

Who was Imam ‘Ali? – Sunni Islam, Theological Boundaries, and Imam ‘Alī: An Interview with Professor Nebil Husayn

Early Islam was rife with a vast spectrum of beliefs, many of which were coupled with vehement, even violent disputes. Indeed, when we read about its early history, Islam seems to have been very different from how we think about it today. And Imam Ali ibn Abi Talib was a focal point for many of these various disputes. How did early Muslims view Imam Ali? What are the various factors that led to or were affected by the views of these early Muslims? And how are the views of early Muslims relevant to us today?

We sat down with Professor Nebil Husayn at the 2015 Muslim Group Conference in Chicago, IL, to gain insights into some of these questions, and to ponder how to approach Islamic history. His dissertation at Princeton University, entitled, “The Memory of Ali ibn Abi Talib in the Early Sunni Community,” was on the issue of Pro-‘Alid perspectives, Anti-‘Alid sentiment, and the imprints of early Muslim thought on Sunni Islam. Professor Husayn now teaches Islamic Studies at the University of Miami.

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