

CHAPTER SIX

THE STRENGTH AND WEAKNESS OF AMERICAN MUSLIMS

SOURCES OF STRENGTH

No one knows for sure how many Muslims are there in America. No scientific reliable study has been made, but most put the figure at 6 million. The number of Muslims was increasing and Islam was spreading fast, till immigration from Muslim countries was abruptly halted after 9/11. Also many Americans began to look with suspicion and fear at Muslims and Islam.

Another source of strength is the fact that most American Muslims are highly educated and professionals. They are usually well to do and enjoy financial independence. Many are doctors and work hard and serve their patients well. They are respected because of the service they provide. They do not live in Ghettos like some European Muslims.

A third reason for strength is the open minded approach of many of these professional Muslims. They are able to reconcile their religious beliefs with the society they live in and realize how to increase their understanding of new ways of applying their Islam. They are faithful to their faith and its tenants, and at the same time able to be active members of their community. They are proud of being American and proud of being Muslims.

Most Islamic centers in America have a vision and a philosophy of

openness and active participation in their community. They do not isolate themselves; rather they welcome visitors, and answer questions directly and honestly. Their image is that of trust and respect.

When Muslims study their religion carefully and understand its guidelines, then they are able to offer Muslim solutions to current problems that plague their community and their country. They bring a new and fresh perspective.

American Muslims are truly diverse since they come from different parts of the world, and speak different languages, and have different traditions. Such diversity when utilized properly can enrich and offer new and challenging ideas.

Many Muslims are willing to learn. Some dare to reflect and think critically at their own religion, tradition and culture. Few are willing to challenge long held beliefs and accepted dogmas. We are just beginning to see the clash of old established philosophy that is deeply rooted and a new intellectual approach to religion and an attempt to reflect at the reason, wisdom and rational of divine orders. Should this dialogue and struggle evolve, it will benefit not only Muslims but non-Muslims as well. Muslims have been labeled as not thinking rationally and adhering to old tradition not based on logic. When Muslims begin to present the religion of Islam in intellectual terms and show the beauty and wisdom of the Qur'an and the tradition of the Prophet (PBUH) they would go a long way to convince others of the applicability and value of Islam to a Western society.

It is expected that the children born to American Muslims will hold on to their beliefs and practice their Islam. Since education and learning is a central element of belief in Islam, then it is likely that the Muslim children will be highly educated and will be professionals and continue to enjoy economic advantages in society. How committed they will be to their religion and Islamic tradition is another matter. Some may want to immerse themselves in what American society offers, and may for a while detach themselves from their religious roots. But it is expected that once they get married and have families of their own that they will realize the need to set an example for their children and return to their tradition and religious practices.

SOURCES OF WEAKNESS

Some Muslims who have immigrated to the United States come with heavy baggage and preconceived ideas and dogmas. It is very difficult for them to accept a new approach to religion, an approach based on critical thinking and rationalization. Back home, whether this home used to be an Arabic country in the Middle East, or India or Pakistan, religion is taught as dogmas and not to be analyzed or criticized. Muslims are taught this what the scholars of old have said as if it is written in stone. It does not matter that these scholars lived centuries ago, in a time and place quite different from our time. They thought, wrote and gave rulings and opinions about matters that concerned the society they lived in. They never dreamed of having their views be held sacred or never changing with time. As an example to prove that indeed they were intellectuals and not dogmatic in their views is Imam Shafe'i who grew up in Macca and learned from Imam Malik, then went to Iraq and debated the scholars of the Hanafi School. But when he settled in Egypt, he changed some of his views that is why in books of Fiqh (Jurisprudence) we see references to old opinion of Imam Shafe'i and new opinion. When asked how can you change your view and opinion he replied: "Because I learned things in Egypt, that I did not know before". This shows a scholar with a dynamic intellect that absorbs new knowledge and reaches conclusions, and is not afraid of changing his position and admitting that he made a mistake. To a person with a rigid point of view or who understands Islam to be rigid, or black and white, such an intellectual approach is strange, if not threatening. It threatens deep held beliefs that Shari'a law is solid and does not change. To such a person we are not allowed to change any law because it is Divine in origin. What such a person with limited and narrow point of view fails to realize that it is we as human beings who must understand and must apply Divine law. Our understanding and application of the Divine law depends on our ability as human beings to think critically of what it means and how we can use this Divine guidance to suit our society and improve our life.

The biggest challenge to American Muslims is this clash of Ideology, between a rigid interpretation of the Qur'an and Sunnah, to a more liberal and rational understanding and application of the spirit of these two

Divine revelations. An approach that negates or cancels our minds and limits its potential to understanding what the early great scholars wrote centuries ago, versus an approach that is not afraid of looking fresh at the Qur'an and Sunnah and not being hampered by old interpretation. To a rational mind, the great scholars of yesterday did a great job for their time, and we can learn from them and their approach and way of thinking. But we should not stop there but go beyond what they told us, because our knowledge is greater and our times and challenges are different.

