

CHAPTER SEVEN

THE RESPONSIBILITY OF AMERICAN MUSLIMS TOWARDS MUSLIMS ELSEWHERE

Muslims have certain obligations towards their Muslim brothers. These duties include helping and supporting them, giving them sound and sincere advice, and not wronging them. Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) said: (Religion is to give sound sincere advice). His companions asked: To whom? He said: (To God; and to His Book; and to His messenger; and to Muslim leaders and to the masses) Muslim. The Prophet (PBUH) also said: (A Muslim is the brother of another Muslim; he does not wrong him, nor does he leaves him unsupported. Whoever was helping his brother, God will help him) *Bokhari & Muslim*.

Since American Muslims live in an affluent country and enjoy both economic and religious freedom, they can be of help to their Muslim brothers and sisters elsewhere. They can help financially in the form of charity and by supporting worthwhile projects and institutions. They can also help by giving sound advice and by pointing out what is right and what is wrong. They can serve as a voice of moderate Islam in a world polarized by extreme views on many issues. They can correct the bias and misrepresentation of Islam and the Muslims in the news media and explain what are the true teachings of Islam, especially in areas like Jihad or the status of women in society.

American Muslims enjoy freedom of expression and are able to practice their Islam with no oppression or fear. They have a solemn responsibility of acting as moderate Muslims in contrast to fanatics that smear and distort the teachings of this tolerant and noble religion. Living in a country dominated by a Christian majority, they can set an example

of how minorities can live in harmony with each other respectful of other traditions and beliefs.

To explore further these issues I will discuss the following:

- Financial aid to other Muslim
- Educational support
- Defending the image of Islam and Muslims
- Setting a good example of how Muslims should behave
- Confirming that Islam is compatible with Western society
- There are the limits for our support
- Supporting our own institutions in America takes precedence

FINANCIAL AND ECONOMIC AID

A central concept in Islam is that we only have temporary use of our money. It actually belongs to God who entrusted us with this wealth and charged us with the obligation of using our money properly. The Qur'an states:

﴿ وَمَا لَكُمْ أَلَّا تُنْفِقُوا فِي سَبِيلِ اللَّهِ وَلِلَّهِ مِيرَاثُ السَّمَوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ لَا يَسْتَوِي مِنْكُمْ مَنْ أَنْفَقَ مِنْ قَبْلِ الْفَتْحِ وَقَتْلَ أُولَئِكَ أَعْظَمُ دَرَجَةً مِنَ الَّذِينَ أَنْفَقُوا مِنْ بَعْدُ وَقَتْلُوا وَكُلًّا وَعَدَ اللَّهُ الْحُسْنَىٰ وَاللَّهُ بِمَا تَعْمَلُونَ خَبِيرٌ ﴾ [الحديد: ١٠]

“Why do you not spend in the cause of God, for to God belongs the heritage of the heavens and earth. Not equal are those amongst you who fought and spent before the opening (of Macca). They are better than those who fought and spent after the opening. God has promised both parties a good reward, and God is well acquainted with all that you do” (Al-Hadeed 57: 10).

Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) explained: (Every person will be asked on the Day of Judgment to account for four things: his life what did he do with it; and his youth, how did he use it or abuse it; and his money: how did he earn it, and spend it; and his knowledge: what did he do with it) Termedhi. Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) also explained that what really counts is our deeds, and not our money or position: (Three things go with

man to his grave, two return back and one thing remains with him: his money, family and friends return back, only his deeds remain with him).

If we understand that we are accountable for what we do with our money, which is a gift from God, then we understand that we must use it properly. The Qur'an states that there is a right for the poor, needy and relatives in our money:

﴿وَأَاتِ ذَا الْقُرْبَىٰ حَقَّهُ وَالْمِسْكِينَ وَابْنَ السَّبِيلِ وَلَا تَبْذِرْ تَبْذِيرًا ۚ إِنَّ الْمُبْذِرِينَ
كَانُوا إِخْوَانَ الشَّيْطَانِ ۚ وَكَانَ الشَّيْطَانُ لِرَبِّهِ كَفُورًا ۚ﴾ [الإسراء: ٢٧-٢٨]

"And give to kindred his due right as well as to the poor, needy and wayfarer, and do not squander your wealth, for those who squander their wealth are companions of Satan, and Satan was ungrateful to his Lord" (Al-Isra'a 17 : 26 & 27).

Many American Muslims are well to do because they are professionals and work very hard. They should realize that they are obligated to give back to their community part of that wealth and help the poor and needy and to support, not only their Islamic centers, but other charitable and educational institutions. They also have an obligation to help their poor Muslim brothers and sisters overseas. This is crucial during times of disasters like famine, earthquakes, flooding and war. American Muslims have risen to the challenge and supported Muslims elsewhere in recent years. This help did slow down considerably because of the fear that the current administration has caused labeling many charitable organizations as having ties with terrorists.

EDUCATIONAL SUPPORT

Many American Muslims have renewed ties with their original home country and supported educational institutions abroad. They went back to give lectures, organize international meetings or give professional advice each in their own chosen field. Some accept graduate students to do research in their departments.

These educational activities can be expanded and made available to a

wider audience and reach more people. Or specific projects of mutual collaboration can be worked out. The curriculum in many colleges and universities in Muslim countries are outdated and require major overhaul. American Muslims can be of tremendous value and help in that regard.

The system of learning in many Muslim countries needs to be changed from didactic lectures and memorization, to active participation and critical thinking. American Muslims can lead such a change in methodology and ideology.

