



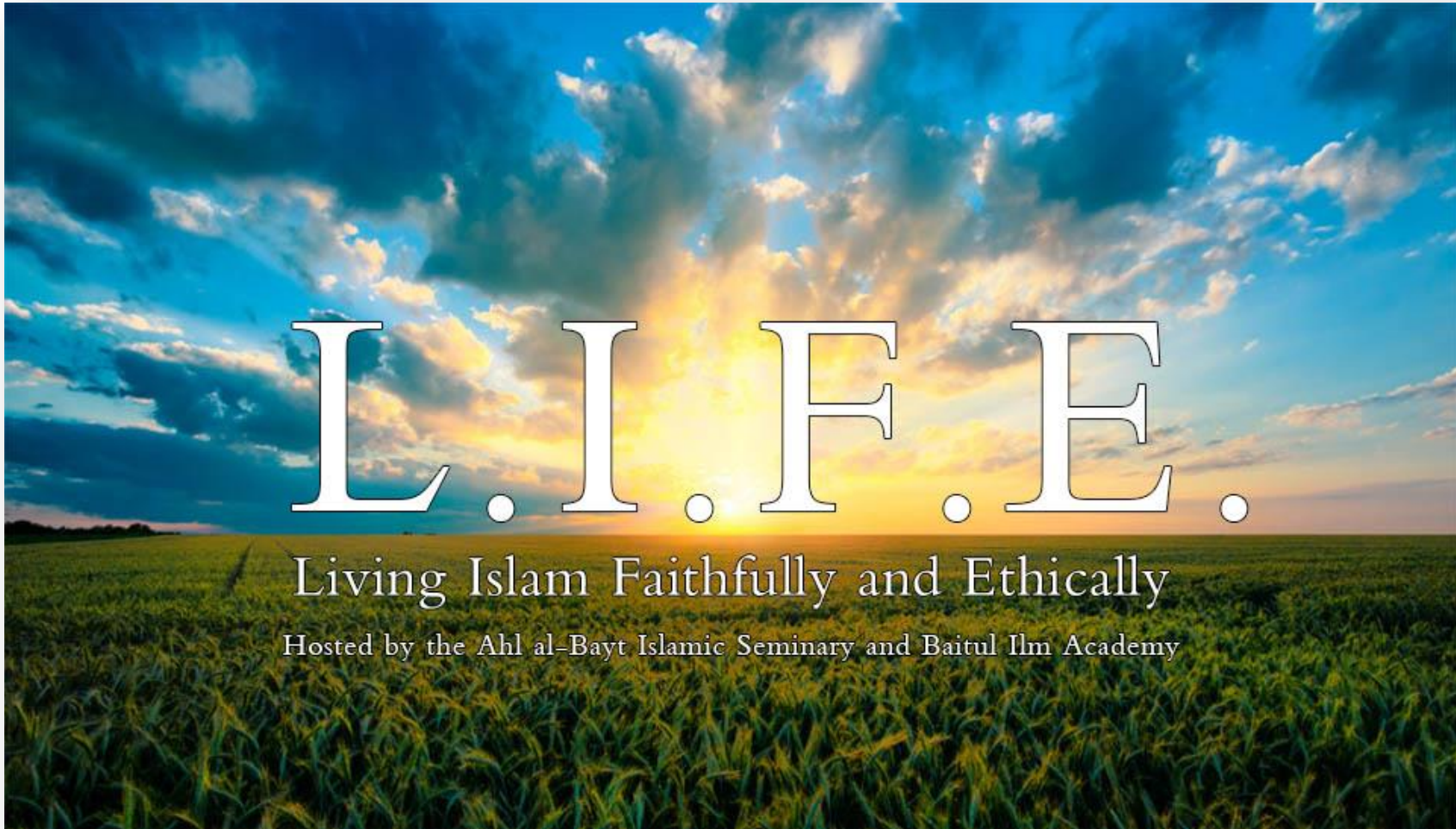
L.I.F.E. 2015

LIVING ISLAM FAITHFULLY AND ETHICALLY

An intensive studies course

Hosted by the Ahl al-Bayt Islamic Seminary
and Baitul Ilm Academy, Streamwood, IL





L.I.F.E.

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تَبَارَكَ الَّذِي بِيَدِهِ الْمُلْكُ وَهُوَ عَلَىٰ كُلِّ شَيْءٍ قَدِيرٌ

الَّذِي خَلَقَ الْمَوْتَ وَالْحَيَاةَ لِيَبْلُوَكُمْ أَيُّكُمْ أَحْسَنُ عَمَلًا ۗ وَهُوَ الْعَزِيزُ الرَّحِيمُ

“Blessed is He in whose hands is all sovereignty, and He has power over all things, the One who created death and life that He may test you to see who are best in deed. And He is the All-mighty, the All-forgiving.

