

American Muslims

Is there a Vision for the Future?



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In July 2009, Rick Warren, a popular evangelical Christian pastor was the keynote speaker at the ISNA (Islamic Society of North America) conference. Pastor Warren's speech was welcomed by many American Muslim organizations, leaders and community members. This is because the expression of friendship by such a leader in a conference attended by 45,000 Muslims was first of its kind in America. His speech was perceived by American Muslims as a positive step in helping to bridge any misunderstandings between Muslims and Christians of America.

However it can be easily argued that to many American Muslims, his coming to the conference signified a symbol of their acceptance in the American society. While Pastor Warren's friendly presence may have sent that message, the contents of his speech underscored how American Muslims' efforts to position themselves in the American society may have been falling short. This was clear from many of his comments. For example, during the past few years American Muslim leaders' mantra has been to demand tolerance in response to the intimidation that Muslims have suffered on various fronts. However, Pastor Warren reminded Muslims that "***Tolerance is not enough. People do not want to be tolerated, they want to be respected. They want to be treated with dignity. They want to be listened to.***" This therefore was a clear wakeup call that American Muslims should not

have merely stopped at demanding tolerance, whereas respect and dignity should have been a right that American Muslims should never have compromised on.

American Muslims have also complained about the media's bias toward them in recent years. While American Muslims have been trying to fix that image, their efforts surely have fallen short. Pastor Warren further validated this by stating "***And since today much of the press is actually clueless of what you believe, and as to what I believe, and then there are frequent mischaracterizations in the media, frequent ignorant generalizations, generalizations are generally wrong, and frequent stereotyping, of all of us***". This told American Muslims and their leaders about how far they are from "clueing in" the media and others to prevent, or at a minimum curb such mischaracterizations and ignorant generalizations.

Among other things, American Muslim leaders have also been focusing on "Interfaith Dialog" as one of the avenues to bridge gaps with other faiths in America. However, Pastor Warren's suggestion that in such matters action goes further than dialog was more appealing. He commented: "***And I will tell you that I am not interested in interfaith dialogue, I am interested in interfaith projects. There is a big difference. Talk is very cheap. And you can talk and talk and talk and not get anything done.***"

Finally, for those few American Muslims who have wrongly believed that assimilation within the American society can only be achieved by compromising ones Islamic values and principles, the statement by Pastor Warren “***maintaining our separate traditions, maintaining our convictions without compromise***” echoed what mainstream Muslims believe in but is doubted by a certain segment of American Muslims

The above clearly highlights the need to fill the voids and gaps in the vision for American Muslims. Although American Muslim organizations have been undertaking a number of focused and proactive steps to better American Muslims’ positioning for the future, there are a number of questions that must be asked to gauge their efforts. Some of the key questions are as follows:

- 1) Are American Muslims any closer to Islam and their mosques today than before?**

- 2) Are the outreach efforts and tactics of Muslims making a difference in clarifying the message of Islam?**

- 3) Does the Muslim leadership have a strategic vision to improve the relationship with the US government that is constantly being viewed by many American Muslims as challenging or are the efforts of American Muslims merely reactive and stop-gap in nature?**

4) Are the Islamic centers, mosques, masajids, etc. organized well enough to attract Muslims and non-Muslims alike for transparent dissemination of the message of Islam?

5) Who are the Imams and leaders who American Muslims have put on the podiums and how effective have they been in uniting their local communities?

6) And finally, what specifically is being done to get Muslims involved in the democratic process of America to be able for them to make their voices heard?

These questions must be debated and discussed strategically to be able to craft a vision for the American Muslims for this century. Pondering over these questions brings forth 6 areas which American Muslim leaders must focus on at a minimum to get clarity on a roadmap for a better Muslim America. They are discussed below.

1. Get American Muslims back in Mosques

Many studies indicate that a large number of American Muslims are absent from the masjid or are mere seldom visitors. According to the Pew Forum on religion and Public Life, only 17% of Muslims go to mosques more than once a week. This compares with 30% for evangelical Christians (largest religious

group in the US). According to the study, 34% of Muslims seldom or never attend mosques and Islamic centers. On the other hand, this compares with only 13% for evangelical Christians.

Simply put, practising Muslims cannot stay disconnected from mosques and masjids. In Islam, a masjid or a mosque is the epicentre of all spiritual and physical rejuvenation. Amongst other things, a masjid provides a place of worship for the daily 5 and the weekly Friday prayers – one of the required and primary pillars of Islam. A masjid facilitates social interaction between individuals and also provides avenues for spiritual, family and other forms of counselling thus providing for healthier minds. Furthermore, a good masjid facilitates learning of knowledge thus paving the way to build sound Muslim leaders.

The low number of Muslims attending mosques should be a cause of concern for the Muslim leaders. With hundreds and thousands of mosques and Islamic centers built in the US over the past many years, why are those Muslims not heading to the masjid? Whether their spiritually needs are being met elsewhere or whether there are other reasons, Muslim communities in America cannot afford the exodus of such a large percentage of Muslims from the Islamic centers and this is where Muslim leaders should step in to think through reversing this exodus.

