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“Sectarianism in Islam and Muslim Communities”

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**ABSTRACT**

“A Narrative Identity Approach to Islamic Sectarianism”

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This paper will explore recent conversations among scholars of sociology, psychology, anthropology, philosophy and literary criticism (in particular, the work of Margaret Somers) as to how human beings use the narrative to form identities and interpret their experiences. It will interrogate the extent to which a “narrative identity” approach might be fruitfully applied to the study of Islamic sectarianism by treating sect/school affiliations as one particular cluster of narratives in which human beings find themselves emplotted. I will argue that such an approach has much to commend it. First, it avoids essentializing sect and school affiliations by recognizing them as products of human beings – products that accumulate, change and develop (even break down) – over time, and in accordance with the particular situations in which people employ (or forget) them. Second, it allows for human agency within the social context of group affiliation, viewing sect/school actors as both participating in a drama that goes beyond their individual selves, but also manipulating that drama through their participation in it. Third, it recognizes sect/school identity as part of the multiple, intersecting and competing identities that constitute a person or social entity. Viewing sect/school affiliation as a kind of “narrative identity” thus permits the researcher of Muslim sects and schools to inquire after the narratives, themes, plots, institutions and characters that make up – collectively – what we consider to be any given *firqa* at any given moment, and in this way, it provides a potent methodology for the historical study of Muslim sects and schools