- The Noble Qu'ran, Chapter 67 "The Kingdom", Verse 2

L.I.F.E.

The *hawzah* (Islamic seminary) is a scholarly and spiritual institution that has historically served as the backbone and “protective citadel” of Shīʿī Muslim identity. Ideally, every Shīʿī community and region should encompass a seminary that is integrated into its society. The Ahl al-Bayt Islamic Seminary was established to fulfill this aim and to aid the Muslim community in deepening its roots and provide solutions to the myriad challenges of contemporary life.

The L.I.F.E. (“Living Islam Faithfully and Ethically”) intensive studies course was born out of this vision. It provided a three week, aiming to broaden and deepen their understanding of the Islamic sciences and survey the studies and concerns of the *hawzah*. Courses were taught by a variety of Islamic scholars and offered a critical engagement with Islamic disciplines. The intensive course was designed to provide participants the insight and tools to examine both Islamic tradition and their own intellectual milieu in order to deepen their understanding of Islam and to better serve their communities in the future.



INSTRUCTORS

The blessing of the presence of various ‘ulamā’ – from a number of communities in the United States and Iran – provided a unique opportunity to learn from scholars with different life, academic, and professional experiences and perspectives. Instructors included the following resident and guest scholars:

Shaykh Mukhtar Faezi, Chicago, IL

Sayyid Sameer Ali, Milwaukee, WI

Shaykh Muslim Chawla, Buffalo, NY

Shaykh Ammar Haider, Dallas, TX

Shaykh Ja‘far Muhibullah, Qum, Iran

Sayyid Rizwan Rizvi, Somerset, NJ

Sayyid Dr. Mohammad Hejazi, Qum, Iran

Shaykhah Fatemah Meghji, Qum, Iran

Shaykh Rizwan Arastu, Chicago, IL

Sayyid Sulayman Hassan, Chicago, IL

PARTICIPANTS

Participants of the L.I.F.E. intensive were Muslim students and youth from North America, including Ontario, Canada; Michigan; Minnesota; Texas; New York; and Illinois. They brought with them diverse experiences, interests, motivations, and educational backgrounds. Throughout the three-week intensive course, participants leveraged their particular interests and backgrounds to engage in lively and fruitful discussion during classes and workshops. They formed bonds and friendships that will further their intellectual and spiritual growth and collaboration.



CORE COURSES

The core courses of the L.I.F.E. program were designed to provide students with a well-rounded and broad-based overview of the main disciplines of the *ḥawzah*, along with courses generally regarded as secondary or supplemental topics in the traditional curriculum.

Tafsīr with Shaykh Rizwan Arastu

This course touched on the major themes of all 30 *juz'* (sections) of the Qur'ān. Shaykh Rizwan presented each *juz'* through a thematic walkthrough of successive passages of verses, which provided a novel map through which to navigate reading the Qur'ān. He also provided many insights into a variety of exegetical questions raised by students.

Qur'ānic Recitation with Shaykh Rizwan Arastu

This course provided an overview of tajwīd in 5 class-hours. Shaykh Rizwan presented and illustrated methods of proper pronunciation and recitation rules.

Philosophy with Sayyid Sameer Ali

This course provided an overview of the major goals, terms, arguments, and thinkers of Islamic philosophy. Sayyid Sameer began with an exposition of philosophical terms and concepts, then explored basic arguments of various thinkers, starting with Ibn Sīnā (Avicenna) and ending with Mullā Ṣadrā. He also introduced students to various issues related to manuscripts and the academic study of Islamic philosophy.



Fiqh (Islamic Law) with Sayyid Sulayman Hassan

This course provided an overview of the aims of fiqh, the major topics of *aḥkām* (rulings), and their underpinnings in the Qur'ān and the ḥadīth corpus with a view to presenting a broader conception of fiqh which incorporated ethics alongside law. Sayyid Sulayman provided insight into the ethical contours of basic legal rules and suggestions for how to apply them in daily life. In some special cases Sayyid Sulayman analyzed some of the major talking points surrounding controversial aspects of religious law.

Qur'ānic Studies with Shaykh Muslim Chawla

This course provided an overview of the major themes of *‘ulūm al-Qur’ān* (*sciences of the Quranic text*). Shaykh Muslim explained the major issues of Qur'ānic Studies including the etymology of important terms, the names and attributes of the Qur'ān, and the compilation and integrity of the book.

History of the Prophet with Shaykh Muslim Chawla

This course provided an overview of the major topics of study of the Prophet's (ﷺ) life. Shaykh Muslim also discussed some of the major points of dispute between Sunnī and Shī'ī historians, including the contention about the experience of *wahy* (divine revelation) and the implications about the Prophet's (ﷺ) knowledge and mission.

Introduction to Ḥadīth Literature with Shaykh Ammar Haider

This course provided an overview of the corpus of traditions from the Prophet (ﷺ) and Imāms (a). Shaykh Ammar explored the challenges and early history of the narration and compilation of traditions and how these coalesced into the 4 major books of traditions used by scholars.