DEFENDING ISLAM

Most Americans know very little about the religion of Islam or the beliefs of Muslims. Most Americans get their information through short news bullets shown on TV which lack accuracy and depth. Many times the views of extremists are portrayed as representing the views of Islam, which is distortion of the truth. Islam is represented as a violent religion and that Muslims hate non-Muslims and stop at nothing in forcing others to become Muslims against their will. Nothing could be farther from the truth. Islam is a peaceful religion that does not advocate violence. It is a tolerant religion that respects and safeguards the beliefs of others. The Qur'an is clear that Man has the freedom to choose or reject faith, and that Muslims are not allowed to force others to become Muslims against their will.

American Muslims are in a good position to defend Islam and clear these mistakes about Islam and the Muslims. They are respected in their communities, and are free to speak up. They know how to express themselves and have open lines of communication. They are not afraid of standing up for the truth and are not easily intimidated. They live in a free democratic society and know their rights as Americans.

American Muslims have repeatedly condemned acts of violence and killing as un-Islamic, and explained that those fanatics or radicals are only using the name of Islam to justify their own personal agenda.

It has become clear that Lumping all Muslims together will not work and represent ignorance of human nature and how American Muslims view themselves and their role in this society.

We still have a long way to go, for the problem is two fold. One aspect of the problem relates to events that occur in Muslim countries that we as American Muslims have no control over. We cannot change the course of events or influence those shaping it. Another problem is the internal struggle and clash of ideology that is taking place within Muslim America. A third event is that American Muslims are under greater government scrutiny which is curtailing their freedom.

SETTING GOOD EXAMPLE

In some Muslim countries the emphasis is on rituals of worship, fasting and reciting the Qur'an. True these obligations are necessary and characterize Muslims, but Islam is much more than prayers or fasting the month of Ramadan. Islam is how we behave with others in being honest and truthful, fulfilling our promises and being faithful to our trusts and covenants. Islam is being kind, forgiving and merciful, and helpful to others. Islam should be evident in our character and in our behavior. Our conviction and beliefs must be confirmed in the way that we live our life.

American Muslims can represent true Islam if they are good at their work and exhibit their faith as honest, caring, and hard working people, if they reach out to others and become active members of their community, and support charitable causes and civic organizations. Deeds are more important than empty hollow words. A dedicated physician is more valuable and is a true representative of Islam than a person who detaches himself and spends his time secluded in the mosque praying and reading the Qur'an.

American Muslims standing up for social justice and working hand in hand with Jews and Christians and others of different faith represent Islam better than Muslims who isolate themselves fearful of being influenced by Western ideology.

American Muslims who talk in churches, schools and universities and who are not afraid of speaking out and explaining what true Islam represent, serve their faith much more effectively than those who sadly lament the distortion of Islam in the news media, but sit idle and do nothing about it.

ISLAM IS COMPATIBLE WITH WESTERN SOCIETY

We can live as Muslims any place in the world as long as we safeguard our morals and convictions. In America the freedom of expression is guaranteed in the constitution and the separation of church and state safeguards minorities from being suppressed or oppressed by a Christian majority. Muslims are free to practice their religion and be faithful to their traditions, in the same way that people of different culture and tradition were faithful to their principles.

There is nothing in the American constitution that contradicts the principles of Islam. Muslims are loyal citizens of this country, and are faithful to their religion. American Muslims actually have more religious freedom than many Muslims in other parts of the world, including many Muslim countries.

The things that Islam forbids like alcohol and gambling are personal choices that can be easily avoided. Similarly sex outside of marriage and indecency are not inherent in American society but aberrations that may be glamorous in some circles. The lust for material things is a human weakness that has been present for centuries, and is not unique to American society.

There are now several generations of Muslims in America and many have been successful and able to transmit and ingrain their principles in their descendants. True, the latter generations are different from the original Muslims who came to this country. Some have melted in this society, but this is expected.

We still have to show that Islam can make us better human beings and improve our life. Until we do that, people will not look at Islam as a viable religion in a western society.

There Are Limits To The Extent Of Help We Can Give And Provide

Helping our Muslim brothers in other parts of the world is a two way

street. We need to understand our obligation to help and be committed and provide that help. But at the same time, our Muslim brothers and sisters should also show that they are willing to change and not just be recipients that keep on asking for more. Unless there is a genuine desire to change, then the help that we provide will not make any difference and nothing will change.

Muslims in other parts of the world must rise up and take back their religion and their life from those who continue to oppress them and control their destiny. They cannot expect a free handout forever.

The problem is what entities do we as American Muslims deal with! Do we deal and channel our effort and support through government agencies, many are corrupt and ineffectual, or do we deal with educational institutions, many are behind the times and want to spend the money they get on buildings rather than on changing the way students think! Or do we deal with social organizations that lack the appropriate structure or accountability!

We Have An Obligation To Help And Support Our Own Institutions here in America

This responsibility should take precedence over any help we give to Muslims overseas, because if our institutions in America are weak, we will not be in a position to help anyone, let alone ourselves.

Some Muslims in America when asked to help support Muslim institutions in this country answer that they are building a mosque in their village back home or helping poor relatives. This answer, if honest and not an excuse, shows lack of appreciation of what is really important. Building yet another mosque in a country over-crowded with mosques illustrates superficial thinking and not understanding what is Islam about.

Muslim institutions in America depend on private donations, and are not supported by a government agency or outside foreign group. If the Muslims, in every and each location, fail to support their own institutions they will fail and die and become white elephants.