

# MEMPHIS AND ISLAM: INTEGRATING MUSLIMS AND ISLAM INTO THE COMMUNITY FABRIC

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## INTRODUCTION

Islamophobia is defined as the fear of Islam or Muslims, or both. Muslims living in America and the western world have been suffering from this social and political problem throughout history. More troubling, since the start of the 2016 presidential election campaign, the rhetoric on Islamophobia has increased dramatically to criminal proportions. Now we hear of killing Muslims, burning mosques, Islamic centers, Muslim-owned restaurants and other businesses. Furthermore, attacks on women wearing Hijabs, or head coverings, have swelled, either through verbal assaults or physical aggression. These attacks are not only limited to followers of Islam, but also to anyone whom the attacker perceives to be empathetic to Muslims. Interestingly and contrary to what one might expect, those who express the strongest anti-Muslim attitudes tend to also have anti-Semitic attitudes (Levin and Grisham, 2016).

Muslims, sensing the increase in Islamophobia, are rightfully becoming more fearful for their lives, families, and property (American Muslim Poll, 2017). They are seen less in public, and often limit shopping to familiar Muslim-owned business or institutions. Muslims are increasingly using "Americanized" names. A person whose name is Mohammad now is called "Mo," Mustafa is "Steve," Khadijah is "Kate," and Amira is "Amy." Those who grow their beards are shaving or keeping them short, and many have stopped wearing any traditional clothes that identify them as Muslims.

Women who wear Hijabs are removing them or wearing wigs instead (Mackay, 2013). The latter choice to conceal their Muslim identity is based on a Fatwa (Islamic edict) from the time of the Spanish Inquisitions. Muslim children are told by parents to avoid public parks, shopping centers, malls, movie theaters, and other places of fun and to stay vigilant for "impromptu" mob attacks. Muslim parents are telling their children to stay in contact with them on regular time intervals, even when they are in school, and are also instructing them not to leave the house alone, but only in groups. Those who believe in carrying guns for self-protection are doing so, while others are taking martial arts to defend themselves.

## HISTORY OF HOW WE GOT HERE

Islam captured public attention after the cowardly attacks on September 11, 2001, and in the early 1980s during the Iranian hostage crisis. Prior to this, Muslims in America did not enter people's consciousness on a daily basis. Recent Muslim immigrants and non-Muslims simply assumed incorrectly that Islam was a new religion in the United States. However, Islam was on this side of the Atlantic Ocean and/or Pacific Ocean even before the establishment of the United States.

In fact, Muslims have been living in the Americas as long as Europeans and Africans. A number of documents show that when Columbus sailed to this part of the world he was accompanied by Moors (Arabs) on his ship (Abdelkader, 2012). Other Spanish explorers also brought Moors with them. A case in point is Estevanico, (whose real name was Mostafa) from the city of Azzemour in Morocco, who landed in present day Florida on April 14, 1528, with explorer Panfilo Narvaez (GhaneaBassiri, 2015). Even during the Spanish and British battles with the early colonies there were references to the presence of Moors (Abd-Allah, 2010). Furthermore, the Melungeons, a tri-racial group of people who live in the Appalachian Mountains of southeastern United States, are presumably of unknown origin. Recent DNA studies show that the Melungeons could be descendants of Moors who ran away from the first Spanish colony Santa Elena, which existed from 1566 to 1587 in present day Paris, South



Carolina. (Kennedy et al., 1997; Hirschman, 2005; Hirschman and Yates, 2007; Price, 1953). During the slave trade, historians estimate that no less than 30 percent of the people who were captured and sold into slavery were Muslims (Tweed, 2004). A Muslim from present day Syria called Hi Jolly (real name is Hadji Ali) was the first camel herder hired by the U.S. Army in 1856 to train the military on desert warfare (Kjelgaard, 1960).

The West has viewed Islam with suspicion for a very long time, and the increase in negative publicity toward the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century contributed to negative perceptions of Islam and Muslims (Shadid & van Koningsveld, 2002). Recent events have not helped. In 1989, Iranian leader Ayatollah Khomeini called for the killing of author British-Indian novelist Salman Rushdie after publication of his book "Satanic Verses" which he considered contributed blasphemy against Islam. This contributed to the feeling among many Americans that all of Islam and all Muslims should be blamed for the carnage that took place with the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks. Because of the acts of a few terrorists associated with Islam, there have recently been orchestrated, systematic attacks on the a) deity of Islam, b) the holy book of Islam, c) the prophet of Islam, d) the teaching of Islam and finally e) the followers of the religion.

