Muslims Making Inclusive Spaces

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About The Author

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Shakila Ahmad is dedicated to numerous civic and community causes in addition to heading business development and management for the Allergy & Asthma Specialty Center. Mrs. Ahmad was appointed in December 2013 as the first woman to lead the Islamic Center of Greater Cincinnati as President and Board of Trustees Chair of the Islamic Educational Council. She also serves as Vice Chair for the YWCA Cincinnati heading Racial Justice, is on United Way of Greater Cincinnati's Board of Directors and on the regional FBI multicultural task force. She has been an active member of the Board of Trustees at the Islamic Center since 1995 and is the founder for the Muslim Mothers Against Violence initiative and Tours & Talks Education and Outreach programs at the Islamic Center of Greater Cincinnati. Civically, her work has included board leadership roles at the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center, BRIDGES for a Just Community (formerly NCCJ), Ohio Humanities Council, Cincinnati Enquirer Editorial Board, WCET Community Advisory, Academy of Medicine Alliance and the Martin Luther King Jr Coalition. She has conducted lectures and programs related to inclusion, education, interfaith, Islam, women and the cultural and demographic diversity of Muslims. She spearheaded the creation of the nationally recognized 'A Visit to a Mosque in America' DVD. Mrs. Ahmad is a Cincinnati Enquirer Professional Women to Watch 2014, regional Chamber's Women of Excellence 2011, 2010 FBI Director's Community Leadership Award recipient, Enquirer Women of the Year 2001, and NCCJ's 1997 Community Service Award recipient. She is a member of Leadership Cincinnati XXXI.

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 Shakila T. Ahmad's presentation from Session 4 of the conference that explored the topic of muslims making inclusive spaces.

Introduction

The last eighteen years of engagement with interfaith-relations work has taught me that American Muslims have learned to interact fairly well with non-Muslim groups but we have not been able to accomplish the same level of success on an intra-faith level within our own diverse communities. This lesson has not come easily. I believe that I, personally, have learned a lot from all of the 70,000+ people who have engaged with the Islamic Center of Greater Cincinnati's Tours & Talks programs in its various forms of education and outreach. So, as we look at the matter of Muslims Making Inclusive Spaces, I find myself reflecting on the challenges and the many lessons learned over the years that can be taken forward in addressing this critical issue for American Muslims needing to broaden the conversation within our own communities.

American Muslims are a more recent (for the most part), yet a fast growing faith community in America. This young community inherently encompasses a broad spectrum of immigrant communities as well as indigenous Muslims—the majority of whom are African American with their own rich cultural roots of which Islam was a part for many. This inherent diversity, bound by a common faith, will naturally tend to fragment and fall into previously known patterns and cultural exclusion.

This has proven to be detrimental in establishing a strong community voice that will be recognized and heard for the benefit of the collective community. It has also left the American Muslim community deficient of the benefits of diverse, yet unified, skills and talents.

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The Opportunities

There are many challenges that stand in the way of Muslims making inclusive spaces. I see these as opportunities that if addressed will most certainly lead to favorable and necessary outcomes. There are many opportunities but the foremost that come to mind are:

- Ownership of the American Muslim narrative
- Lack of mentorship for women and diverse leaders
- "Cookie cutter" box Mosques
- Spiritual and intellectual intolerance and
- Weight of old cultural baggage

I mention the first, the *American Muslim narrative*, as an underlying theme that cannot be ignored. If we, the ones being represented, don't have proactive engagement and ownership of our story then not only will we be defined by others (who have their own agenda) but we will inherently enable the exclusion of Muslims who fear or do not relate to the narrative being heard.

The key element in effectively telling this narrative is that it is diverse. Muslims are diverse nationally and globally; we are not monolithic. We have much to learn from each other and must engage in the storytelling of Muslims in all its forms and beauty.

The reluctance of leaders to mentor those who are not 'like them' is limiting our potential and engagement of significant talent. This includes *lack of mentorship and leadership development for females and diverse ethnic communities* by the current leadership in many Mosques and Islamic institutions.

The lack of representation has caused disarray in our communities. Thus, mosques have left a huge gap in *making American Muslim spaces welcoming*—unable to reach outside the sphere of the religiously obedient or the very young being "forced" to attend religious education classes or "Sunday School". This has kept out those with a desire to grow. It has also disconnected many of the youth from Mosques; they exert their objections to 'Sunday School' by refusing to attend classes in their older teenage years. Most often they do not come back until their own children are of age to attend 'Sunday School', if at all. In many Mosques that are quickly built, with limited funding and fore thought which I refer to as *"cookie cutter" mosques*, there has been no place to engage women to serve the community beyond the kitchen. Nor are there spaces for youth to play or space for the community to gather and form meaningful bonds.

Spiritual and intellectual intolerance comes in many forms and is a major inhibiting factor in the inclusion of ideas and people. Quite often, we lack the necessary understanding and respect of the diversity of thought within our own faith tradition. More often than not, the school of thought that is most challenging, most pervasive, is the 'my way or the highway' school of thought. This mentality is counter to principles in America as well as Islam's rich intellectual history.

