

THE CONCEPT OF THE STRANGER: AN ISLAMIC PERSPECTIVE

*"Be in this world as if you were a stranger or a traveler."
~Prophet Muhammad (pbuh)*

The concept of being a stranger and how to interact with the stranger is a common theme in Islamic religious texts. The two primary sources of Islamic teachings are the Qur'an, the Holy Book of Islam, and the Hadith/Sunnah traditions of Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him).

To Muslims, the Qur'an is the literal Word of God, revealed to Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) through Angel Gabriel, who recited the Qur'an to Muhammad (pbuh) in installments for over twenty-three years.

The *Hadith* on the other hand, refers to the statements, actions, and approvals of the Prophet (pbuh) throughout his mission. They are traced back to the Prophet through a chain of narrators and recorded in canonical books.

So, what does Islam say and how do Muslims view the stranger?

TEXT OF THE HADITH OF THE STRANGER

The text of focus for this program is the Prophetic statement narrated by Mujahid:

'Abdullah bin 'Umar said, "Allah's Messenger (pbuh) took hold of my shoulder and said, 'Be in this world as if you were a stranger or a traveler.'" The sub-narrator added: Ibn 'Umar used to say, "If you survive till the evening, do not expect to be alive in the morning, and if you survive till the morning, do not expect to be alive in the evening, and take from your health for your sickness, and (take) from your life for your death." (Related by Al-Bukhari)¹

THE TECHNICAL MEANING OF THE HADITH

As for the technical religious meanings of strangeness, Imam Ibn Al-Qayyim Al-Jawziyyah (1292 C.E-1350 C.E.) described stranger here to mean the strangeness a traveler feels.²

In his blog, Seifeddine-M, succinctly explains the Hadith:

Imaam Ibn Rajab [1335 CE-1393 CE] points out that Allah [the Almighty] originally placed Adam [peace be upon him] and Eve [peace be upon her] in Paradise. Then they were expelled from it. But they and their pious descendants were promised to be returned to that original home. Hence, that is the believer's real home. In this world, he is a stranger, away from his home. Therefore, the believer is always yearning to return to that original home from whence he came (*Jaami' al-'Uloom wal-Hikam*, vol. 2, p. 379).

LINGUISTIC MEANING

The concept of being a stranger takes various forms and shapes in the teachings of Islam. Some key words that might help us understand the concept include:

Gharib – (Singular) strange, alien, foreign, unknown, unfamiliar
Ghurabaa' – (Plural) strangers, aliens, foreigners
Ghurbah – Strangeness

These words connote being new or unknown in a place or setting. The dislocation could also be short term or long term. The ideas conveyed here are that strangeness could be physical, spiritual, social, economic, political, or other life ramifications.

¹ <https://sunnah.com/bukhari/81/5>

² <https://www.islamreligion.com/articles/4303/who-are-strangers/>

COMMENTARY ON THE HADITH

According to Seifeddine-M, this hadith shows that a believer should have one of two attitudes toward this world. **The first is that of a stranger in a strange land.** He feels that he is in a place where he does not belong. This is not his home and he cannot feel entirely happy here. His heart can never be tied to this land. Instead, his heart and mind are preoccupied with getting back to his home. His time and his efforts are filled with that purpose. He is spending his time, money and capabilities to gather together what he needs to return to his home. His time is not spent or wasted on entrenching himself deeply in this environment to which he knows that he does not belong.

The second possibility that the Messenger of Allah [Pbuh] mentioned **for the believer is to be like a traveler along a path.** This implies that the person is actually not residing anywhere but is always moving toward his final destination or goal. The end of his travels, of course, will be his death. Therefore, his only preoccupation is to gather the provisions that he needs to continue his journey and make his journey a successful one.

Therefore, the believer's life, long-term aspirations, goal in life, time, efforts, work and wealth should never be spent for the purposes of this worldly life alone. Instead, they should all be guided by his urgent desire to reach his true home, where he knows he belongs. They must all be guided by his want to please Allah [the Almighty] and to be entered among Allah's pious servants in the everlasting home of Paradise."³

THE HIJRAH (HEGIRA)

Another concept related to the state of strangeness in Islam is the *Hijrah*, which is a sanctioned act of migration, emigration, or immigration in pursuit of safety and security for one's life, property, or belief. Therefore, a person has the right to be a *muhajir*, i.e., to migrate, emigrate, or immigrate on God's earth to escape untenable conditions.