### WHAT IS SHAREE'AH?

The basis of these attacks is, in part, the fear of Sharee'ah or Islamic legislations. Many Americans think that Sharee'ah is a political system which Muslims in America are trying to establish so they can govern this part of the world (Johnson and Sergie, 2014). That's far from the truth and to put this idea to rest one can look at present day Ethiopia. Prophet Mohammad (PBAUH) ordered the Muslims of Makkah (a city in Saudi Arabia, Mecca) who were persecuted to migrate to Abyssinia (present day Ethiopia) in the year 613 or 615 CE. The prophet's command was "Go to Abyssinia for it has a king who oppresses nobody" (Ibn Kathir, 1998; Pasha, 2009). This migration happened more than 1400 years ago and to this day, Christians and Muslims coexist and practice their religions peacefully in Ethiopia, alongside a number of other religions including Judaism and some African traditions. Just as Muslims are living in peace and are not trying to impose Sharee'ah on everybody in Ethiopia, Muslims in the U.S. are doing the same. It is important to remember that just as Prophet Mohammad (PBAUH) asked his companions to flee persecution of the Makkah at that time, the Muslims are fleeing the tyrant rulers that are present in majority Muslim countries in these days.

To explain the above point, it is important to understand the meaning of Sharee'ah in Islam and its relevance for Muslims. Sharee'ah (شريعة) comes from the root word (ش ر ع), which has two meanings: a) the straight path and b) the path to running water. Simply put, Sharee'ah means "code" or "law," thus in Arabic, the "Codes of Hammurabi" is known as "The Sharee'ah of Hammurabi" (Hasan, 2013). Since Islam is a "way" of life then Muslims must apply this "way" in their lives. This way of life includes personal, social, economic, and legislative aspects of life. The laws of Sharee'ah are extracted from two sources: The Quran (the revealed words of Allah) and the Hadith (the saying and practices of Prophet Mohammad).

Islam comes from the root word (س ل م), which means peace and submission (Khan, 2003). So Sharee'ah shows the Muslim individual the way to submit peacefully to the will of God or Allah. First, the believer must attest that there is only one deity and Mohammad is the final prophet. For Muslims this is an admission that God is the creator, sustainer, and controller of all affairs. The way God wants the believers to do all worldly activities is the way Prophet Mohammad did them. Thus, if you ask a Muslim why they pray five times a day, pay homage, fast Ramadan, and perform pilgrimage the way they do, the answer is because Prophet Mohammad did it this way. The purpose of these instructions is to keep the believer humble and constantly remembering the blessings of God that guided her or him to this way.

In the social sphere, Islam shows the way to its followers on how to live as social beings. The word human in Arabic is "Insaan/إنسان," which comes from the root word (إن س ن), which means "close companionship" and a creation with a tendency to forget (Inel and Yu cel, 2015). For the Muslim, belonging to the human race means being close companions to our fellow beings. That is accomplished by treating family members, neighbors, colleagues, and other members of the society with close companionship. As the society grows and becomes diverse people have to deal with each other in business and trade. The Quran tells Muslims that "everlasting righteous deeds that help people are better than the love of beautiful material things." The Quran instructs the believers how to deal with the world, including money and wealth (Ali, 2000). In order for Muslims to stay focused on keeping the peace in the society, evil dealing with others is prohibited. Evil dealings include, but are not limited to greed, hiding the defects of a commodity for sale, inflating the price, taking advantage of a need, and dealing



with prohibited items.

As a complete way of life, Islam also has a legislative aspect as well. Many look at the legislative verses in the Quran and criticize Islam as being harsh and/or primitive if not even barbaric (Ad-Dausaree, 2013). The fact of the matter is that out of about 6,241 verses in the Quran only 200 (or so) verses are legislative (the differences in the verses' numbers are due to the differences of opinions as to where a verse ends and where the next verse starts). In the modern world, however, these verses are interpreted in modern legal and human-rights frameworks, which render the strict application of these verses impossible, and thus it is left to the judge to find "holes" to show mercy if there is a need to do so (Hakeem et al., 2012). The best example is stoning the adulterers. Yes, the Quran does state that, but Sharee'ah states that in order to carry on a stoning, four, reliable, separate individuals must have witnessed the act at separate events (Shahidullah, 2014). When the Prophet Mohammed (PBAUH) was asked what constitutes "witnessing the act" he responded "just as you see the pen going into the ink jar." Everybody knows that this is next to impossible to happen unless you are the person who is involved in the act. Scholars of Islam all unanimously agree that the harsh punishments are there as a deterrence, and every legislator knows that the first reason to legislate a punishment is to deter an individual from committing it. Like Christianity, some of the language in the Quran is not applicable today. The Bible states "an eye for eye, a tooth for a tooth." But that fact is that if one were to knock out someone's eye or tooth, one is going to be charged and jailed in America. Similarly, the Quran might have such language, but it is not practicable in American society. It is crucial to understand that it is almost impossible in Islam to reach the verdict of stoning, just like Jesus (AS) said "let the one without sin cast the first stone." A very strict interpretation of the Quran is impossible to correctly and legitimately apply even in Muslim majority countries. What this means is that those who would stone adulterers, for instance, are not really following the Sharee'ah even in their countries. They are using Sharee'ah as a way to subjugate women. Like aspects of every religion, Sharee'ah can be abused, but that is the travesty that flows from such abuse. More importantly for Muslims in America, the Quran also mandates that Muslims abide by the law of the land. Muslims in the United States must obey American laws as a central element in the religion.

