

CHAPTER FOUR

ISLAMIC CENTERS SHOULD BE OPEN

Muslims in America must understand that they are an essential part of American society, and can actively contribute to their community. Muslims can provide answers to current day problems like poverty, drugs and decline of moral values.

DANGERS OF ISOLATION

Muslims cannot isolate themselves and refuse to interact with other organizations in their community whether they are civic or religious structures. We cannot retreat to inside the walls of our mosques and just do our own things and feel comfortable and content in being with people of similar mind set and similar culture and background. If we do that we alienate ourselves and become a cast that is looked upon with suspicion and fear. Most people fear what they do not know and become apprehensive about culture that is different from their own. They form opinions not based on fact, but out of fear and concern. These fears are reinforced if Muslims isolate themselves and are looked upon as outside the norms of the society and that they do not fit in. They become “foreign” and not welcomed. Even worse some may try to get them out, since they “do not belong here in America”.

This prejudice and bias can be easily overcome if Muslims make the effort to open their Islamic center to the public and invite others to tour their center and make them feel welcomed. Muslims have nothing to hide and should not close their doors. The constitution guarantees freedom of

religion and expression, and no one is to interfere with the rights of others. The Islamic center of greater Cincinnati had a policy of openness from its inception, and welcomed visitors from all different faiths. Guided tours of the mosque and educational facilities are offered on the first Saturday of each month. Other groups visit the Islamic center at other times coming from schools, universities, churches and synagogues and other places of worship. Other civic organizations are welcomed as well. These tours last 30-60 minutes and usually include visits to prayer areas and classes where children get their Islamic education, as well as a brief introduction to Islam and its principles, then questions are answered. More than 50,000 visitors have toured the Islamic center in the 10 years since it was opened in 1995. These tours and the interaction it offers between non-Muslims and Muslims improve the image of Cincinnati Muslims and clear some of the misunderstanding and stereotyping of Muslims. These visitors talk to their families and friends and the impact is positive. Better understanding of Islam and the Muslims and the realization that Muslims in America are similar human beings with fears and hopes and are active members of society is an important step in fighting bias and prejudice.

REACH OUT TO THE LARGER COMMUNITY

If Muslims in Cincinnati did not open their Islamic center, rather closed their doors and isolated themselves, they will surely add to and strengthen the bias and prejudice that is fed through misrepresentation of Islam and the Muslims in the news media. What most Americans see on TV are stories and images of fighting and killing propagated in the name of Islam. Such crimes are committed by extremists who justify their wrong deeds in the name of religion. Islam is free of such labels and does not condone, rather Islam forbids the killing of human beings and safeguards human life since it is a gift from God.

Muslim leaders in Cincinnati and other parts of the country realized the importance of dialogue and reaching out to the community they live in. They became members of civic and inter-religious organizations and some served on the board of trustees of such organizations. They were active participants in dialogue with both Christians and Jews for the past

20 years, and established lines of communication and became friends with people of other faiths.

EDUCATING AMERICA

Islamic centers must be open to the public and welcome visitors, and serve as examples of how Muslims practice their Islam as a religion of tolerance and moderation, not a religion of extreme ideas or violence. Many Americans are ignorant of what Islam teaches and what do Muslims believe in. There are many misconceptions about Islam and the Muslims. Just to cite a few examples of these misconceptions:

- They allege that Muslims have no respect for human life or any regard for civil liberties, and that Muslims want to force everyone to become Muslims against their will. That is why you see violence and extremism only in Muslim countries and that terrorists are Muslims.
- They allege that Fighting to force others to become Muslims is sanctioned by Islam and that Muslims conquered other countries and forced masses to become Muslims by force
- They say that Jihad or Holy war is a fundamental principle in Islam and that means that Muslims, if capable are committed to fight the whole world to subjugate everyone to Islam
- They allege that Muslims look down on women and that Women in Muslim countries are second class citizens and have no rights
- They allege that Islam is not compatible with democracy, and that Muslim countries are ruled by dictators

From the above allegations, it is clear that Muslims in America have their work cut for them. They need to work hard to educate Americans about the basic beliefs of Islam and correct many of these wrong concepts. Such a process of teaching and dialogue must come from Muslims who are sincere and who have the proper knowledge and are able to express themselves and communicate with others. Those Muslims who are to defend Islam and who represent Muslims in America must have decent character and the ability to listen to opposing points of view and to be patient and tolerant. But above all they should be able to think critically and answer questions directly and honestly, and convey what they

believe in. Many times, what we do is more important than what we say. Therefore, if our character and behavior imply that we are harsh or unwilling to listen, or if we refuse to interact with non-Muslims, then our words mean very little.

This process of educating America must be carried out by several members in each Islamic center. No one person alone can carry this burden. Our abilities as human beings differ. Some of us are quiet thinkers, while others more eloquent speakers. Some are work horses, while others are better at organization. It is only through coordinating this collaborative effort that we may be able to accomplish our goal and be successful.

Those who are to speak on behalf of Islam and the Muslims should have an understanding of their audience. What are they made of, what do they believe in, and what are the sensitive issues. They must do their homework if they are to reach their audience and be successful in clearing misconceptions about Islam. Unless a Muslim has lived in America for a number of years and became exposed to American culture, he or she will not be able to understand the dynamics of this country, nor will he be able to interact and dialogue with non-Muslims.

LACK OF HUMAN RESOURCES

This lack of qualified human resources is what plagues Islamic centers in America. There is a serious shortage of Muslims who understand American culture, history and ideals, and who are able to communicate effectively with non-Muslims. This shortage is crucial in staffing Islamic centers, particularly looking for qualified people with the right balance of knowledge, experience, outlook and ability to lead an Islamic center. It does no good to import scholars from Arab or Muslim countries to serve as leaders of Islamic centers or as Imams, because they have no understanding of American society. In Cincinnati we looked for several years and searched for a qualified leader to head our Islamic center. Our efforts were not successful and we learned a number of lessons from this search. The most important lesson is the need to establish centers of higher learning in America that will groom and graduate leaders to staff

the many Islamic centers in this country. I believe this effort is needed now, and is more urgent than building new mosques. Unfortunately, many Muslims still have this notion that building a mosque is more important than building a school, and that building a mosque will guarantee a place in paradise. They do not understand that God rewards us according to what we do to answer the needs in our community, and that solving problems is more important than just doing our prayers and ignoring our problems and dire needs.

The organizations that Islamic centers need to interact and work with

- Schools that send their children in field trips to the Islamic center, so that they can see Muslim children in the Islamic school and talk to them; and visit the mosque and educational building and the Gym
- Universities and colleges : Obviously the goals here are more intellectual and the dialogue more sophisticated
- Churches, synagogues and other places of worship. We should concentrate on our similarities and common goals
- Civic organizations that promote better understanding between people of different faith, and fight bias and prejudice and religious intolerance
- The community and neighborhood that the Islamic center is part of. The people in the neighborhood should feel comfortable with the Islamic center being present amongst their midst. Regular discussions and open lines of communication is essential

The Islamic center should be a place full of activity all week long. Such activity is not limited to prayers, but also includes educational activities, social interaction and recreational activities.