‘Irfān (Islamic Mysticism) with Shaykh Ammar Haider

This course provided an overview of the major topics and aims of spiritual wayfaring. Shaykh Ammar focused on practical ‘irfān – the development of the soul through refined action. He also shared inspiring stories about the major scholars of mysticism.

Ḥadīth Studies with Shaykh Ja‘far Muhibullah

This course provided an overview of the issues in the study of the traditions of the Prophet (ﷺ) and Imāms (a). Shaykh Ja‘far explained the major elements of study involved, including the study of the biographies of narrators (*rijāl*) and the study of the text of narrations (*dirāyah*) and the general aims of these disciplines. He also touched on some debates – both academic and from within the tradition – about the nature and the authenticity of narrated traditions.

History of the Imāms with Shaykh Ja‘far Muhibullah

This course provided an overview of the major topics of study of the lives of the Imāms (a). Shaykh Ja‘far explained the attributes recorded about the Imāms, the debates about those attributes, and some of the theological implications derived from various historical accounts. He also touched on some of the disputes regarding the appointment of several of the Imāms.

‘Aqā’id with Sayyid Rizwan Rizvi and Sayyid Sulayman Hassan

This course provided an overview of the study of theology. Sayyid Rizwan Rizvi explained the general contours and levels of Tawḥīd. Sayyid Sulayman Hassan supplemented the course by focusing on the relationship between Tawḥīd and Prophethood, including the implications and debates about intercession, and how to develop a nuanced conception of Tawḥīd and its implications regarding our interaction with God’s creation.



Special Attributes of the Qur'ān with Sayyid Dr. Mohammad Hejazi

This course provided insight into some special topics regarding the Qur'ān and its study. Sayyid Hejazi explained key topics of the study of the Qur'ān and elaborated on some of the subtleties of the Qur'ān's structure and special attributes.

L.I.F.E. ISSUES

The L.I.F.E. Issues modules were designed to take our participants beyond the traditional curriculum and into critical thinking about pressing intellectual, social, ethical, and spiritual topics that the Muslim community is facing day-to-day with the ethos of the Islamic tradition in mind.



- The Philosophical Underpinnings of Liberalism and Islamic Responses

The prevailing worldview of American society is informed by liberalism, which posits a conception of the human being as an autonomous individual who is free to seek his or her own desires free from the constraints of community and religious institutions as far as is possible. This worldview, however, was constructed in a particular time and place and need not be seen as a given. In contrast, the Islamic worldview focuses primarily on a vertical relationship of humanity with the Divine – positing the individual’s duty to struggle for moral purity by referring to the *fitrah* (divinely-inclined human disposition) and revelation. Islam would have human desires be subordinate to and guided by Divine purpose.

- Same-Sex Marriage, the Supreme Court Ruling, and Implications for the Muslim Community

The recent Supreme Ruling in favor of marriage equality, now framed as a civil right, poses challenges for the religious American, particularly Muslims who learn from Islam a conception of marriage that is between woman and man and with spiritual purpose. The challenge for Muslims in America will be to present their conception of marriage in a moral language in line with religious teachings, and strive to understand how to navigate within a society whose legal structures and mores may conflict with their own conception of morality. The Supreme Court ruling also challenges the autonomy of religious institutions should they seek federal support. Individuals, businesses, and organizations may be legally bound to not be partial against homosexual activity, and may be legally bound to make choices in support of homosexual activity. Finally, the construction of a homosexual label as a category of *identity* creates a culture where various sexual orientations deserve equal legitimacy under the law. The Islamic conception of sexuality recognizes diverse inclinations and attractions, but it believes that human desire can be directed in accordance with divine purpose. This conception avoids crystallizing inclinations into social identities.

- Language and its Impact on our Worldview and Actions

A deliberation of how language is value-laden and can shape the way we think about reality and interact with the world, people, and even our religion. This discussion aimed at critically evaluating the ways words are used in mainstream culture and exploring their heavy and often overlooked implications. In light of Prophetic and Qur'anic injunctions, the conversation explored ideas of mental constructs, thoughtful silence, and thoughtful speech, and how we can use these to (a) understand the limitations of language and (b) use language (with its limitations) in a manner conducive to an Islamic worldview.

- Gender Roles in Muslim Communities – Social Realities and the Question of Ideals

The issue of gender roles in Muslim communities is a sensitive and often polarized conversation. This discussion attempted to address the crux of the issue by first asking if the marginalization of women in our communities is perceived or real, and intended or unintended. From here, the discussion explored the effectiveness (or lack thereof) of the numerous strategies for addressing women's participation in communities and the potential for a stronger communal future. Perceptions of women in the Muslim and non-Muslim world were explored, including psychological studies on objectification and the perception of women as less competent, less intelligent, and less 'human'. The implications of these perceptions in our communities, and the possibility and nature of gender ideals in the Islamic tradition were also deliberated on.