Muslims in America are still largely composed of immigrant populations. Even with first and second generations, as in many immigrant communities, there is a strong focus to retain the culture of where the parents or grandparents came from. There are cultural, national and family traditions that are often not Islamic and yet adhered to as such. As a result, some of this *cultural baggage*, quite often having to do with women and diversity, contributes to the newer generation radiating away.

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WHAT CAN WE DO?

The first thing I would say is lose the cultural baggage without losing the culture! If Muslims look to their rich historical roots as it traveled it would be clear that "Islam showed itself to be culturally friendly and, in that regard, has been likened to a crystal clear river. Its waters (Islam) are pure, sweet, and life-giving but—having no color of their own—reflect the bedrock (indigenous culture) over which they flow."[1] For Islam in America to flourish, American Muslims must embrace the inherent American values and realities of hard work, innovation, integrity, philanthropy, service, gender equity, democratic processes and embracing diversity which are all principles grounded equally in Islam.

We must engage in intentional diversity for the inclusion of women and minorities void of bias. It is most certainly something in which we have much work remaining. The senior leaders, despite their cultural background, must make a concerted effort to bring women and diverse cultural communities into leadership roles at Mosques and in Islamic institutions.

This alone is not sufficient for community success. Current senior leadership must dedicate time and energy in order to cultivate meaningful leadership programs and mentorship opportunities. By leaving women and minorities outside of the leadership roles, over half of the talent, intellectual power, and resources are excluded. At a time when talented human capital is a limited resource, this is something we cannot afford.

Creating welcoming community spaces is so much more than a clean open space to recite prayer. The physical space and the programs offered at and around the Mosque itself can foster a necessary sense of belonging and lead to the establishment of a vibrant Islamic community center. The physical space must be as easily accessible to women as well as men. People must smile and welcome others to join them. The intellectual engagement opportunities here must deepen our understanding of our faith, the world and the thoughts of its inhabitants. These conversations and work can and should be done at our Islamic Centers not just at coffee houses elsewhere. It is the bringing together and addressing the spiritual, physical, intellectual and emotional needs of community members that foster a welcoming community space where people can begin to know one another and their faith at a more meaningful level.

Making our spaces welcoming for our youth is a particular challenge when it come to religious education and activities associated (or the lack of) with this education. It's not only about the material; it's about making the material conducive and relevant so discussions, thought, and reason are encouraged. Force wouldn't even be relevant, because the students would desire to come to a safe, non-judgmental environment that fosters dialogue, an exchange of stories, and spiritual development—which further solidifies esteem in their American Muslim identity.

Our outreach has shown us that it is much harder to dislike or be fearful of someone when you have gotten to know them.

Strengthening relationships that strengthen our faith and community are most important things that, with concerted effort, most certainly are within our grasp. These relationships pretty much fall into the categories of faith, family, and community. A strengthening of the most important relationship with our One and Only Creator should naturally lead to better relationships with those closest to us—our family.

1 Taken from Islam and the Cultural Imperative by Umar Faruq Abd-Allah

We are blessed with a diverse community with representation from many cultures and viewpoints, young and old. Providing religious and social opportunities within an Islamic community will enable us to learn not only about our faith, but will allow us to get to know and respect, and eventually appreciate each other's differences. This understanding and respect within its members will enable us to work collectively for communal benefit and ultimately strengthen our communities as a whole.

Part of this work is learning to resolve conflict and disagreement amicably and fairly. As mentioned earlier, it is much more challenging to work with people you don't know and think you don't like. As healthy family relationships have a great deal to do with family members fostering positive relationships outside the family, positive community relationships will most certainly enable American Muslims to serve greater societal needs and strengthen our relations with the broader community while fulfilling our religious obligations.

All of this broader conversation is about creating a new, stronger and healthier American Muslim narrative which engages many who are on the outskirts and disconnected from the community at this time. In order to have our American Muslim narrative heard it is imperative that we have a seat at the broader community table of conversation. These conversations are happening not just in houses of worship but also in community centers, in civic organizations, in our neighborhoods, and in boardrooms. It is natural for recent immigrant communities to be heavily focused on establishing themselves and providing for their

families. But simultaneously, it is an imperative for American Muslims to be civically engaged in matters affecting the broader community as well as themselves and their families. The engagement most familiar to many currently engaged in the American Muslim community may be in the form of education, outreach, and interfaith activities coming from Mosques and Islamic Centers. But it cannot stop there. Social service organizations, local school councils and boards, human relations organizations, leadership programs of regional Chambers of Commerce, and professional groups are some paths that can be used to address the severe shortage of Muslim and ethnic diversity on boards and in leadership positions of institutions. The opportunity for engagement can be availed not just by making oneself available but by hands on commitment in the community service work many groups are already doing.

American Muslim leaders must help develop the necessary skills within the community through programs at our Islamic Centers. By cultivating leadership skills and by actively supporting community service, meaningful engagement will result. This will not only allow American Muslims to create our own American narrative, but help create a Muslim engagement and inclusion model that will serve as a model globally.

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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.