

Unity in Diversity

Sunni-Syiah Harmonious Relationship at STFI Sadra

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Foreword

When we speak of peace, we speak of its absence. Peace is an ideal desired by everyone, unfortunately, a unanimous agreement on the definite meaning of peace is elusive. Islam is a religion where the idea of peace has different understandings to its followers. Some would say peace would have to include the absence of those outside of Islam. Some believe that peace requires the whole of the Muslim community to have one way, one goal. Some believe that peace is accepting the world as is, without forcing our views and beliefs unto others.

Islam is a belief that states that Allah is the one true God, the perfect element, the only one worth submitting to, with Muhammad as its prophet. But Islam is not a religion where everyone follows the same path, the followers of Islam are aware of this, and that these multiple paths can be a source of disagreements and conflicts hindering the way to peace. These paths in themselves are not problems, but how the followers choose to focus on their differences. A conflict as old as Islam itself circles around one of the paths in Islam, the Shia. Followers of the Shia way of Islam are never short on accusations of infidelity and heresy.

When people are busy arguing whether or not Shia adheres to the tenets of Islam, whether the Asyura memorial day is *haram* or *halal*, whether or not saying happy birthday to one another is in accordance with the initial teachings of Islam, whether or not wishing people of other religions well during their holy days is acceptable, apparently some believe these are arguments worth bloodshed. On the 23rd of October 2015, the day that coincided with the 10th of *Muharram*, officials from the city of Bogor deemed it necessary to spread a publishing which forbid the memorial of the death of the Prophet's descendant, Sayyidina Hussein, who died in the in the deserts or Karbala, Iran. This was deemed acceptable because he believed that the path of the Shia is misleading. We live in an age where we're learning to accept each other's differences and live side by side, and yet these arguments still exist.

Sekolah Tinggi Filsafat Islam (High School of Islamic Philosophy) Sadra, or better known as STFI Sadra, is an institution that was officially declared on July 12th 2012, by a representative from the Ministry of Religion of Indonesia, Prof. M. Zein, as the first school of Islamic philosophy in the country. STFI Sadra is a school which stands under the care and supervision of Yayasan Hikmat Al-Mustafa, Jakarta, with its center based in the city of Qum, Iran.

“Sadra” in STFI Sadra is named after a philosopher from the Shia path, Shadr al Din Muhammad Ibn Ibrahim Ibn Yahya Qawami al Syiraz, or Mulla Sadra for short, the institution that watches over the school itself is based in Iran, where most of the population is Shia, which of course then leads the STFI Sadra to be seen as a religious institution with extremist undertones. Is it then acceptable for us to deem this particular path as so dangerous that we have to avoid and even stop them from doing their activities in this country? Perhaps judgment is best reserved for when we have more information than just the mere words and opinions of our peers.

Unity in Diversity

In order to obtain the truth from something, we need data and evidence before we decide on any form of action, to take action before anything is proven would be foolish indeed. It is a surprise everytime we see people act out of provocation from parties with veiled interests. Although that is not my main concern in this writing, I aim to focus on the diversity found on the campus of STFI Sadra, according to my own experiences as a student there.

I am a Muslim, follower of the Sunni sect, currently enrolled in STFI Sadra (a campus that was established by a foundation from the Shia sect). As I have stated in the introduction, when people are preoccupied on which sect is the most correct and which one will ultimately be chosen by God, the name of my campus tends get dragged in because of its Shia roots, when in reality, tensions among the sects are non-existent inside the campus itself.

The students of STFI consists of people from every corner of Indonesia, and even some from Malaysia and Singapore. Thus we are met within an extensive agenda lasting for four years, in accordance with our educational contracts, ending once we receive our bachelor's.

For years we've shared many experiences, starting from when were strangers, to saying “hello” every now and then, to being inseperable, from perhaps a little suspicion to complete openness. These truths have led to a realization and a question; how can we, a diverse group

of students, find peace and friendship instead of conflict and anarchy like others elsewhere? I believe, according to my own experiences, there are a few things that help us live together in peace:

1. *The Courage to Question*

Many students in their first year tend to be anxious. This is due to the fact that this campus does indeed have a widespread reputation, one of them is that Sadra is a school that which indoctrinates its students and therefore it is deemed “lost”. There was a time when we were still freshman, and we were in our dorms, when one of our friends asked, “is it true that this is a Shia school?” with an unsure expression on his face, hinting an unwillingness to accept that Shia, too, was part of Islam. Mita then asks each of us what sects we follow, and we answered,

“I’m a Sunni,” said the first person.