- Islamic Studies: The Academy and the Ḥawzah

These discussions explored the relationship between the contemporary academy and the Ḥawzah. The Ḥawzah's aims include providing its students with the tools to delve into and study the primary sources of revelation and Islamic tradition while also providing the student with a moral and spiritual environment oriented towards the Qur'anic ethos. The academic study of Islam is not oriented towards the need for such an environment and thus generally studies Islam as a civilization and phenomenon in human history; the student is, in general, to be detached from their subject of study.

Despite these differences, the methods and aims of these institutions can provide insight for each other and there is opportunity for expanded communication amongst scholars rooted in both approaches; indeed many traditionally-trained scholars are also studying the methods of the Western academy. It is important, however, to recognize that the approaches of *both* institutions are value-laden, each having their own peculiar commitments and worldviews. This problematizes the misconception some may have that the Western academy is objective and critical, while religious and traditional academic institutions are biased and dogmatic.

Additionally, the Ḥawzah's curriculum has expanded and contracted through time. Interest in subjects which have been less commonly studied in the past century are beginning to be explored once again today.

- The Question of Religious Communities' Assertion of Values in the Secular Arena

The question of liberalism, and its effects on the social and legal landscape, creates difficulties for religious communities seeking to gain public recognition of the moral values and agency of the religions they believe in. As contemporary interpretations of the philosophical underpinnings of the state are increasingly diminishing the role of religion, it is important to intellectually explore the nature of secularism and how it operates in different contexts. What role can religion have in the public sphere? Is it admissible for religious values to inform public opinion or legal deliberation? How do these notions affect religious liberty? If religious notions have no role in the public sphere, how does that affect the private practice of religion, and can a distinction be made between what is private and what is public? Is the liberal position value-neutral? Can a greater recognition of religious traditions provide a safe, thoughtful, and humane negotiation of public practice?

- Shī'ī-Sunnī Differences: Intellectual and Practical Issues

The experience of navigating Muslim community life as a member of the minority branch of Islam presents a number of hurdles, both intellectual and practical in nature. The discussion regarding intellectual issues presented useful ways to discuss perspective on topics of contention such as: differences in ḥadīth source material and sciences, the doctrine of *imāmah*, and the nature of differences in legal deductions and rulings. Practical matters discussed included topics such as: how to navigate differences in performance of the prayer, how to work with differences in prayer times and fast-breaking times, and how to generally build community in university settings and other areas where intra-religious relationships are key.

- A Deeper Look into the Compilation and Integrity of the Qur'ān

This discussion centered on how the Shī'ī community should understand the value of the Qur'ānic text, and also touched on the controversial discussions on *taḥrīf* (alteration) of the Qur'ānic text, and how such accusations were resolved by Shī'ī scholars in light of guidance from the Imams (a).

- Converts and Their Place in the Broader Muslim Community

The problem of retention of new Muslims is not a new issue for the Muslim community. The short documentary *Wayward Son: The Jordan Richter Story* provided a narrative account of many of the challenges new Muslims face along their journey, including the difficulty of transitioning to a new *culture*, feelings of alienation, complications with non-Muslim family, and their struggle to find a place in the community that helps in their religious growth. Of utmost importance is the problem of developing a well-rounded religious curriculum for new Muslims so they don't have to rely on scattered stories and "facts" told to them from Friday sermons and community members—there is a need for a type of curriculum to provide a foundation of knowledge from trustworthy sources. In addition, many communities lack the cultural elasticity to adequately welcome new Muslims, so steps ought to be taken to develop welcoming committees to make transitions into the community smoother. Finally, the idea of a "Supplemental Space" was explored whereby additional culturally-apt institutions could play a complementary role alongside existing community centers and *masjids* to help ease the growing pains of Muslim communities in the West.



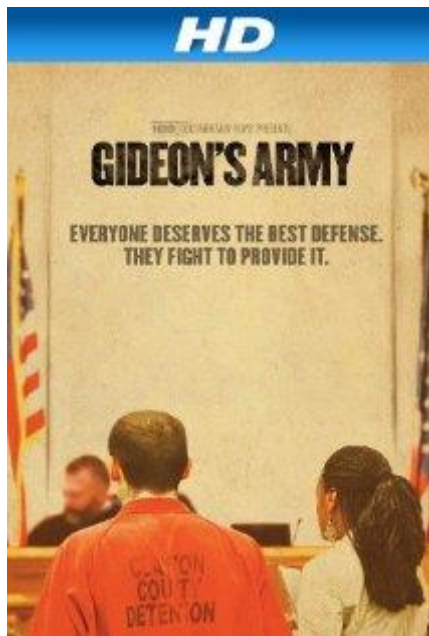
DOCUMENTARIES

Various documentary screenings and discussions played a complementary role alongside the L.I.F.E. Issues Modules. Participants viewed documentaries and gathered for discussion afterwards. The mentioned topics are fleshed out in cinematic detail.