Islamic history is reminiscent of migration right from the inception of the Prophet Muhammad's message at the age of 40 in 610 CE. Because of religious persecution from the Meccans, the Prophet ordered some of his followers to seek refuge in Abyssinia (Ethiopia) with a just Christian ruler, the Negus As-Hama. In 615 CE, groups of Muslims ventured into the unknown. The encounter of protection and hospitality accorded to them is documented in Islamic history for posterity. Perhaps, the *Hijrah (Hegira)* of Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) from Mecca to Medina in 622 CE is the most significant event in Islamic history. In fact, the Islamic calendar begins from this date. The *Muhajirun* (emigrants) from Mecca were well received by the *Ansar* (supporters) in Medina. A brotherhood compact was created between the two groups in which they were paired to care for each other. The lives of both individuals and groups were enriched through mutual benefits and larger social cohesions.

THE AMERICAN NARRATIVE

Apart from the American Indians, all other ethnic groups are immigrants to the United States. Waves of people arrived at different times, from far and varied backgrounds to forge a unique experiment. That is why some call America the "Land of Immigrants." Some have historically been oppressed, while others have been favored. The struggle continues to the present day as immigration remains a topic of deep passion to the present day. So, how do we view the stranger? Do we feel threatened, afraid, resentful? Do we push for assimilation and conformity? Or do we see the stranger as enriching our lives? As offering us fresh perspectives? Do we open our hearts and arms or shut them in his or her face? Perhaps, we should listen to our moral and ethical calling to respond kindly to the stranger. Remember the story of the Statue of Liberty as a symbol of liberty and justice for all.

³ https://www.muftisays.com/blog/Seifeddine-M/3733_07-08-2014/be-in-the-world-as-if-you-were-a-stranger-or-a-traveler-along-a-path.html

MINNESOTA IMMIGRANTS

- Over 400,000 in MN – 8% are recent immigrants, compared to 13% in the U.S.
- Until 1970, most immigrants were from Germany, Norway, and Sweden
- Recent immigrants from Mexico, India, Laos - Hmong, Somalia, Vietnam, Ethiopia, Liberia, and Myanmar - Karen
- Immigrants revitalize distressed neighborhoods, making them safer, generating tax and attracting economic development.⁴

Reasons for immigrating:

- **Push factors** for leaving home country
 - Poverty
 - Natural disasters
 - Civil war
- **Pull factors** for going to another country
 - Family reunion – 66%
 - Work/employment – 16%
 - Freedom from political, religious, ethnic persecution – 8%⁵

KINDNESS TO THE STRANGER TO PROMOTE PEACEFUL CO-EXISTENCE

Dr. Jamal Badawi, a prominent Muslim scholar in Nova Scotia, Canada, outlined these steps for peaceful co-existence:

1. Attitudes of fairness and humility
2. Reaching out to one another
3. Mutual understanding & respect
 - a. Build on commonalities
 - b. Respectfully discuss differences
 - c. Engage in intra-faith dialogue too
4. Connect between peace & justice
5. Work together for common good⁶

RESPONDING TO THE STRANGER

There is clearly an element of temporariness, uncertainty, and vulnerability for the stranger. He or she needs obviously acceptance, hospitality, guidance, support, and shelter. People of faith and organizations like Interfaith Action of Greater Saint Paul must be the vanguards of protecting and promoting the well-being of the strangers in our midst. Welcoming the stranger with open arms is possible because our communities are generally kind and generous. We can do it since we are called upon to be hopeful and not succumb to fear and political whims of the day. Politics changes but our common human values transcend time and geography.

*Prepared by Imam Abdisalam Adam, Islamic Civic Society of America
Interfaith Action - Opportunity St. Paul Learning Community Event
January 18, 2018*

⁴ www.mncompass.org

⁵ www.MinnesotaMeeing.com

⁶ https://www.ohio.edu/orgs/muslimst/downloads/Is_Co-existence_Feasible.pdf