“I too am a Sunni,” said the second person.

“I am a Shia,” said the the third person.

The situation turned awkward, but then Mita broke the ice by asking, “what is the difference between Sunni and Shia?” Our friend, who was a Shia delightfully explained to us the differences, and that evening became a meaningful introduction for us.

We have a tendency to label people or certain groups. This labeling is generally influenced by our ignorance and our willingness to accept information from dubious sources. Unfortunately for us, instead of searching for clarification and truth, we simply accept the informations handed to us. This could stem from our reluctance to ask because we’re afraid of offending someone. When in truth, there is nothing to fear when we want to ask questions, especially when we only mean well with our questions and ask politely. Asking is the easiest way to learn new things in order to understand, and the first step in eradicating our own prejudices.

2. *Seeing Diversity as Something Normal*

God could have made us look just like one another if He willed it. But He created is various shapes and sizes. Diversity is the will of God, and if we hate diversity, truly we would hate His will, and deny His pleasures. Our Prophet Muhammad stated before his death that we (Muslims) will be divided into 73 different groups, and only one group among those will be accepted by God. In this puzzling statement, who knows which of these groups will

ultimately be accepted by God, some say it is the Sunni, some say it is the Shia, while some say it will be the Salafi, etc. Until now, there has been no agreements. Perhaps the groups that the prophet meant did not necessarily mean within the sects of Islam, but from the universal deeds of humanity.

Is it not selfish to say that God will only accept a certain group into heaven? Would such a thought not limit God Himself, when in truth we would want to see God as limitless perfection?

From birth, the students of STFI Sadra are inherently different, by this I mean the sects that we are from. Depending on our sects, we have different paths, ideologies and different ways of prayer. The Sunni sect places an emphasis on *hadits* and *assunnah* whereas the Shia rely on the *Qur'an*. When they pray the Sunni places their arms on their chest and the Shia lets them hang. The Sunni need only a praying mat, whereas the Shia need to wear a *Turba*. In the NU (*Nadhlatul Ulama*) sect, they have gatherings where they read the *Qur'an* together, and this activity is absent among the *Muhammadiyah*. The NU sect calculates days to certain holy days based on astronomical movements, whereas the *Muhammadiyah's* calculations are based on the Islamic calendar. But these differences do not then lead us to bickering about who is the most correct, but these differences make us richer in knowledge, embracing the diversity of views. We then are able to cultivate respect for one another. Joint celebrations and memorials among the sects are not uncommon to see. Just because we do things differently, doesn't necessarily mean we are shifting our beliefs, embracing difference and diversity means embracing God Himself.

3. *Compromise*

The brightest moments of harmony among the STFI Sadra moments are shared during sundown for our evening prayers. The Sunni and Shia have different opinions regarding the best time for evening prayers, but we've taken steps to find a middle ground during our dorm meetings.

The Sunni believe that the correct time for evening prayers is during sundown, when the sky blooms red and clouds can still be seen. The Shia believes that the best time is when the sun has fully set, and night has set in. Both believe that when the time comes, evening prayers

should be done with haste, tarry too long and we wouldn't be able to pray together, even though the campus deem it mandatory for us to pray together. Thus we came to an agreement, when it is time for the Sunni to pray, they should pray first, but the Sunni should wait for the Shia to pray and read holy book, for time to read the holy book is unlimited. We've maintained our own ways whilst being able to pray together as the campus wanted. This is the way of tolerance we've created within the campus of STFI Sadra.

4. Philosophy as the Basis for Dialog

Another aspect I would like to elaborate about STFI Sadra is because we are fundamentally a school for philosophy, principles within philosophy are implemented within our daily lives. Questioning the information we receive, dismantling them into premises. But then this way of sometimes makes us look like fools. Questioning everything is similar to criticising it, criticising everything makes us look arrogant and surly, when that's not the case. We prefer to dissect questions with a dash of humor so our academic lives and differences doesn't seem so stiff.

Sometimes being overly critical becomes our mode of comedy, "When we are thirsty and drink water, where does our thirst go? Change of question, what is it that makes our thirst disappear, is it the water, its existence or its form?" We would often joke with our professors during exam week. "*Ustad*, the Sunni and Shia have agreed to shun radical Western empirism within rational thought, in our dreams, since dreams also count as rational thought" with a smile our professor would reply "Sure, but your grades will also be in your dreams". That is how handle our diversity. With humor and dialog we've gotten rid of thoughts that limit how we perceive others.