A second major weakness to American Muslims is the notion that Islam is rituals of worship, and as long as we have been faithful to our prayers and fast and give the obligatory charity, then we have fulfilled our duties as Muslims, and we are Ok. On the contrary, Islam is a whole way of life, and the Qur'an stresses that belief is not just convictions or words that we utter, but more importantly it is our behavior and character that confirms or denies our faith in God. The Qur'an refers to "Those who believe and do good". Islam rewards more for actions that help others than individual acts of worship. Visiting a sick person is rewarded much more than standing in prayer at home at night. Helping a person in difficulty is more important than secluding ourselves in the mosque praying and reading the Qur'an. Some Muslims are quite faithful to their prayers and fasting, but their behavior at home is un-Islamic. They treat their wives and children with the authority of a dictator, and they do not tolerate an opposing point of view or allow discussion or consultation. They do not exhibit the kindness, love and mercy that God has instilled in our hearts towards each other. The reason for this dichotomy is that teaching of religious thought and practices in Muslim countries have focused on rituals of worship, and did not emphasize as much proper character and behavior. Hence, some Muslims may get the notion that it is Ok to lie or take a bribe as long as they had safeguarded their prayers. To stress that doing our work to the best of our ability, and to be honest and sincere and not try to take advantage of another person is the core of religion, may sound strange to some Muslims, though it is exactly what the Qur'an and Sunnah teach us. The Qur'an states:

﴿ وَقُلْ أَعْمَلُوا فَسَيَرَى اللَّهُ عَمَلَكُمْ وَرَسُولُهُ وَالْمُؤْمِنُونَ ﴾ [التوبة: ١٠٥]

"And work for God and His messenger and the believers will see what you do" (At-Tawba 9 : 105).

Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) said: (Allah loves for every person among you to perfect his work and to do it to the best of his ability) Baihaqi. This dichotomy between behavior and rituals of worship is not a major problem among American Muslims, because they have to work and excel in their work in order to survive in a competitive society. It is, however, a major problem in many Muslim countries, and some Muslims who came to America as immigrants may have inherited this mentality or grew up with it. They may feel there is nothing wrong in being lazy if you can get away with it. They may not understand that laziness is against faith in God. Laziness indicates lack of commitment and caring about our responsibilities.

A third major source of weakness among American Muslims is the lack of coordination or communication among Muslim organizations. Each is doing its own thing and not aware about the activities or expertise of other organizations. Sometimes, such organizations do not talk to each other or work together, or even worse may interfere or put obstacles in each other's path. They may not like other organizations to succeed or may feel envious. This is against Islamic principles that call for every person to reach out and collaborate with others for the welfare of the community. The Qur'an warns against division and separation:

﴿ فَتَقَطَّعُوا أَمْرَهُمْ بَيْنَهُمْ زُبُرًا كُلُّ حِزْبٍ بِمَا لَدَيْهِمْ فَرِحُونَ ﴾ [المؤمنون: ٥٣]

"But people have cut off their affairs of unity between them, and became separated into sects; each party rejoices in what it has"

(Al-Mumenoun 23: 53).

Also:

﴿ وَأَطِيعُوا اللَّهَ وَرَسُولَهُ، وَلَا تَنَازَعُوا فَتَفْشَلُوا وَتَذْهَبَ رَاحَتُكُمْ وَأَصْبِرُوا إِنَّ اللَّهَ مَعَ

الصَّابِرِينَ ﴾ [الأنفال: ٤٦]

"And obey Allah and His messenger, and fall not into disputes, lest you lose heart and your power depart; and be patient and persevering, for God is with those who patiently persevere"

(Al-Anfal 8 : 46).

In contrast, we see many Jewish organizations in America that

coordinates their activities and effort with other organizations. Muslims are newcomers and have not had the historical experience or resources that American Jews have, and hopefully they will learn from their mistakes. We should learn from the experience of others, and avoid their costly mistakes.

Another source of weakness is the lack of clear vision and putting fourth priorities, then working hard to achieve these priorities. A 5 or 10 year plan is necessary to achieve short term goals, but plans to look ahead to the future are also important. Many Islamic centers are preoccupied with lack of resources, in house fighting and how to respond to events beyond their control and damage control to Islam and the Muslims, that they have no clear vision of the future or a set of priorities. Add to this the inability to find qualified professionals to act as directors of Islamic centers, and the inability to pay them enough to devote themselves entirely to the service of their community. If such a person is available, he is overwhelmed with smaller issues that he has no time to devote to forming a clear vision and direction to the future.