## **ISLAM IN MEMPHIS**

Memphis can serve as a model for the entire country in the way Islam is practiced and the way Muslims live. The Muslim community in Memphis is as diverse as Islam and includes Muslims from every continent and almost every cultural background. There are eight mosques in the city, with the first built in 1975, seven representing Sunnis, a branch of Islam, and one representing She'ah. Having said that, it is important to mention that no one checks identification as to what sect a person belongs to, and Muslims (and non-Muslims) are welcome at all area mosques. Besides mosques, the Memphis Muslim community built an Islamic school from pre-K to high school, a butcher shop that provides stores and restaurants with Halal meat, a cemetery, Islamic businesses, and wedding halls. The month of March was officially dedicated by elected officials as Muslims in Memphis Month. The 15th annual celebration was held in 2017.

The Memphis Muslim community has established interfaith relationships with all traditions: monotheistic, Hindus, Buddhist, agnostic and others. Our faith tells us to be only ambassadors of our faith tradition, not to try to convert individuals into Islam. Muslims are actively involved in political life in Memphis and regularly hold meetings and workshops to explain our faith and practices. For example, we discuss why when a Muslim speaks to someone they make no eye contact, why some women cover their heads, while others do not, and how to behave in the mosque. And, since most Muslims are from different countries we help educate the Muslim community about the importance of getting involved in civic activities. These meetings are very crucial because when there is a new Islamophobic rhetoric or concept floating in the media we must immediately show the fallacy of such thoughts.

However, the civic engagement of the Memphis Muslim community is not limited to Islamic issues. We also address community problems that affect others. To bridge differences and to make friends and allies, the Muslim community has formed strong alliances with various civic and nonprofit groups throughout Memphis that represent diverse interests, including include Latino, LGBT, youth, racial and religious concerns. Through a series of meetings, ongoing dialogue and community events, Muslim, Christian, and nonprofit leaders and their organizations continue to facilitate discussions and interactions that lead to understanding, acceptance, and support of Muslims and other groups in Memphis.



## **HATE PRACTICED AGAINST ANY MINORITY IS EQUALLY ABHORRENT TO ALL**

As hard as it is to admit, Donald Trump became the president of the U.S. while campaigning on racism, sexism, bigotry, xenophobia and all other forms of hate. This hate has not been limited to Islam and Muslims but has been equally launched against women, Latinos, Jews, African Americans, Native Americans and many other minorities (Abdelkader, 2016; Anti-Defamation League, 2016; Okeowo, 2016). Even Mother Nature was not spared from the venomous rhetoric throughout the election campaign (Merica, 2017). The truth of the matter is that all these fears grow from one common cause: ignorance. We all have biases that are often formed in the cultural and sociological shackles of our childhood. However, if we stay locked within our biases and justify our hate of others using any concept ideology and political strategy that only leads to more fear further entrapping each of us at the expense of ourselves and others.

### **DEMOCRACY'S YINGS AND YANGS**

Living in a "global village" with other people who lack education about others with different religions and from different ethnic groups, along with misinformation from the media, can easily lead to people who are afraid of each other. These social conditions can lead to governance through fear. The conditions of fear among different groups perpetuates the creation of terrorist acts, which ultimately have the effect of limiting the freedom of Muslims and causing others to wrongly attribute these acts to an entire religious group.

In general, terrorists, who operate at the fringes of society, live in a distorted world of extreme ideologies. However, once they are exposed, even within their own community, they will be stopped. It is critical, therefore, that informed citizens, including the Muslim community, remain vigilant to guard against governmental powers of intrusions in the name of security, and against fringe elements and terrorists that may take advantage of our liberties and freedom.