One of the things that is emphasized in STFI Sadra is that you are free to be different, you are free to choose your own path, you are even free to invite others to join you in that path, but under any circumstances should you force yourself and your beliefs onto others. No one knows which path is will ultimately be accepted by God. But one should never tire in his or her search for truth, every ounce of our efforts will be valued in the eyes of God.

People tend to forget that Islam was based upon strong philosophic roots. The media always on the frontlines reporting violent extremist acts done by those claiming to be Muslims,

making it seem as though Islam is religion that doesn't follow context and even backwards. In reality, Islam has a strong intellectual history. Take for example Ibn Sina, an Islamic philosopher, often called the father of modern medicine. Ibn Sina, also known as Avicenna has contributed unprecedented advances in the world of medicine, one of his most noteworthy works is the *Al-Qonun*, a tome, one of the largest encyclopaedias ever created by humankind, within it are astonishing insights into human anatomy and his work on medicine. Ibn Sina is not the only Islamic figure to contribute, Islam also has Alfarabi and Alkindi with their work on music, Ibn Khaldun's travels rival Marcopolo himself, in chemistry there is Ibn Arabi, in politics there is Ali Syari'ati and et cetera. During this modern era Islam has Sayyed Husein Nasr and Dr. Haedar Bagir in the realms of philosophy and thought. This history shows that Islam has an extraordinary mechanism for dialog to tackle diversity, and this is what we aim to reintroduce.

5. *Collaboration*

We are together 24 hours of every day, we understand each other's characteristics, and slowly learn to understand ourselves by observing others and reflecting within ourselves. Perhaps this is due to the fact that we live in dorms. On campus we are classmates, and outside of class we are perhaps in one organization or perhaps we are colleagues, in dorms we are friends, and partners for dialogue. We are able to talk about anything. It's not unusual for us then to develop a strong bond of love and kinship.

Our different sects do not hinder us from collaborating and do something for the greater good. Take this group I am currently leading, for example, called Medina. Medina is group that consists of students from Sadra that come from various sects. In this group, we go through a lot of discussions, mainly concerning women. We discuss the various roles that women take part in within society. Starting from religion, to economic, social and political. Even though we have differing opinions regarding Imam Mahdi and a few rituals, we've still managed to find common ground, that is our desire to empower one another as women and to fully realise our full potential. This is what united us together.

We are constantly over-focused on what makes us different, blinding us from similarities that we share. For instance, I am a Sunni and my friend is a Shia, we are both women and we are both students at STFI Sadra, we would both like to graduate with good grades and make not

only our parents proud, but also our almamater. My elders were Sunni, and my friend's elders were Shia, but both struggled together to bring our country's independence. Instead of bickering over our differences, we'd be better off working together toward our dreams.

Until now, STFI Sadra only accepts Muslim students, and Islam itself consists of various sects, Shia is not the only one, there is also NU and Muhammadiyah each having their own distinctions. Although it seems that it needs to be reiterated that the Shia, NU and Muhammadiyah cannot be placed under the same category. In their essence, NU and Muhammadiyah are not sects, but merely the two largest Islamic organisations in Indonesia which tend to be what the Muslim population follow.

The Shia is more apt to be categorised along with the Sunni, because they are both sects. Sunni is a path of Islam that emphasize *hadits* and *sunnah* as their base for law. Whereas the Shia sect depend on thought and what is rational as their base of law. The NU and Muhammadiyah and their members can be considered as the Sunni sect.

That is how we see difference as a normal daily affair, we see no need to race to the frontlines and declare that our sect is the most righteous, and others as heretics, the point here is to always seek to learn. Not only from Islam, but being open to learn from other religions as well. Within our curriculum we have a class of religious history where we study directly from priests, monks, among others.

The Wisdom of Diversity

Diversity is a reality we have to accept, whether we would like to or not. Diversity is a fate humanity cannot alter, although all too common it becomes a spark that ignites conflicts among us. Diversity is not the problem, it is merely a factor. What is the problem then? It stems from our egotistical attitudes, our unwillingness to listen to others, our reluctance to accept others, and sincerely seek out find the underlying problems, perhaps we are too rigid and take things too seriously, creating a world ominous with strife and struggle.

Peace is achievable with better understanding. Understanding problems, understanding differences, learning to tolerate and never cease to learn even when we seem enlightened. Direct dialogue is one of the most effective ways to understand one another, humor is also an overlooked tool to relieve tensions among different groups.

The diversity within the STFI Sadra campus is merely a small example of what can be done with understanding and tolerance among us. If we could only desire to understand one another, perhaps peace and justice wouldn't seem like such an impossible goal for us to achieve.