

CHAPTER TEN

MAJOR PROBLEMS FACING MUSLIMS IN AMERICA

There are several problems facing Muslims in this country. Among them are the following:

- Working hard to earn a living and providing for their families
- Educating the children and raising them to be good Muslims, and at the same time good citizens in this country
- Feeling that as Muslims they belong here and can contribute something positive
- Facing different ideologies and trying to understand and live their Islam in a Western culture.
- Getting rid of the baggage that they carried when they came to America and understanding Islam in a new light based on reasoning and not adhering to rigid principles
- Facing prejudice and stereotyping and distortion of Islam and its morals and teachings
- Working with other Muslims and learning organization and collaboration between different groups, and not fighting each other or undermining their efforts
- Placing priorities and realizing that we must confirm our faith in our character and behavior in addition to our rituals of prayers and fasting
- Planning for the future and setting an agenda for short and long term goals, and not just reacting to events that we may have little control over.

EARNING A LIVING

Islam encourages us to work hard and earn our living through lawful honorable means. This way we become independent and not rely on others for support or be at the mercy of others. Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) said:

(The upper hand (that gives) is better than the lower hand (that receives) and start with those whom you support).

Bokhari & Muslim

Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) once saw a young man and stressed that working to earn a living and become self-sufficient is much better than begging others, they may or may not give you (Bokhari).

Most Muslims who immigrated to the US are professionals who earn a decent living and are able to provide well for their children. Most have a college degree or higher. They have to prove themselves; therefore they work harder than many Native Americans.

Sometimes Muslims face prejudice and discrimination because of their accent or their skin color or appearance that indicate that they were not born in this country. This is usually not a major problem if the Muslim is a doctor or college professor, but can be challenging if one is competing with others that do not have such a hurdle or obstacle.

Anti-Muslim sentiment has risen after September 11 and the war in Iraq and the TV and news media only showing the views and reaction of radical Muslims. Prejudice may not be apparent, but can be hidden and detrimental none the less.

Muslim children can also be the subject of bias and prejudice at school, especially girls if they chose to wear the Hijab (Muslim head cover).

RAISING THE CHILDREN

This is not an easy task for the children who may have to integrate and become like their peers at school, but at home they need to respect and

follow their parent's traditions and culture. Such tradition and attitudes may be at odds with an open Western society, especially in areas like dating, premarital sex, alcohol and drugs.

It is not only the children who feel the pressure to adapt and conform to the norms in society, but the parents face different challenges as well. Just saying: "This is what I want you to do" without giving good reasons and explanation why will not work. Also just saying "It is not our culture or tradition that you can go out on a date or stay overnight in a friend's house" will not work either if not discussed rationally and explained in a way that shows that the parents care for their children and are afraid for their safety and well being.

Teaching the children the basic principles of Islam and how to live their lives as Muslims is not easy either, since the majority of their friends and peers are non-Muslims. It is not enough to teach the children how to pray or how to memorize verses of the Qur'an. What is more important is to instill in them noble character and righteous behavior. Even more difficult is to inspire them to feel attached to their Islam and to be proud of their faith and heritage.

Being with other Muslim friends is obviously important, but the children should not feel isolated or protected from the larger society, and should be allowed and encouraged to take on Christian and Jewish friends and respect the faith that others profess, though it is different from their own.

Facing temptation and the lure and glamour of material things, children may feel that what really matters is to have a good time, and to satisfy their lusts and vain desires. It is much more difficult to stress and teach patience and sacrifice, than to allow immediate gratification and enjoying ourselves and having a good time. Glorifying money and power, and depicting crime and sex as symbols and goals to achieve places different priorities than what religion tells us.

The best way of teaching our children is not the words that we say; rather it is what we do. Our children look for role models. If they do not find them in their parents or close relatives, they seek different role

models elsewhere. If we fail to inspire our children, they may turn to what is glorified in the news media.

It is not just the food or the clothes that we provide for our children, rather it is the love, support and caring that is crucial for their development and well being. A loving home where there is stability and where the children are not afraid of coming to get help fosters normal development, than a broken home where there is no one to provide guidance, love or support.