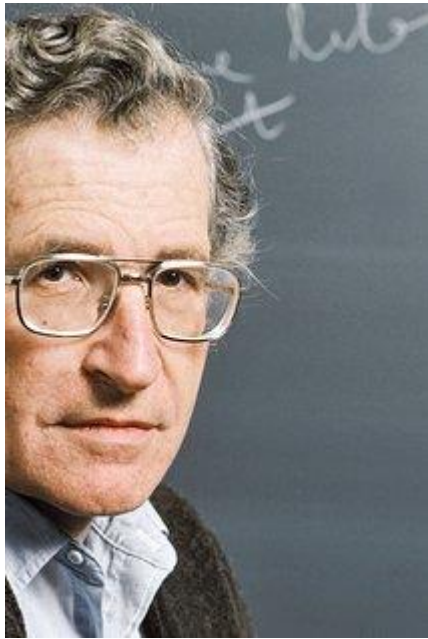
Dirty Wars - Investigative journalist Jeremy Scahill is pulled into an unexpected journey as he chases down the hidden truth behind America's expanding covert wars.

Discussion Topics: State Violence, Drones, Just War



Gideon's Army - Follows three young, committed Public Defenders who are dedicated to working for the people society would rather forget. Long hours, low pay and staggering caseloads are so common that even the most committed often give up.

Discussion Topics: Public Defenders, Empathy, and the American Legal System



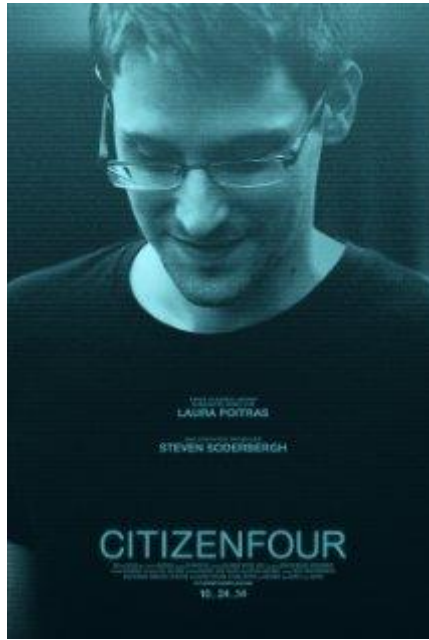
Video Clips on science, philosophy, cosmology, and perspectives on how to navigate competing epistemological theories.

Discussion Topics: Science and Our Conception of the World



UnMosqued - UnMosqued is a documentary film that focuses on the need for reform in many of our mosques in America. The film discusses women and the spaces they occupy, converts and the struggles they face, mosque stewardship, and some of the third spaces that have emerged in reaction to conditions in mosques.

Discussion Topics: Muslim Community Institutions, Community Needs, and Reform



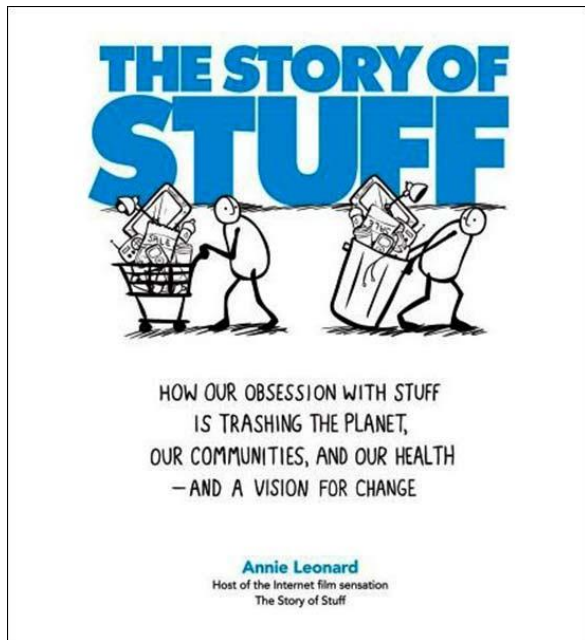
Citizenfour - A documentarian and a reporter travel to Hong Kong for the first of many meetings with Edward Snowden.