Another problem is the gap that exists between current leadership and the future generation of leaders that should take charge one day to run these Islamic centers. Such a gap exists because the leaders who established these Islamic centers are not willing to give up the reigns of power, or are not grooming the next generation to take charge. The energy of youth must be complemented by the wisdom and experience of the elderly. The two must work together and egos and personal differences must be put aside for the benefit of the community. Each leader in his own area of expertise should choose and prepare the person or persons to replace him and work with that person for a sufficient time to teach him what he needs to know. Unless this is done and a succession plan is worked out, we may find ourselves in a crisis and shortage of responsible leadership. Other elements that are not qualified nor experienced may step in lured by the prospect of power but lack the realization that they are not up to that job or responsibility.

We need in addition Islamic centers of higher learning and a live debate among the scholars. Such debate should deal with current issues and how to solve problems that face the Muslims in America, and not be confined to well known subjects that have been discussed and debated

many times. We should not be afraid of different or opposing ideas, and give each person the opportunity to express himself without interruption. We also need to learn how to listen and try to understand opposing points of view, with respect and an open mind. We do not have a monopoly on the truth. There may be more than one correct answer to the problem at hand and different approaches can reach the truth.

We need not be afraid of using our intellect that God has blessed us with. The Qur'an explains that belief based on knowledge and proper understanding is more solid and reliable than blind faith:

﴿ وَلِيَعْلَمَ الَّذِينَ أُوتُوا الْعِلْمَ أَنَّهُ الْحَقُّ مِنْ رَبِّكَ فَيُؤْمِنُوا بِهِ، فَتُخْبِتَ لَهُ قُلُوبُهُمْ ۗ وَإِنَّ اللَّهَ لَهَادٍ الَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا إِلَىٰ صِرَاطٍ مُسْتَقِيمٍ ۖ ﴾ [الحج: ٥٤]

“So that those endowed with knowledge may understand that (the Qur'an) is the truth from your Lord, then they believe therein and that their hearts may submit, for God guides those who believe to a straight path” (Al-Hajj 22 : 54).

The light of knowledge and proper understanding enables us to reason and rationalize and reflect on the wisdom, meaning and goal of God's divine orders. Thus we can see our way clearly as the Qur'an contrasts those who know and believe to those who are ignorant and reject faith:

﴿ أَوْ مَنْ كَانَ مَيِّتًا فَأَحْيَيْنَاهُ وَجَعَلْنَا لَهُ نُورًا يَمْشِي بِهِ فِي النَّاسِ كَمَنْ مَثَلُهُ فِي الظُّلُمَاتِ لَيْسَ بِخَارِجٍ مِّنْهَا ۗ ﴾ [الأنعام: ١٢٢]

“Is he who was dead, and to whom We gave life and a light that illuminates his way among mankind, the same as he who is in the depths of darkness unable to get out. Thus to those without faith, their deeds seem pleasing” (Al-An'am 6: 122).

This is a major problem with many Muslims who refuse to use their minds afraid that thinking may lead them to a wrong understanding of Shari'a law (Divine law which lays down rules and regulation that govern our life). They are willing to close their minds, and follow an interpretation centuries old, by scholars who lived at a time and a place quite different from our time and place now. If these scholars came to life and witnessed

the inaptitude of Muslim masses today, they would be shocked and feel sad that their own writings caused such ignorant following.

Another major weakness of American Muslims is that many confuse tradition with religion. Religious guidelines and morals should be clear and not ambiguous and give us insight and lead us to live better lives. On the other hand, traditions can be rusty and not suitable for our times. We should be able to establish our own traditions based on our needs and guided by principles of morality and justice clearly outlined in the Qur'an. American Muslims should be able to take what is good and noble in American culture and integrate these morals and traditions with Islamic guidelines and principles. What evolves is an American brand of Islam that is suitable and characteristic of American Muslims. Hard work and achievement and integrating technological advancement with our lives is something that American Muslims can illustrate to their fellow Muslims elsewhere. Putting forth the concept of charity into action and the spirit of volunteer work and a sense of community is Islamic in principle, but this understanding has been forgotten in many Muslim countries, yet it is practiced by non-Muslims. Respect for human dignity and personal freedom and human liberties is what Islam calls for. Yet these important concepts have been neglected and forgotten in many Muslim countries that are ruled by dictators with no regard to the dignity or welfare of the common man. We see this spirit alive and well in America, though recently human liberties have been curtailed by a government intent on expanding its powers and misusing public trust, and igniting fear of terrorism.

Islam is compatible with many ways of life and with different traditions because it is flexible and does not restrict human freedom. It is a tragedy that some Muslim scholars have stopped thinking of new ideas and new ways to enrich their society using the spirit and guidelines in the Qur'an and Sunnah of the Prophet (PBUH). When we liberate ourselves from rigidity of thinking and copying what earlier scholars said, then we can come up with solutions to new problems that we face, that did not exist before. What a wonderful gift American Muslims can provide to the whole world by providing an American Islamic tradition suitable for our times and in a free and progressive society.