

## ESSAYS ON FAITH: UNITY

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I would like to remember and acknowledge one gentle soul who has inspired me and millions of others across the globe with her true and sincere scholarship, Annemarie Schimmel. With her selfless and genuine devotion, she did what very few have achieved. For the past three decades, she was not only affiliated with Harvard University, but she was also the chairwoman of Theology and Islamic Studies Department. Before that she was a faculty member at several academies across the Muslim world. From her youth, she was not only a genius but a person of astounding spiritual depth. A Lutheran, she set out on a sincere journey in search of understanding and knowing the other, in this case, Muslims. Islam took her to those very lands that today, unfortunately, have been deemed evil.

She mastered the languages of Turkish, Urdu, Arabic, Persian; she was familiar with Pushto and Sindhi along with her native German and English and other regional dialects. She received many global awards and honors from many countries including the United States, Germany, Turkey, Egypt and Pakistan. She translated and explained the essence of Islam and Islamic spirituality as seen and understood by the most intimate mystics and scholars of Islam — such that she became a teacher of Islam to Muslims themselves. Unfortunately, this wonderful lady, whose lecture I once attended on Muslim women and Islamic mysticism, passed away earlier this year, a true loss in the deepest sense.

I have not related her credentials for mere admiration, but to help you realize why it was such a unique loss, the loss of a visionary woman who, believing in the essential goodness of humanity, leaped forward to reconcile civilizations torn apart by superficiality and a history of unfortunate wars. She believed and strove for what in German is termed a “Weltanschauung,” a comprehensive worldview with the idea, in her case, of “seeing civilizations as rich as the Islamic and Christian working together for a better, more tolerant and flourishing world.”

Her beauty was in her focus on commonality and the deeper consciousness of each other as human beings and not those elements of our history that have separated us or stigmatized our senses even until today!

You see, we are different and built on differences and that makes us unique individually and culturally. We are different from birth, from the very womb that bore us; we are different from our siblings with whom we grew up, different from the classmates and friends with whom we studied; let alone the differences of ideology and religion. But if we make our life and communal relationships focused primarily on differences, we would erode the very fabric of human societies individually and civilization at large.

Unfortunately, for me “differences” as an approach to the other is the greatest undiagnosed plague of human history affecting all strata of human life, especially when it involves emotional religiosity — in which it takes on an explosive dimension and, once again, unfortunately, not a new finding in our human history regardless of the times, the culture, or the religious order.

The deepest dilemma to organized religion, regardless of the actual and essential teachings of that religion — the deepest dilemma — is when a text material or a historical figure or event is interpreted. That interpretation has the ability to follow one of two paths — either one of an “authoritative” perspective or to take on an “authoritarian” role! By authoritative what is meant — is whereby an interpretation according to the rules and dictum of scholarship is put forth which is recognized as a product of the human mind and effort (termed in Islam as “ijtihad” or “academic or scholarly jihad”) and yet though very strong in its position, it, however, can still be challenged and argued and debated — such to me was the “Golden Era” of Islam — when we found challenging views co-existing at the same time, each with its giant expositors of great caliber, of great personality — the likes of Averroes/Ibn Rushd, Algazel/Al-Ghazzali, Rhazes/Ar-Razi and countless others who were the predecessors to the European Renaissance itself.

The other path of interpretation is one in which the interpretation, since it deals with sensitive material of divine origin or nature, takes on the tone and language of the divine and thereby transforming the interpretation and the interpreter subsequently into an authoritarian person, but not just any authoritarian — but — an authoritarian divine or dangerously divine-like/God-like in his/her proclamations leaving no room for anyone else’s viewpoint. Such is a

reality and fact that each religious order has had to face. This is not a divine problem but a human problem. Unfortunately, the contemporary era is rampant with a “New World Order” defined by these divines! The simple fact of life is that no one can know the thoughts and mind of the infinite God or creator. But, unfortunately, throughout time there have been many (self-proclaimed or the un-chosen) who have ventured to know and speak on behalf of God at the expense of others!

As Muslims living in the free, plural and democratic states of America, on our part, we again stand today to be counted against those who speak, not with authoritative scholarship, but as authoritarians — regardless of their outer forms! There is no room and no room can be made for such a one in the fold of Islam!

This country is not a country to which we migrated just 50 or even 100 years ago. The relationship between Muslims and this land of the Americas extends over seven centuries beginning in the recorded year of 1312, as Leo Wiener of Harvard University noted, and Al-Omari, a famous Muslim historian, has documented:

Pre-Columbian times saw Muslim merchants and voyagers landing and living in the Americas amidst the native populace. Their graves until today are marked by their names and Islamic symbols. Interestingly, Columbus himself was guided by Muslim crew members who knew and were following the maps of the famous geographer Al-Idrisi.

Post-Columbian or Ante Bellum America saw Muslim freemen and women from Western Africa brought as slaves and ransomed on the plantations, one of whom was the focus of Alex Haley’s “Roots” — Kunta Kinte.

The 19th and 20th centuries saw the migration of Muslim families seeking the American dream and escaping domestic oppression in their countries of origin. One such migrant was the designer of the Sears Tower in Chicago as well as other architectural landmarks.

As Muslim citizens and co-religionists, we are proud to be an integral part of the American vision as enshrined in the principles and documents as pristine as the Declaration of Independence and the Bill of Rights and forwarded and championed by men like Abraham Lincoln and Martin Luther King Jr.

Along the same visionary lines, let me refer you to two statements from the Masters of Islamic Law from that “Golden Era” of Islam, when the authoritative approach was the norm, and an era that was cherished and expounded by the likes of Annemarie Schimmel:

This is of particular importance to the Muslim community here, as we grapple with the thought of our future in this nation.

The first is from Abu Ishaq Al-Shatibi — the noted scholar of Muslim Spain — from that period of time when Cordoba, Spain, under Muslim leadership, has been described by Western scholars of history as having been in the light while London, England, was in darkness. He wrote, “God made this blessed righteous Shari’a [Islamic Law] accommodating and convenient and thus won the hearts of human beings and invoked in them love and respect for law.”

The second quotation that I would like to share with you is from an equally prominent and committed scholar of the 13th-14th century, Ibn Qayyim; he writes, “The Shari’a [Islamic Law] is all Justice, Kindness, Common Good and Wisdom. Any rule that departs from justice to injustice ... or departs from common good (maslaha) to harm (mafsada) ... is not part of Shari’a, even if it is arrived at by literal interpretation.”

In the end, I leave you with this verse of the Qur’an related in the chapter entitled, Al-Maidah or The Table of the Last Supper of Jesus Christ (peace be upon him) with his disciples. It reads: “Had God willed, He could have made you one community! But that He may try you by that which He has given you (He has made you as you are). So vie with one another in good works.”

*These abridged remarks were part of a talk Dr. Ashraf of Charleston gave earlier this year at an open house at the Islamic center in South Charleston.*