

Chapter Eleven

Is there an American Islam?

To some Muslims such a question may seem strange and inappropriate. They would say: “There is only one Islam that is applicable in all places since all Muslims believe in one book, the Qur’an, and believe in one prophet, Muhammad (PBUH)”. Others would argue: “True the Qur’an is the same book, and the teachings of the Prophet (PBUH) are the same, yet our understanding of these guidelines and how we apply them in our life differs according to our society and its diverse culture and needs”.

Both views are correct to some extent:

Fundamental or basic principles of belief and the code of ethics and morality does not change from one generation to another, or from one society to another different society. Principles like God is One and that we are accountable to Him, this basic principle certainly is valid for all times and all civilizations. The principle of being good, helping the poor, needy, weak and those who need our help; being honest, not cheating others, doing the work to the best of our ability, being kind and forgiving, all these are morals and codes of ethics and noble character that does not change with time or place.

But how we dress, and how we rule ourselves and how we interact financially must change according to the society that we live in and its culture. Obviously there are certain guidelines that still govern such

behavior. For example modesty and not vulgarity is the basic guideline in dress. Justice and consultation is the basic guideline for government, not oppression or dictatorship. Fair dealings and not taking advantage of the poor and those in financial needs and social justice and not hoarding money are the basic guidelines that should govern financial transactions. The methodology and the system changes from one place to another, but the guidelines remain to ensure social justice and our ultimate accountability to our Lord.

So the question: Is there an American Islam that is distinct from Islam in the Middle East? Is a valid question and explores the different needs of American Muslims living in a culture that is diverse and different from the usual culture encountered in traditional Muslim countries.

American Muslims are just beginning to struggle with their identity and a debate is emerging to define the nature and scope of American Islam, or Islam in a Western democracy. Some Muslims living in the West are very uncomfortable with this issue and try to avoid it, fearful that tackling such a subject may cause them to dwell into areas of the religion that are “Sacred” and cannot be changed. They feel more secure, content and comfortable in what they grew up with and with their view of traditional Islam. They do not want to be challenged with new ideas, though deep inside they may feel at odds with the new society they live in and are finding it difficult to reconcile their deeply held beliefs with a pleural diverse society particularly their interaction with non-Muslims.

We will explore this subject by discussing the following concepts:

- The Qur'an only provides guidelines but does not restrict our ability to think critically and reach conclusions and arrive at answers that suit our situation and different needs.
- We should understand the prophet's sayings in its historical context and reach conclusions based on the spirit and rationale of the Hadeeth, rather than get stuck on the literal words that may not be appropriate in our society or culture.
- We should be faithful to the basic principles of Islam and to moral guidelines that shape our character and behavior, but our actions should conform to the challenges that we face,

and we should answer our current problems with fresh ideas, not ideas that were not meant for our time.

- There is nothing wrong in having an American Islam that addresses the needs of American Muslims if we are faithful to our Islamic principles and guidelines.
- We should learn from others who passed through a similar experience and struggled to form a new identity in this culture.
- Accusing each other and rejecting new ideas will not work anymore. The future of our children and of Islam depends on a healthy debate based on reason and respect for differing points of view. We should not be afraid of discussing new ideas. We are not changing the religion of Islam. Rather, we are trying to understand how to live our life as Muslims in a different environment.

The Qur'an only provides guidelines but does not restrict our choices

The Qur'an gives guidelines concerning basic principles of belief and morality. There are few injunctions or rulings concerning financial transactions or the form of government, to allow each society to come up with answers that suit its needs and peculiar situation. Islam is valid for a rural as well as an urban society. It is valid for a Middle Eastern country, as well as a European country or North America. What the Qur'an tells us is that the basic principles in government are: justice and consultation. Justice for everyone implies that human rights and liberties are safeguarded, and the poor and weak are not abused by the rich and powerful. Consultation implies that tyranny and dictatorship do not flourish and wrongs can be corrected and no one is afraid for his life, family or possessions. These basic principles can be applied in any society, regardless of the form of government.

The important concepts regarding financial transactions are fair dealings and not cheating, and a realization that there are rights in our money for the poor, needy and disadvantaged, whether an individual or an institution. Thus money is not hoarded, and the wealth of the community circulates and jobs

are created. These concepts again can be applied in any society, but the form of financial transaction could vary from one community to the next. Rituals of worship like the obligation to pray and to fast the month of Ramadan and to give charity does not change. These rituals of worship are constant and serve to bring us closer to God and emphasize our Islam.

Also moral guidelines and ethics of conduct such as honesty, truthfulness, kindness, forgiveness, piety and justice are constant and do not change from one society to the next. Without these morals corruption and decadence will spread and society will loose its mission and dies.

Therefore, we can see that in Islam there are constant values and guidelines that do not change with time and place. These are rituals of worship, basic beliefs and morals. At the same time, there are variables that change depending on the needs and circumstances to suit each community and different cultures.