Discussion Topics: State Surveillance, NSA, Internet Data, Courage, and Resistance



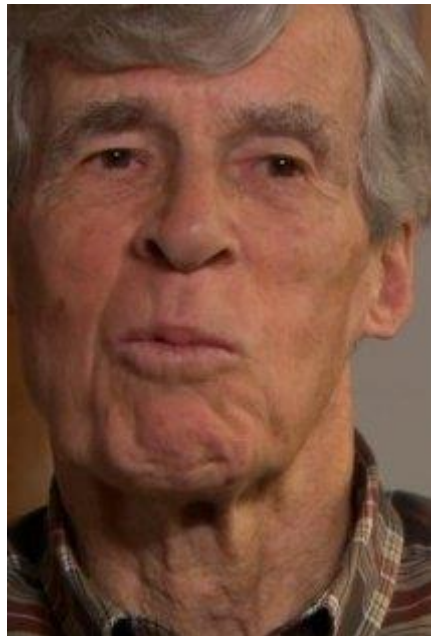
Virunga - A group of brave individuals risk their lives to save the last of the world's mountain gorillas in the midst of renewed civil war and a scramble for Congo's natural resources.

Discussion Topics: Globalization, Transnational Corporations, Nature, and the “Developing World”



The Story of Stuff - For much of the world, consumption has become the unquestioned duty of every individual. Then garbage activist Annie Leonard brought her two-hour lecture to Free Range, who helped her turn it into a 20-minute animated revolution. Shown in thousands of classrooms, endlessly blasted by Fox News, viewed more than 10 million times, The Store of Stuff opens the door to a serious cultural dialog about the costs of consumption.

Discussion Topics: Consumerism, Industrial Excess, and the Environmental Crisis.



The Suicide Plan - Explores the shadow world of assisted suicide, in which the lines between legality and criminality are often blurred.

Discussion Topics: Sickness, Suffering, Destiny, and Assisted Suicide in America



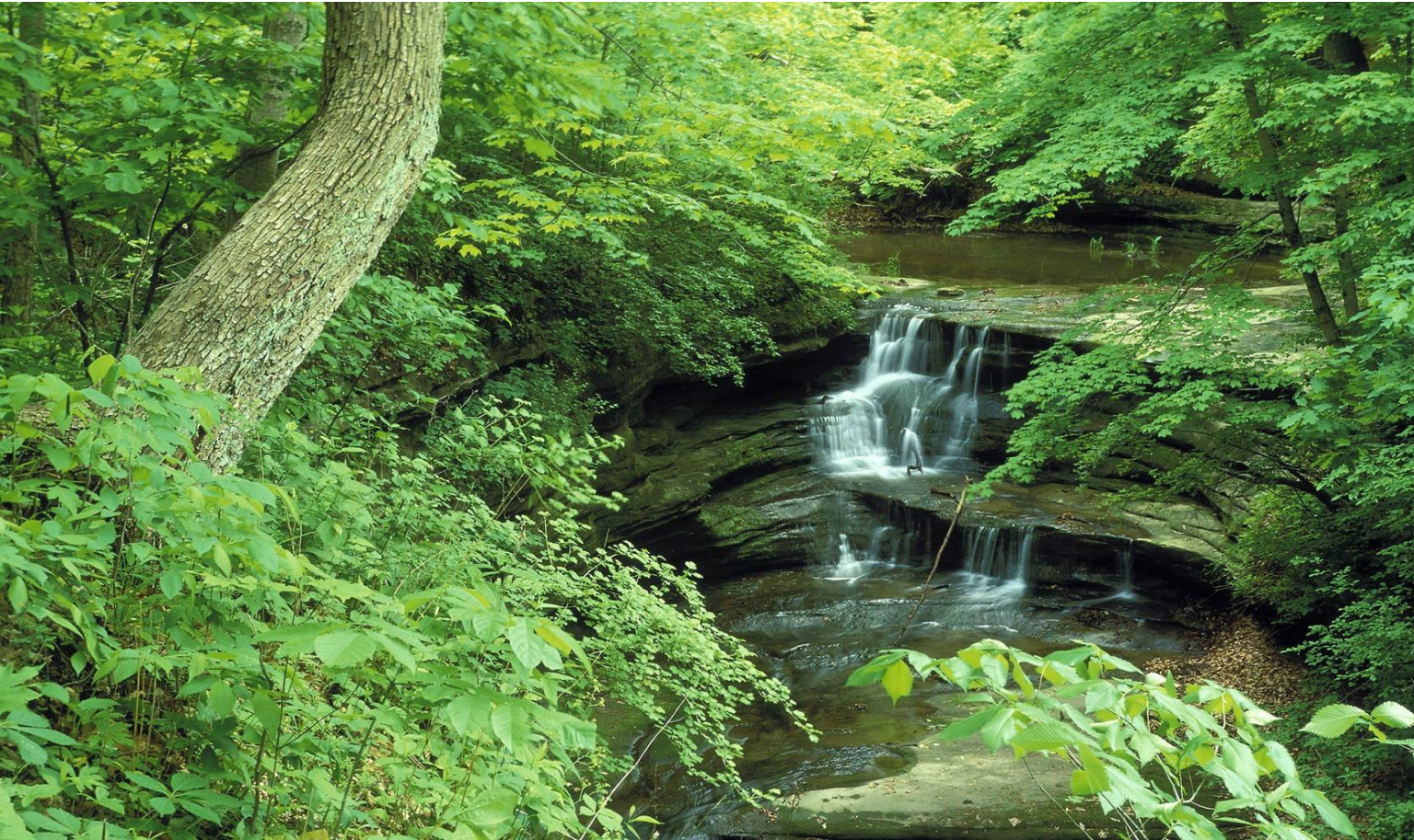
Faith Behind Bars - After a life of crime, Mateen at a young age discovers Shia Islam whilst serving time in one of the harshest American prisons. Meanwhile, Ibrahim rediscovers Shia Islam while growing up in the harshest ghettos of Washington, D.C. This is the amazing story of how they came together to begin their mission of spreading Shia Islam through American prisons.

