



(Re)Presenting American Muslims: Broadening the Conversation

Muslims Making Inclusive Spaces

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About The Author



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Ahmad El-Khatib was born in Jerusalem, Palestine in 1984. He had a passion for Martial Arts at a young age. In 2001, he earned the Grand Champion title of The World Cup Martial Arts Finals and was ranked 3rd in the United States, by the National Blackbelt League.

Mr. El-Khatib then decided to look beyond competition and focus on what he loved most, teaching. He aimed to instill, in his students, what he felt were the most valuable principles of Martial Arts: self-control and perfection of character. Through his own practice and study of these two principles, he found a deep love for the prophet Muhammad (pbuh) and his message. Mr. El-Khatib has had the privilege of studying directly under Habeeb Umar bin Hafiz of Tareem, Shaykh Muhammad al-Jamal of Jerusalem, and is currently a student of Lokman Effendi of the distinguished Osmanli Order.

In 2010, with the collective efforts of his mother, a Montessori teacher, and sister, an art teacher, he founded The NUR Center for Art, Fitness, and Enrichment, a community center serving people of all faiths, in the D.C metropolitan area. The Center offers a Montessori School, an Art Studio, and a full time fitness facility providing Martial Arts and private group fitness classes for women. The center also hosts a variety of performances, film-screenings, and workshops emphasizing environmental education, sustainability, and spiritual wellbeing.

The NUR Center was recently featured in the documentary film Unmosqued and described as “an up and coming third space that is really fulfilling the needs of its community”.

On Friday and Saturday, April 11 and 12, 2014, the Alwaleed Islamic Studies Program at Harvard University hosted a two-day workshop (Re)Presenting American Muslims: Broadening the Conversation to discuss the ways in which American Muslims define themselves, and are defined, in the twenty-first century. The workshop brought together a diverse slate of American Muslim activists, artists, scholars and advocates in a constructive dialogue on a wide range of issues affecting Muslims in the United States. In five sessions over two days, the group addressed challenges regarding the ideas of American Muslim identity and representation while encouraging a discussion of the opportunities and a broader view of the communities encompassed in the umbrella term 'American Muslims'.

What follows is Ahmad El-Khatib's presentation from Session 4 of the conference that explored the topic of muslims making inclusive spaces.

Introduction

In the Name of Allah Most Gracious Most Merciful

Recently, I had the honor of speaking on a panel discussing Muslims Making Inclusive Spaces. Being the most racially diverse religion in America, it is clear that Islam, as a religion, is naturally inclusive. Our mosques and community centers and may not completely reflect this yet, but with time and some reconnecting, they will.

Let's begin with a good hard look in the mirror. As a community, we have spent so much time analyzing the faults of "others" that it seems we have forgotten the only thing we should be focused on improving, ourselves. Our prophet peace and blessing be upon him teaches us to be liberal when judging others and conservative when judging ourselves. Only when we embody this teaching as individuals, will we experience real change in our communities. Many of the issues that were discussed in this important conference seemed to have one common driving force, the human ego. It is the very reason we are greeted with this fashionable skepticism from others in the Muslim Community and more importantly why we are so offended by it.

We all laughed and related to the story of the elder with the scowling face that many of us may have encountered at our local mosque. As unwelcoming and uncomfortable as it may be to deal with these mean looking faces, we must constantly do our best to understand the meaning behind them.

This takes me to the first challenge we face: understanding the value of our elders. We have become so preoccupied with creating our own narratives that we have forgotten the value of sitting at the feet of our elders and listening to their stories. After all, they may have good reason to wear the face they do. In the same way we hate to feel judged by them we often extend them the same treatment unknowingly. The old look at the young and see unwarranted arrogance, while the young look at the old and see unwarranted cynicism. Understanding and respect must be mutual but it is the duty of the younger generation to reach out, not the other way around. No matter what the differences in opinion may be, completely writing our elders off as irrelevant is part of the problem, not the answer. We don't have to agree with everything they say but we should take time to understand them and remind them that their voice is valuable to us.

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Our next challenge is locating Authentic Scholars of Islam with pure chains of transmission directly linked to our prophet Muhammad (pbuh). They are out there, and without them, we will continue to build several confusing versions of Islam according to our own individual lifestyles rather than attempting to change our lifestyles according to the one message of Muhammad (pbuh).

The third and final challenge we face is for us is remembering that ultimately, only Allah inspires change. Unfortunately, it is in our nature as humans to forget this. The Arabic word for human is *Insan* coming from the root word “ins” meaning to forget. We convince ourselves that we can simply strategize our way through life relying solely on our own human intellect in addressing our problems. This leads to the stress, anxiety, and depression we carry as individuals and commonly see in our communities. Thankfully, there is a very strong healing in the act of prostration, known as the *Sajdah*. We may forget, but the *Sajdah* is our reminder. Through it, we become grounded, humbled, and reminded that it is only He who is in control, not us.

I pray that the true beauty and inclusivity of Islam will naturally manifest in our communities once we begin to reconnect with our elders, recognize our rightly guided leaders, and establish an increased reliance on the sublime.

The following community to do list was written in reflection of this workshop:

Things to Re-Do

- Re-Emphasize** the commonality of Mankind
- Re-Direct** criticism of others towards self
- Re-Empower** the Indigenous
- Re-Strengthen** our Families
- Re-Connect** with Nature
- Re-Vocalize** the Silenced
- Re-member** the Creator
- Re-Inspire** the Hopeless
- Re-Ignite** Creativity
- Re-spect** the Saints
- Re-Press** the Ego
- Re-Move** Hate
- Re-Learn** Love
- Re-Think**
- Re-Use**
- Re-Do**

I am truly grateful to have met and benefitted from the words of so many inspiring people. The panelists brought valuable insight from their respective backgrounds and I am amazed and energized by the work that is being done. Thank you for allowing me to be a part of this historic conference. May Allah forgive me and bless everyone involved.

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Institute *for* Social Policy *and* Understanding

ISPU is an independent, nonpartisan research organization specializing in addressing the most pressing challenges facing the American Muslim community and in bridging the information gap between the American Muslim community and the wider society. ISPU conducts objective, empirical research and offers expert policy analysis on some of the most pressing issues facing the United States. In addition, ISPU has assembled leading experts across multiple disciplines and built a solid reputation as a trusted source for information about American Muslims and Muslim communities around the world.

ISPU scholars provide insight into the major debates taking place across the country. They offer context-specific analysis and recommendations to journalists, policymakers, and the general public through reports, policy briefs, articles, op-eds and books. ISPU disseminates its publications through a variety of channels and holds regular congressional briefings, policy events and academic conferences.

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