The Prophet's sayings must be understood in historical context and the spirit of the Haddeth followed rather than the literal words

Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) lived in a different society and a time and place quite different from our own. His sayings cannot be taken out of historical context, since he addressed the needs of his people and observed their culture and tradition. His orders are valid for all times as long as we follow certain guidelines:

- We must understand the circumstances surrounding his saying: Did it apply only for a specific situation that is not applicable today or is it valid for our times
- We need to follow the spirit and rationale of the Hadeeth, rather than the literal words
- Did the Prophet later on reverse or modify the order, therefore, we follow the latest ruling
- Was his saying meant as an order from a prophet, or the opinion of a human being who did not have divine guidance at that time, and his opinion may not be valid.
- Could we have misunderstood the prophet's recommendation? We are human beings who are fallible, and we have likes and dislikes!

The sayings of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) or his Sunnah (tradition) is misunderstood by many Muslims. Some do not know or follow the Sunnah. Others follow it literally regardless of time or place. Others misunderstand or change the meaning or spirit to suit their needs and advance their agenda. Very few are faithful to the spirit and follow the general guidelines of the Sunnah.

There is nothing wrong in having an American Islam

There is nothing wrong in having an American form of Islam as long as this Islam is faithful to the basic principles and spirit of this noble religion, and follows the constant orders namely: basic beliefs, rituals of worship and codes of ethics and morality.

American Muslim scholars then must come up with answers that address and solve the problems that Muslims face in America. How to finance a house? How to save without being labeled as using Reba (usury) ? how to educate our children and teach them Islam in a logical way? How to interact with a non-Muslim majority? How to deal with abortion and homosexuality? What are the Muslim solutions to poverty and AIDS?

To be relevant American Islam must answer these questions and address similar issues. This way Islam can demonstrate that it is a viable religion and not a relic of the past. By providing solutions to our current problems the religion proves that it is a practical religion and that it can guide our life and shape our behavior.

Muslims must demonstrate that they are better human beings because of their faith and conviction. Otherwise their faith is a theory that is not practiced or only debated by academics. Unless the religion provide answers to our problems it will lack authenticity and fails to convince others of its validity. A good theory is nice but does not change your life or behavior or solve your problems.

Some Muslims worry what will happen if we have an American Islam, and a European Islam and a Pakistani Islam and an Egyptian Islam. Are we not changing God's religion that is supposed to be Divine and applicable at all times? They do not understand that no one is changing the religion of Islam. Islam is here to stay as the religion that God has chosen for mankind till the Day of Judgment. We are only changing our understanding of the religion

and how it can best suit our times. The basic principles of Islam do not change with time or place. But how we live as Muslims certainly changes depending on where we are and according to the challenges that we face.

We should learn from others who passed through similar experience

When I say that American Muslims should learn from the Jewish experience and the struggle that American Jews experienced in America I get a knee jerk reaction: Do you want us to learn and benefit from Jews?

The answer is yes. Of course I am willing to learn from anyone who passed through a similar experience and faced the same challenges that I am facing now. Jews arrived in this country long before Muslims came. They faced the same obstacles, prejudice and challenges that we as Muslims face in America today. They worked hard and had a vision and long term plan. They did not isolate themselves, nor did they dissolve in American society. Rather, they were faithful to their religious convictions and tradition, and at the same time true and faithful citizens of this country. They worked hard and earned the respect of their colleagues and neighbors. They fought prejudice and stereotyping and became leaders in different fields. Their experience and struggle is full of lessons and gives us direction and hope. We should learn from their example and not repeat the mistakes they made. To refuse to study their history and struggle and follow their example is not Islamic and is foolish. The organizations and the meticulous planning and the ethics of hard work are truly Islamic thought put into practice.

The same is true of Christians and their culture and hard work and how they translated their love of God into kindness and charity and love of neighbor. Again these are Islamic values that many Muslims have forgotten.

There is a lot of good and of value in American culture and its ideals. The struggle of people to liberate themselves and to govern themselves through justice, equality of mankind and the pursuit of happiness are valid principles that we as Muslims should embrace. The ethics of hard work, charity, a volunteer spirit and the formation of civic and religious organization that are dedicated to helping those in need are important principles and accomplishments, that we as Muslims have forgotten or neglected as we became faithful to our rituals of worship, but forgot the vision and goal of living our lives as decent human beings helpful to others.

We need a healthy debate based on respect for new ideas and not accusations or labeling each other

American Muslims must be willing to listen to new ideas and think critically about the issues and problems that we face. Problems that require new ways of thinking and fresh ideas, and not repackaging of what old scholars said centuries ago and who did not face our challenges.

We should not be afraid of change or of new ideas as long as they are faithful to the basic principles and guidelines of Islam.

It is easy to label someone who does not share your views or accuse him of changing the religion of Islam. It is much more difficult to listen to opposing points of view and allow the other person to present his case and rationale. Some feel safe and secure in old traditional knowledge and are afraid of new ideas that challenge well established rulings or dogmas. Their convictions are not based on reason or logic, rather these concepts are accepted without much thought. When a new idea that is contrary to what is accepted is presented it presents a new challenge and it shakes their foundation and it makes them very uncomfortable. It forces them to re-examine deeply held views and their security is threatened.

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