Discussion Topics: Prison, Da'wah, and Muslim Institutions in America



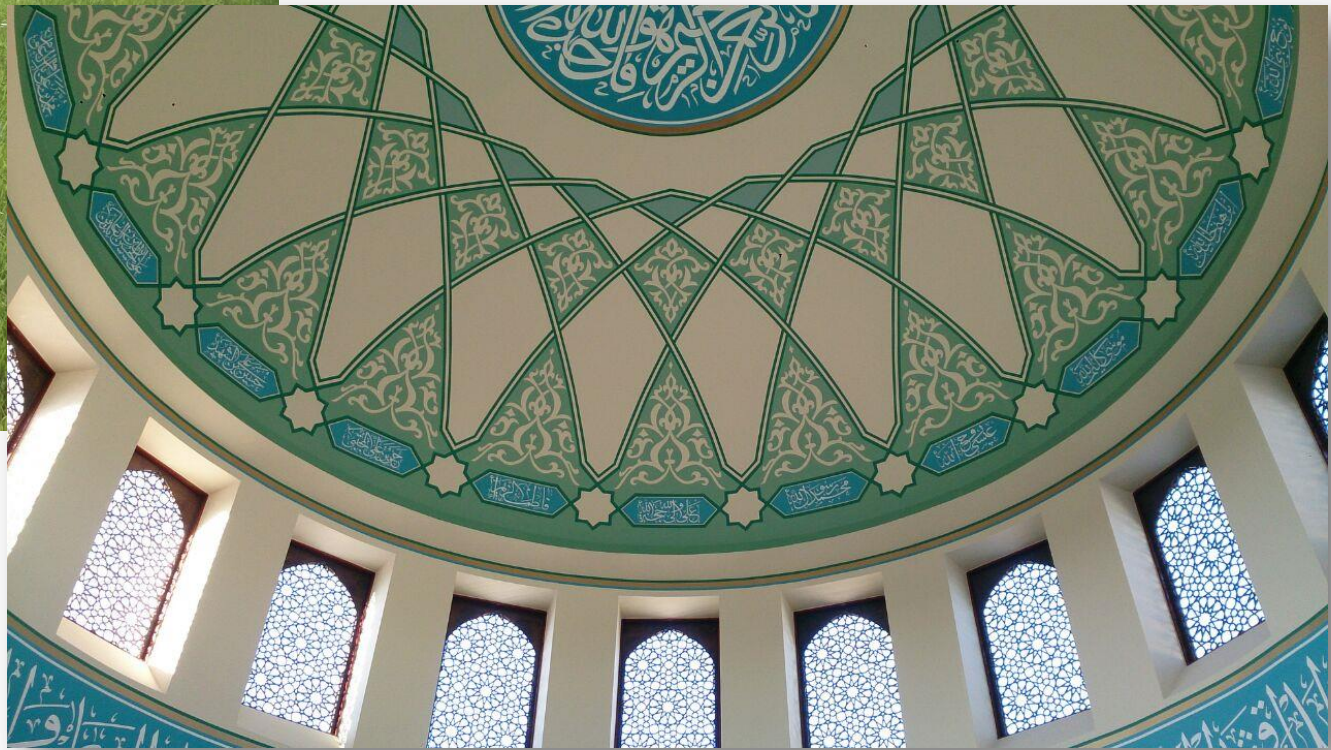
COMMUNITY BUILDING

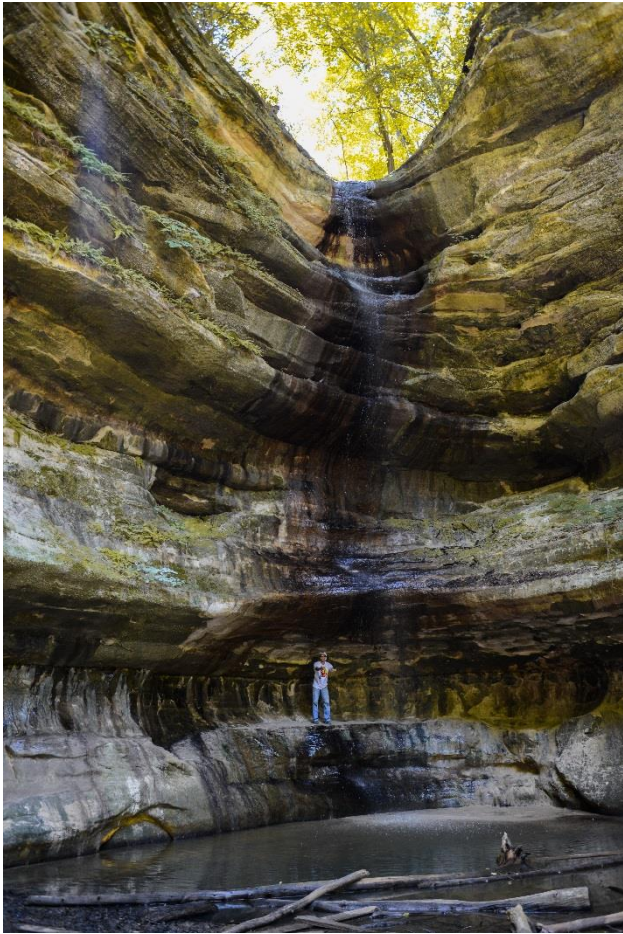
Several programs were aimed at building the bonds of community amongst the students. In addition to the many hours of classes and discussions, participants engaged in daily congregational prayers, du‘ā’ sessions, a State Park