

This transcript accompanies the *Cambridge in your Classroom* video on 'Are all Muslims the same?'

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Are all Muslims the same?

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We commonly hear words such as the 'Muslim world' or 'Islamic world', referring to the Islamic community or the Ummah. This may give us a sense of a unified community. However, the Islamic community, with its 1400 years of history and spread throughout the world, is nothing but hugely diverse.

All Muslims look for guidance in the Qur'an and believe in the prophecy of Muhammad, but other than these two elements they show great variation.

I am Esra Özyürek, the Sultan Qaboos Professor of Abrahamic Faiths and Shared Values and also the Director of the Cambridge Interfaith Programme at the Divinity Faculty, University of Cambridge.

Today, I will tell you that, with almost 2 billion members spread around the world, adding up to one of every four humans, Muslims show a great variation amongst themselves. Muslim practices vary on the

basis of denomination, school of thought, national and ethnic context and religiosity.

Today, only 20 percent of the Muslims are Arabic speakers, and the majority of the Muslims live in the Asia Pacific region, with the largest populations in India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Iran and Turkey.

Muslim communities have disagreements and contradictions amongst themselves on a number of issues of principle and practice. Sometimes even slight moderation might cause Muslims to be targeted by more radical elements within the same school of interpretation. The original Islamic community under Muhammad showed great variation.

The Arabian Peninsula was home to two very different communities before Muhammad's times. On the Red Sea coast, there were trade routes from the south coming from Africa, carrying gold, ivory, slaves and crops, and from the east carrying spices and silk.

There were rich merchant settlements in Mecca and Medina who profited from these riches. In the Arabian interior, harsh deserts and barren uplands were home to semi-nomadic herders and tribal people.

One of Muhammad's great achievements was in getting the merchants of the trading cities of Mecca and Medina to pay taxes so that the raiding tribes can conquest across the Middle East and North Africa.

So the community remained unified through Muhammad's life. When Muhammad died in 632 CE his followers could not agree on who should be the leader of the community.

According to the central message of Islam, Prophet Muhammad was the Seal of the Prophets, meaning he couldn't be succeeded by another prophet. However, when he died someone needed to replace his position as the leader of the Muslim community.

They soon split into two distinct communities, the Sunnis and the Shi'a. This division was not only about who the leader should be but also how the religion should be interpreted. Through time the Sunni and the Shi'a are themselves subdivided into smaller communities around particular theological and legal interpretations.

According to Sunnis, the Prophet had not appointed a successor, so the Muslims had to decide on the leader.

Shi'ites on the other hand, believe that Ali, Muhammad's cousin and son-in-law, should succeed the Prophet on the basis that 'prophet through divine revelation' designated Ali as his successor. Supporters of Ali are called Party of Ali or Shi'a Ali. Based on specific Qur'anic verses and certain sayings of the Prophet Muhammad, they argued, the Prophet designated Ali as his successor.

The distinction, however, did not lie only in their idea about who should lead the community, but also about how the religion should be interpreted.

In the Sunni understanding, the caliph is the administrator and the guardian of the Islamic law and the leader of the community. For the Shi'a on the other hand, the imam has a spiritual function to interpret the inner truth of religion.

Despite this difference, the first three caliphs were chosen by consensus. During the reign of the third Caliph Uthman a civil war erupted, culminating in the murder of Uthman by the rebels.

After Uthman's death, Ali declared himself as the caliph, but its caliphate was challenged by the pro-Uthman party, Muawiya. The forces of Ali, and chosen Muawiya met on the upper Euphrates in 657 CE. Ali and all surviving members of Muhammad's family were killed at Karbala, and Yazid was recognised as the de facto caliph by the majority of Muslims except the Shi'a.

This war split the Shi'a and the Sunnis to this day. Despite the long-running nature of the Sunni-Shi'ite divide, the fact that the two groups coexisted in relative peace for many centuries suggests that their struggle has less to do with religion and more with wealth and power.

Today about 85 percent of the Muslims re of the Sunni sect and the 15 percent of the Shi'a sect. Shi'a represents the majority of the population in Iraq, Iran, Bahrain and Azerbaijan, and the plurality in Lebanon. Sunnis are the majority in more than forty other countries. And this distribution is also reflected in Muslims in the UK as well, where the majority is Sunni and the minority is Shi'a.

Starting from the early years of Islam, there have been other communities of

interpretations, religious-political movements, or schools of thoughts.

What are some of these communities? Maybe you heard about Rumi and his enchanting poetry. Rumi belongs to Sufi interpretation of Islam. As Sunni and Shi'a interpretations developed, some people were more interested in the personal and spiritual aspects of religion. They struggled to achieve some kind of direct personal union with the divine and purification of the inner self. This tradition was influenced by Eastern traditions of Buddhism and Daoism. Sufi traditions, often seen as borderline heretical by the centres of Islamic power, have prospered in more secluded or frontier areas.

According to Sufis, Jihad, the struggle is an introspective one. It has to be fought against the false, the earthly self. Those strivings produce wonderful poetry and also are associated with ascetic disciplines and also physical exertions involving music, dance and intoxication to induce spiritual breakthrough.

Contemporary Islamic interpretations and movements can be understood within the modern context of how Muslims live their lives. Especially in the 20th century, the interpretation of Islam as a source of political identity and action came into being, mainly as a reaction to colonialism, centralisation of state power, and the development of capitalist economics.

The emphasis on Islamic values is not intended as a return to a past era, but represents an effort to cope with contemporary problems by renewed commitment to the basic principles.

Political Islam represents one aspect of the Islamic revival that began in the 20th century. Sometimes this movement is referred to as Islamism or Political Islam. Other contemporary movements, such as Islamic modernism, one that attempts to reconcile the Islamic faith with modern

values such as democracy, civil rights, rationality, equality and progress, are also present.

Islam continues to be a source of inspiration for people living in dramatically different conditions to understand and give meaning to the world they live in.

From its very early days, Islam has been open to diverse interpretations and lifestyles.

How diverse do you think Islam is today?