WE BELONG HERE IN AMERICA

Some Muslims only interact with other Muslims of similar mind set. They isolate themselves and families as they refuse to interact or cooperate with the larger community they live in. Though they live in America, they behave as if they are still back home before they came to the US. They feel that they are foreigners and do not belong here. This feeling is imparted to their spouses and children.

Other Muslims realize that America is indeed their home. Therefore, they make the effort to integrate and adapt to their new country. They do not isolate themselves; rather, they reach out and form new friendship and relationships. They feel that they belong, and that they have something to offer.

The great wonder of the American dream is the freedom that each person enjoys, and the diversity of talent and culture available. America has been built by the effort of immigrants and by their hard work, and the new ideas they bring. This diversity enriches American society and everyone's life.

Muslims as well others who arrived late can contribute something positive and can provide solutions to current problems. They should not be shy or hesitate to speak and give their own viewpoint. In the beginning some people may not listen or even ignore such new voices. This should not dampen our enthusiasm or desire to participate actively in our community.

Working With Other Muslim Organizations

It is natural and expected that numerous organizations will form, each trying to help and advocate its goals in a specific area. What is important is that such organizations should communicate with each other and coordinate their effort and expertise to the benefit of the Muslim community. At least such organizations should not be fighting each other or putting obstacles or interfering with the sincere efforts of others.

Working together and coordinating activities is a new challenge for Muslim organizations. We should learn from the example and effort of Jewish organizations that have been active in this country for a number of years.

Each organization should specialize in a certain area. For example some groups may take on the responsibility of education, either of children or adults. Others may deal with social issues, while others may focus their activity in politics, voting and lobbying. Others may concentrate on the news media, while other groups may take on the court system and legal representation. Others may focus on the elderly and their needs, or medical issues.

Such multiplicity is to be encouraged, as long as there is coordination and cooperation between the various groups. This horizontal and vertical organization needs planning, vision and dedication.

Setting Up Priorities And Short And Long Term Goals

There may be nation wide goals and objectives, to be set up by a central command. In addition, there must be planning and goals to be set up at each local level. The needs of each Muslim community are different as the mix and composition varies from one part of the country to the next.

The time is past the goal of just establishing a mosque for prayers. What is more important at this junction are social, political and educational needs.

Short term goals should go hand in hand with long term planning, both at the local and national level.

An important priority is centers of higher learning to generate the leaders of Islamic centers. What is important is not an Imam to lead the prayers, rather a director with a vision that can lead and steer the Islamic center in the right direction to ensure that Islamic centers are open, viable and interact with and work with other religious and civic organizations in the larger community.

Each community has its own problems depending on how active or passive its members are and the diverse ethnic and ideological differences that exist. Sometimes personal egos get in the way, and Muslims may forget who are they working for and what goals they are trying to accomplish

Regular retreats and open discussion are crucial if the Islamic center is to succeed in serving its members.

A major problem is obviously the lack of adequate resources and having to rely on volunteers to do the work that is best suited for professionals. Time constraints and burn out is the usual outcome. There is also the problem of people in charge not willing to groom the next generation or to share the reigns of power.

Confirming Our Belief In Our Character And Behavior

Islam is a way of life. We as Muslims confirm our faith and the guidelines in the Qur'an and Sunnah in our behavior and character. Our rituals of worship such as prayer and fasting must influence us to become better human beings, not just going through the motions. If we understand our prayers and the Qur'an that we recite during prayers, then surely we must reach out and help those who need our help, and we must be kind, caring and forgiving. A heart that does not submit, or a soul that is never satisfied, or a tongue that harms others means that our prayers and fasting did not touch our hearts or had the desired effect.

Words that are not confirmed with humility, love and mercy are empty words, that have no value or meaning. To love God and to acknowledge His blessings means to hasten in all good deeds and to help others.

Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) emphasized (The best amongst you is the person whose character is noble and who helps others).