

Islam Began as Something Strange

Description: A brief explanation of the *hadith* about strangeness. Followed by a discussion of the term strangeness, and how it relates to Islam both today and in the past.

By Aisha Stacey (© 2017 NewMuslims.com)

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Objective

- To understand the Islamic concept of strangeness.

Arabic Terms

- *Sahabah* " the plural form of *oeSahabi*," which translates to Companions. A *sahabi*, as the word is commonly used today, is someone who saw Prophet Muhammad, believed in him and died as a Muslim.
- *Hadith* - (plural " *ahadith*) is a piece of information or a story. In Islam it is a narrative record of the sayings and actions of Prophet Muhammad and his companions.
- *Sunnah* - The word *Sunnah* has several meanings depending on the area of study however the meaning is generally accepted to be, whatever was reported that the Prophet said, did, or approved.
- *Deen* " the way of life based on Islamic revelation; the sum total of a Muslim's faith and practice. *Deen* is often used to mean faith, or the religion of Islam.
- *Dunya* " this world, as opposed to the world of the Hereafter.

Among the definitions of stranger to be found on Dictionary.com we find, something or someone unusual, extraordinary, or unfamiliar. A stranger is someone we are unaccustomed to or unacquainted with. We could say that someone is a stranger, as in, *oeI have never seen that person here before.*" Or we could be the stranger, as in, *oeI feel out of place here, it is strange and unfamiliar to me.*" Muslims today are well acquainted with being considered strange or feeling strange. We tend to think that this is some sort of 21st century phenomenon but we are wrong about that.



Those who worship One God have all at some time felt that sensation of strangeness. The prophets and messengers felt as if they were one person among so many others. Most people did not think the way they did. Their families stood out from the crowd, their

followers looked and felt strange among their respective societies. The early Muslims in Mecca must have felt strange too. Imagine them wondering why their loved ones did not feel the same way they did. Imagine how it felt to be one person among many, or a small group within a crowd. Prophet Muhammad, may the mercy and blessings of Allah be upon him, told the *sahabah* that their strangeness was a good sign; glad tidings, he said, belonged to the strangers.

A very well-known *hadith* explains the strangeness we feel. *Islam began as something strange, and it shall return to being something strange, so give glad tidings to the strangers.*"[1] His listeners then asked, *Who are those strangers, O Messenger of Allah?*" He replied, *Those that correct the people when they become corrupt.*"[2] In another narration of the *hadith* he said in response to the same question, *They are a small group of people among a large evil population. Those who oppose them are more than those who follow them*".[3]

When Prophet Muhammad began to call the people to Islam there were very few people who bothered to listen to his warnings and message. Those who did listen were considered to be strange. Then as throngs of people entered into the *deen* of Allah they became less strange, those who refused to accept the message were the strangers.

Prolific Islamic scholar Ibn al-Qayyim (1292 " 1350 CE) explained that there are strangers even among the strangers. He said, Muslims are strangers among humankind; the true believers are strangers among Muslims; and the scholars are strangers among the true believers. And the followers of the *Sunnah*, those that abandon all forms of innovation, are likewise strangers.[4]

Ibn al-Qayyim also divided strangeness into three grades:

1. Praiseworthy strangeness. That is the strangeness that comes when a person says there is no God but Allah and Muhammad is His messenger. To be a believer in a world full of non-believers is a commendable strangeness, a comforting strangeness.
2. Blameworthy strangeness. This is the strangeness that comes from not being among the believers. It is something that we should all seek Allah's protection from because these people are strangers to God.
3. This is the strangeness that the traveler feels. It is neutral, neither praiseworthy nor blameworthy. Ibn al-Qayyim supports the idea that it does have the potential to become praiseworthy.

The strangeness of the traveler is the peculiar feeling a person gets when he is far away from the place in which he feels most comfortable, his home. When a person stays in a place for a short period of time knowing that he has to move on, he feels strange, as if he does not belong there, or perhaps anywhere. Prophet Muhammad said, *Live in this world as though you are a stranger or a traveler.*"[5]

There are many believers who feel as if they are strangers in this *dunya*. New Muslims are often surprised to find that even when they embrace Islam their feeling of not quite belonging does not seem to go completely away. And this feeling is not limited to new

Muslims. Many people who were born into the *deen* of Islam also feel this sense of not belonging in this place. To this end there are many who believe that the feeling of strangeness will not leave until we are safe in our true home, Paradise.

Throughout the Quran Allah reminds the believers that the Hereafter is our final destination. This world, He tells us, is no more than a diversion, a test and a trial. Ibn Rajab (1335 -1393 CE) pointed out that Prophet Muhammad used the analogy of a stranger because a stranger is usually a person who is travelling and always prepared to go home; traveling through this *dunya* preparing for the Hereafter and longing for Paradise.

In addition to this, a stranger does not appear to be like other people, he is different. The differences are what make him a stranger. True believers are strangers and it is appropriate that we are not like those who do not believe. In a world where following the teachings of Islam is looked upon as something strange, sometimes even among Muslims, it is easy to relate to the idea that Islam will return to being something strange. Therefore, embrace your strangeness and be grateful for the glad tidings that come with it.

Endnotes:

[1] Saheeh Muslim, At-Tirmidhi, Ibn Majah & Ahmad.

[2] Reported by Abu Amr al-Dani, from the hadith of Ibn Masoud.

[3] Reported by Ibn Asaakir.

[4] Al-Ghurbathu wa al-Ghuraba, a booklet by Imam Ibn al-Qayyim al-Jawziyyah.

[5] Saheeh Bukhari.

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