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A Minnesota scholar shows how we could find common ground with, and through, Shia Islam

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AVON HILLS SALON

Thoughts from the Avon Hills

Jason Schlude on “A Minnesota scholar shows how we could find common ground with, and through, Shia Islam”

SEPTEMBER 30, 2020



* This article was originally published on September 18, 2020 in the [Minneapolis Star Tribune](#).

Polarity is palpable at the present time. Whatever the causes, large swaths of American society are deeply alienated from one another. The issue does not matter: pandemic, racial equity, education or the upcoming presidential election. Whatever the result of that election, we are at risk of facing an even deeper divide in our society. It is likely that people will die as tensions and violence escalate. The reality is, they already have.

There is no shortage of problems we face. Each prioritizes them in an individual way, but I place

our inability to conduct civil discourse high on the list. How can we talk to one another — without fear of irreparably alienating the other or even provoking violence? Is it possible that we together can gather evidence, interrogate it, identify critical issues, envision possibilities and their consequences, and reach solutions?

If anything, sheer necessity leads me to hope we can. If not, our future as a functional democracy is shrouded in darkness.

While contemplating this darkness, I recently had a remarkable encounter with empathy. I stumbled upon it in a new book on Middle Eastern politics: “[Shia Islam and Politics: Iran, Iraq, and Lebanon](#),” by Jon Armajani, professor in the Peace Studies Department at the College of St. Benedict and St. John’s University in Minnesota.

The book documents the relationship between religion and politics across Middle Eastern history, with particular attention to the Islamic sect of Shi’ism.

Shia Islam is practiced by most people in Iran and Iraq and by many in Lebanon. It is the religion of the Islamic Revolution in Iran, of Hezbollah in Lebanon. Also central to the investigation is the United States’ relationship to these nations.

Knowing even a few details of this relationship’s history, some may be tempted to think that Western empathy for Shias is impossible or out of place. Yet Armajani begins his book by embracing it: “I wrote this book not as a defense of Iran’s Islamic Revolution and its regional consequences, but as a way of explaining that revolution’s reasons in a manner which is empathetic to some of the Shia Muslim revolutionaries.”

Such scholarly empathy enables Armajani to understand the world of Shi’ism on its own terms, resulting in a balanced picture that recognizes its positive potential even as it acknowledges its political failings.

Similarly, he offers an assessment of the U.S. role that is sympathetic, but unflinching.

In the late 1970s, Iranian Shias faced a repressive monarch in Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, a shah driven by personal interests in power and wealth and all too willing to brutally censor his own people with secret police and military crackdowns. Iran’s Shias overthrew the monarchy in early 1979 and formed a democracy defined by Islamic ideals that many hoped would bring succor to

the victimized.

The new government more effectively distributed land to the needy, expanded literacy, critical infrastructure, and health care, and offered subsidies for food and other resources. But it was also a government that carried out its own strong-arm elimination of dissent. It was capable of endorsing a takeover of the U.S. embassy in November 1979 and holding its occupants hostage for more than a year.

The U.S. had reason, then, to distrust Iran — a lingering unease that makes the prospect of a nuclear weapon in its hands terrifying. Still, the U.S. must remember that it helped to organize a 1953 coup against Iran’s democratically elected prime minister, Mohammad Mosaddegh, and supported the shah’s subsequent creation of a secret police. America was willing to abandon its democratic principles for what it thought was in its narrow security interests.

Armajani offers us something deeply needed: a willingness to recognize complexity in our political world. This leads him to a valuable middle ground — not a middle ground in which we all come to the exact same conclusions on how best to proceed, but one in which we all must consider the same facts and genuinely wrestle with them in terms designed to enable meaningful discussion, not to inflame and short-circuit it. It is an approach that as a citizen body we need to embrace if we are to build that more perfect union imagined long ago. **

** On September 22, 2020, I interviewed Dr. Armajani about his new book at the Jay Phillips Center for Interfaith Learning at the College of Saint Benedict and Saint John’s University. The conversation can be viewed [here](#).

Jason Schlude

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