Many Muslims, especially those who lived under dictatorships, cherish individual freedom more profoundly than those who have always lived in a democracy. We know what happens to individuals and their families who rightfully criticize brutal regimes. We know first-hand the horror of friends, family members, and loved ones who disappear overnight or on the way to work, with no trace left behind. Because many Muslims have lived under the most repressive regimes, we know the true meaning of "give me liberty or give me death." These experiences have taught us that Muslims and others have a personal stake in promoting a free and open society. The alternative, an oppressive society, offers only suffering for our children, neighbors and loved ones.

### **CONCLUSION**

The efforts of the Muslim community, Christians, nonprofit and other groups to incorporate Muslims into the broader Memphis community can serve as a blueprint for the nation. Some of our success in Memphis stems from the willingness of the Muslim community to embrace others. For example, as Muslims, we adopt open door policy. This means that any person can go to any of our mosques, schools, centers or any other Islamic institutions. Additionally, all of the educational activities at mosques are taped, with some appearing online, and are available for the public to watch anytime. Muslim leaders also encourage their followers to engage in all spheres of civic activism.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

Through the work of interfaith religious leaders, including Christians, Jews, Muslims, and Buddhists, various interfaith activities such as potlucks, Thanksgiving dinners, and the Kosher Bar-B-Que contests are held annually. To top this off, we have in Memphis, the Muslim Memfest at one of the largest area facilities in Memphis each March.

As a way to promote cultural understanding, leaders of the Muslim community convene meetings with elected officials to discuss issues, including training of police and first responders on how to interact with Muslims to avoid misunderstandings based on cultural misunderstandings.

Some recommendations for law enforcement to consider when dealing with Muslims: During routine traffic stops police should:



- Avoid asking, "Where are you from?" if they want to know what language the person speaks. Ask about the language directly and if someone answers, "I am from here" don't follow up with "Where are you really from?" If a woman is wearing the Hijab don't ask "Are you hot in this head cover?"
- Eye contact between opposite genders is not permissible, while eye contact between a driver and a police officer is considered a challenge to authority. If a Muslim driver doesn't look the police in the eye it is out of respect not because they are hiding something.
- A woman wearing the Niqab (face cover) can only remove the Niqab for another woman. The same is true for a body search. A woman's body is not to be touched by a member of the opposite gender unless he is part of the nuclear family.
- The saliva of a dog is considered an impurity, so if a canine unit stops a Muslim and they want to conduct a dog search, the Muslim may become extremely worried about the dog smelling or licking them. This does not mean they are trying to hide something.

During a house visit for a non-violent call:

- Police should remove their shoes upon entering the house and step in with the right foot.
- Shake hands with the right hand only and with the same gender and not with the opposite gender.
- If an officer needs to talk to a female in the house in private, a policewoman should be present in the same room.

During a visit to a mosque:

- Remove shoes, step in with the right foot. Shake hands with the same gender and with the right hand.
- If it is necessary to go in the prayer hall, and it is not an emergency, male police officers should enter the male section and female officers should go into the female section.
- Recognize that the Quran is a holy textbook and is written in Arabic. Do not use derogatory terms in describing the language or religion.
- Remember that when Muslims are in the midst of prayers, they are not supposed to talk to anyone.
- Emergency trumps everything: promptly notify the members of the congregation that it is an emergency situation when officers are in hot pursuit of a suspect.
- Have a Muslim liaison and translators on the police force for consultations.

In public schools:

- Educators should be informed about the practices of the Muslim way of life, why women wear the Hijab and the dietary laws, particularly for when students go on field trips.
- Educators should be taught the significance of Islamic holidays, particularly Ramadan (when Muslims must fast and abstain from water from sunup to sundown) and why when Ramadan comes Muslim students should be given the option not to go in the cafeteria and go to an alternative place.
- School curricula should be revised to include correct information about Islam and Muslims, including the fact that Muslims also were victimized by the slave trade. The school systems should host an International Day, which would allow all ethnic minorities an opportunity to educate the community on their culture and practices.

In Hospitals (and to a lesser extent other professional institutions):

- Provide health care provider workshops on sensitive gender issues.
- Provide instructions geared to Muslims (as well as other specific communities) in neo-natal facilities about the rights of the newborn and if possible, rights of family members to be in the delivery room and to engage in religious practices that do not break the law.
- Provide instructions on the spiritual requirements of Islam and its impact on healing.
- Provide instructions on the food requirements, or dietary restrictions, of Muslims.



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