



## My Islam, Your Islam, Our Islam, Their Islam

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As may be obvious to readers of this forum, a wide variety of opinions exists as to the nature and teachings of Islam, even among those widely regarded as experts. Rather than view Islam and its teachings as a single monolithic entity, it is more accurate to recognize and acknowledge the de facto plurality of opinions that have always existed as to what Islam is, and what it “compels” you, me or us to do.

The personal experiences of any one human being can never be exactly identical with those of anyone else. These experiences invariably color the understanding and perceptions of those who have them, within the context of their respective religious traditions. I myself have undergone a continual process of transformation regarding my personal understanding of Islam from the time of earliest childhood until today. From this I conclude that the Islam which I conceive and experience is unique to me, and may rightly be termed, “My Islam.” The character of My Islam is the outgrowth of my cumulative personal experience, which it may be appropriate to share, but never to force upon others. Should I try to force my personal understanding of Islam and its teachings upon others, the result will inevitably be a serious “dislocation” for those so affected, annihilating the perceived beauty and joy of their own respective opinions.

A vast diversity of opinions about Islam are held by my fellow Muslims, which they are free, in turn, to share with me. I may or may not agree with them, but the result of such interaction

invariably becomes another element of my own personal understanding and experience, and of theirs. For example, those wishing to “purify” Islam from so-called *bid'a*, or innovation, may reject the use of a drum to issue the call to prayer, reverence of saints, or even the use of a rosary while reciting the names of God. Thus we may refer to others’ personal experience and understanding of Islam as “Your Islam,” and go through life adopting or politely refusing to adopt any given element thereof.

Muslims refer to this process of mutual visitation, sharing and growth by its Arabic term, *silaturrahim*, which means “to relate in an attitude of mutual affection.” Such sharing of views may or may not produce what we might call “Our Islam,” dependent on the respective understanding and experiences of those involved, but at least it fosters mutual respect and tolerance of differences.

Unfortunately, the Muslim world today is afflicted by a crisis in which the tradition of *silaturrahim* is being replaced by attempts to force one’s own views of Islam onto others. For me personally, “Their Islam” is a fair term to describe the views of those who would annihilate the great beauty and diversity of traditional Islam in the name of an artificial and enforced conformity to their own rigid opinions. For such people, Our Islam is a misnomer, for in fact they seek to enforce – through intimidation and violence – a colorless, monolithic uniformity that does not and has never existed in the long history of Islam.

The desire for Our Islam appears to be inherent in the nature of most Muslims. Yet the only realistic way to establish such a phenomenon is for My Islam and Your Islam to peacefully coexist in mutual respect and toleration, without trying to annihilate our differences. Rather than seek to repress or destroy the nearly infinite, beautiful variety of God’s creation, we would be better advised to pursue *al-jihad al-akbar* and annihilate our own egos, so that we may unite in a common spiritual apprehension of the One – which gives rise to inner peace and a joyful tolerance of differences here on earth.

However, those who care about the future of Our Islam on this earthly plane would be well advised to unite in rejecting the use of Islam as an ideology, or a weapon to violate the sanctity of Your Islam and mine.