

Muslims in the US (II)

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There aren't any easy solutions to the challenges that Muslims in the US face today, but if we are to deal with them at all, we need to do some good house-keeping in our own communities. So, I am going to shift focus now and speak about three pressing internal problems.

One is the absence of a powerful Muslim voice in US politics and while there are many reasons for this, a primary one is the insularity and parochialism of most Muslims, specially immigrants. A combination of cultural hubris and alienation from the larger society in which they live, has led most immigrants to detach themselves from it socially and politically as well, and this detachment and alienation have made us so susceptible to the vagaries of the political system today. Consequently, unless we give up on our self-imposed exile and join the mainstream of national politics (and by this I don't mean the Republican party!), we won't be able to narrow the gap between our growing numbers and our marginal presence in US politics.

A second problem is the failure to challenge interpretive extremism in our midst. By this I don't mean that extremism is uniquely Muslim or Islamic. To the contrary, extremisms of all sorts are pretty universal and not all of them are religious in nature. And even when it is, extremism needs to be understood in the broader context of a racist, unjust, and oppressive global political economy that is the outgrowth of both centuries of Western imperialism and of many existing US policies.

At the same time, however, Muslims themselves share some culpability for failing to challenge religious extremism. Liberal, progressive, and so-called secular Muslims in particular have disengaged from Islam thereby allowing the extremists a freer hand to dominate the production of religious meaning with disastrous consequences for us all.

Thus, it isn't just a case of Islam vs. the West, as the popular mantra has it, then, but also an interpretive struggle of Islam vs. Islam, as Ali Shariati, the Iranian intellectual, used to say, and the best antidote to extremism is to interpret Islam in ever more egalitarian ways so as to discredit its abuse for justifying authoritarianism and repression.

By authoritarianism and repression I have in mind not only the politics of Muslim states but also the sexual politics of Muslim communities not one of which practices gender equality and most of which are mired in oppressive gender hierarchies. As a Muslim woman and as someone who has done a careful reading of the Qur'an's teachings, I find this intensely disturbing and, frankly, insufferable. This, then, is the third and most acute problem that Muslim communities face today for several reasons.

First, while it is only recently that the community as a whole has felt the impact of violent and extremist readings of Islam, Muslim women have **always** borne their brunt.

Second, it is around women's issues that our contradictions are most manifest. Many of the same Muslims who were harshly critical of the atrocities that the US committed when it went after the Taliban did nothing to challenge the Taliban's atrocities against women. Even if the "save the Afghan women" campaign became just another tool in the Bush administration's ideological repertoire for bombing Afghan civilians, it doesn't obviate the fact that most Muslims didn't protest the Taliban's abuse of women.

Indeed, for the most part, Muslims tend to remain silent about sexual oppression. Most wouldn't even think of it as a "burning issue of the day" though it's unclear how we can face other challenges so long as we are socialized to view women as inferior to men and to accept their degradation at the hands of men as "Islamic." Dupliciously, this abuse occurs alongside loud proclamations about Islam's egalitarian stance towards women.

I can't offer a detailed commentary on the Qur'an's teachings but I do want to state for the record that the Qur'an does not advocate, condone, or sanction a theory of male rule or privilege notwithstanding misreadings of specific verses. To the contrary, it clearly establishes the principle of ontological gender equality.

The sexism and misogyny that Muslims historically have projected onto the Qur'an is a function of how religious knowledge was produced, by whom, and in what contexts. Historically men have claimed the right to interpret Islam even though the Qur'an says that all humans potentially can acquire knowledge, including religious knowledge, by reflecting on its *ayat* ("signs" of God).

That Islam is not based in the idea of mediation and intercession by men or communities of interpretive or religious experts is also clear from the fact that it does not ordain a clergy or sanction an institution comparable to the church. In fact, there is no scriptural sanction in Islam for male interpretive communities or experts to monopolize religious knowledge and claim inerrant authority. And yet that is precisely how religious knowledge and authority are structured among Muslims today.

At a time when we are confronting serious challenges, it is easy to push awkward and controversial issues to the back burner in the name of communal solidarity. But I am not sure what sort of solidarity can emerge from a situation of inherent injustice and inequality. I believe we would be better served if we were to use the openings provided by the current crises to reflect on our readings of the Qur'an and admit that we've not done an adequate job thus far of reading it for its best meanings, as the Qur'an itself asks us to do. This realization should spur us to do just that in the future.

The Qur'an teaches that God only changes the condition of those who endeavor to change their own condition, just as it teaches that moral individuality and agency lie in using our *aql* and *ilm*, our intellect and knowledge, to understand and practice our religion. Armed with this certainty, we should be unafraid of any challenges; but the burden is upon us to

make the right decisions and the right choices today. Unless we do, we won't be able to actualize the full potential of Islam, hence also our own potential as Muslims.