hike, barbecue lunch, the Shicago-L.I.F.E. joint program, a service project, and daily cooking and cleaning duties. Community building activities provided avenues for students to get to know one another and meet many of the members of Baitul Ilm.

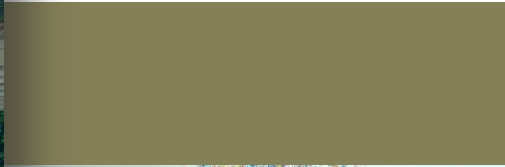
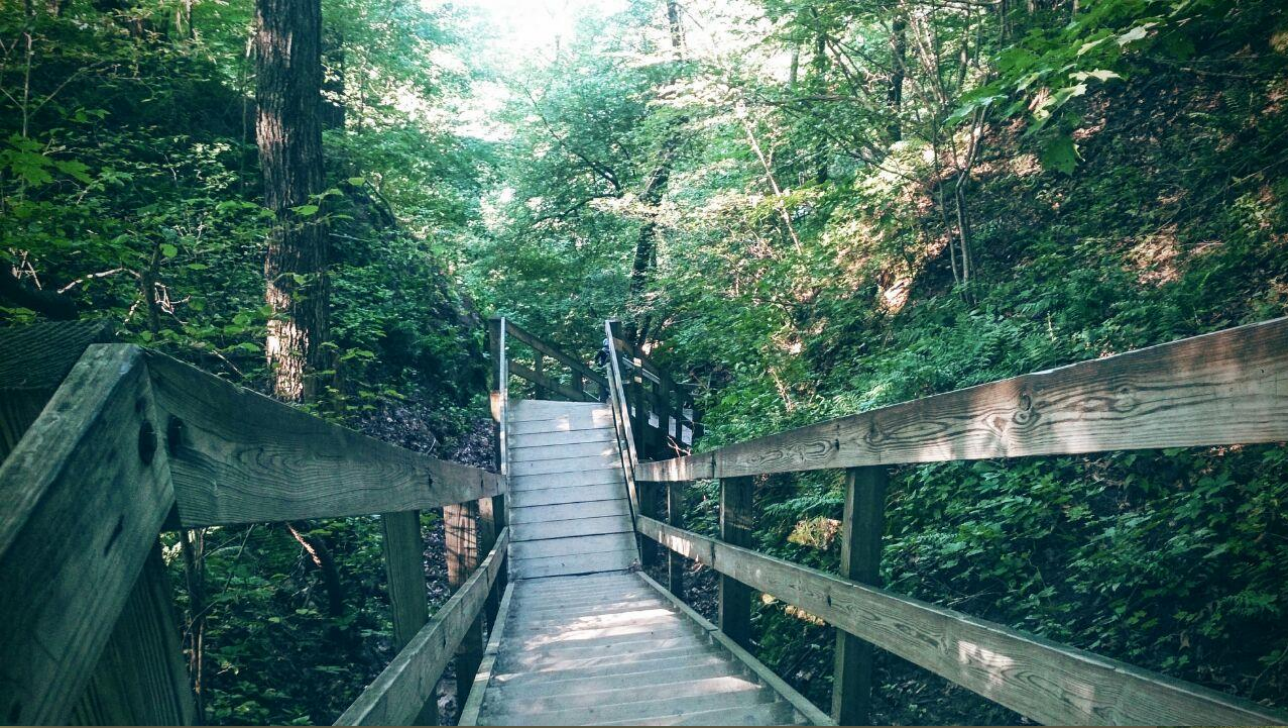
















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