

RE was my favourite subject at school. A quiet student, I was happy to sit and soak in all that I could learn about different religious traditions. I was luckily gifted at the subject too which meant my academic performance in RE would exceed my other subjects where I was average. This inspired me to pursue a degree in Philosophy. These years coincided with Shia Muslim speakers beginning to deliver content in English instead of Arabic or Urdu. I listened, read and engaged more and more about the Islamic tradition in my own time. The Sunni-Shia split always fascinated me and the polemical debates between both schools of thought always engaged me and ensured I knew why I believe what I do.

The most important moment of my life was my first ever pilgrimage to Iraq where I visited the shrine of Imam Ali, Imam Hussain and several other Shia Imams. As a child, the family of Prophet Muhammad were my superheroes and central to our lives, as they still are. To be able to visit where they walked, were killed and laid to rest gave me a new energy. From this moment, I made a decision that I was going to spend my life in service to them, which is service to God. Traditionally, this means becoming a member of the Islamic clergy but I didn't want to do this. I wanted to learn what I wanted and on my own terms, not a curriculum someone else chooses. I eventually decided I wanted to do this through the disseminating of knowledge and I chose becoming a RE teacher. This way I got the best of both worlds – forever learning what I love and teaching what I love to learn.

My worldview is grounded in Shi'ism but has evolved through my experience as a RE teacher. This wonderful subject I have the honour to teach has allowed me to learn different modes of thinking. No matter how different they are to mine, I take from them and use them to improve my life and shape my character. During my career, it became apparent that I am a 'niche' in the teaching community – a Shia Muslim RE teacher. This has allowed me to help others teach Shia Islam better and this has opened doors to so many opportunities that I never thought would be imaginable.

Some people ask me why I do not just call myself a 'Muslim' and insist on the label 'Shia' since it is divisive. There are two types of sectarian: ideology and identity. My ideology is not sectarian where I want to divide people up. In contrast, I want a world of spiritual unity that reflects the Unity of God (Tawhid). However, I am sectarian in identity. The theology, tradition, history and spirituality that I hold to is something I want to differentiate because it is rich in its own right. I am no longer apologetic and this confidence has come from being a RE teacher where everyone I encounter has been given the right to a voice. We are all humans who are on different journeys and my experience is just as important as another person's.

Imam Ali says: "A person is of two types, either your brother in faith or equal in humanity." This is my worldview.