Another [study conducted last year in a western country saw](#) an increase of 21% in the number of Christian church goers from the year before. One of the reasons cited was that churches specifically were reaching out to their local communities to offer people help in their practical lives and to provide spiritual guidance. They found that “In this country, we work with lots of churches who offer vital family support to parents and careers, give advice and counseling around debt and financial management, help refugees to settle into the community, provide companionship for older people, and offer networks of friends to young adults.” Didn’t Muslims always pride themselves being part of a religion that is “complete” offering solutions for their daily lives? Shouldn’t Islamic centers and mosques in the west be doing the same thing or even excelling in building better individuals and useful members of their local communities?

Muslim leaders therefore must address this issue. So, here is the good news. The same forum also reports that while only 17% of Muslims attend mosques and Islamic centers more than once a week, 71% pray atleast once daily (pray outside mosques and Islamic centers). So, all that absence cannot be blamed on American Muslims’ dwindling levels of faith. Why such Muslims do not see any value or a religious requirement to be closely part of Islamic centers is an issue that Muslim leaders need to tackle and find ways to bring these Muslims back to the Islamic centers and masjids.

2. Re-introduce Islam to America

Islam has existed in America for many decades, yet it continues to be a foreign religion to the non-Muslim communities of America. Study after study shows that a large percentage of non-Muslim Americans hold a negative view about Islam. It is obvious that whatever has caused the building of these stereotypes over the years hasn't gone away and whatever Muslim leaders are doing to cast away those stereotypes is not working.

Muslim communities have taken certain steps to counter some of these stereotypes. Interfaith dialogs and conferences, holding open mosque days and distribution of free Qurans are some of the methods that Muslims have sought to introduce Islam and Muslims to the non-Muslim America.

However, Muslim leaders need to gauge the effectiveness of these tactics. Does simply handing out a 600 page Quran translation answer the basic questions that an average American may have about Islam? Instead, wouldn't distributing a 50 page factual guide with basic questions and answers and the one that debunks the falsehoods propagated in many media circles could be more of an effective tool to make non-Muslims aware about Islam? Similarly, how effective are one time introductions to Islam on open mosque days? Wouldn't alternative sustained efforts be sought that can better disseminate the message of Islam within the non-Muslim communities of America? These are some of the questions that Muslim leaders ought to ask amongst themselves to help improve the image of Islam and Muslims.

This dilemma does beg the question as to how Islam was introduced within the communities of early Muslims hundreds of years ago. Quran's linguistic miracle was one of the many factors as it drove many to understand Quran better and in the process got the message. But the key in getting the Islamic message out during those times was that Muslims of those times lived as Muslims not just amongst their fellow Muslims but amongst non-Muslims as well. A Muslim's life was therefore open to non-Muslims and Muslims alike. Their lives that embodied the message of Islam provided non-Muslims with a glimpse of Islam on a daily basis. That not only resulted in non-Muslims to appreciate and respect Islam and its inherent values but was the key reason for people to become Muslims.

This poses the question whether the life of an American Muslim symbolizes that lifestyle. Is it the case that while Muslims may be living as Muslims within their own communities but could be masking out some of that lifestyle when they meet and engage with non-Muslims? When called for, do Muslim Americans feel proud introducing themselves as Muslims or does the Islam hysteria make them shy away from such introductions? Because, when Muslims try to hide their identities from their neighbors and non-Muslim friends, it is only natural that such non-Muslims too will shy away from asking more questions about Muslims and Islam. If Muslims keep their Islam hidden away in mosques and in their homes, then the situation won't improve in anyway.

Non-Muslims need to see Islam and its values in action amongst Muslims before they can appreciate and understand the message of Islam. This living of Islam on a daily basis will introduce Islam to America in ways that no open mosque demonstration, Islamic lecture or newspaper article can ever do. This mode of living therefore has to change and Muslim leaders and Imams must start addressing this topic within the non-Muslim communities of America.

3. Work and Improve Relationship with the Government

Many American Muslims have questioned and complained, and more so lately, about some of government agencies' alleged tactics to intimidate various communities of Muslim America. This intimidation according to many has come in the form of spying in mosques, recruiting informants, using of provocateur methods or simply uncalled for questioning of peace loving citizens. Factual or not, but the concerns are real. The question is what are Muslim leaders doing to improve the atmosphere?

It can be difficult for any community to taste the fruits of freedom under such conditions and to live in the shadows of perceived intimidation. Living freely requires minds free of such stresses. But, the reality is what it is – and under such conditions Muslim leaders must find a way to free Muslim communities of such stresses by helping the government achieve its goals in parallel. This is because government agencies do have an important job to do in protecting the nation from all threats. Muslim leaders therefore should do both –

cooperate fully to help these agencies achieve their goals, and in parallel work with these agencies to understand the underlying reasons of the concerns that Muslims have and wherever possible to work with them to find alternate ways to meet those goals. This also provides Muslim leaders with needed opportunities to educate their communities to improve the overall atmosphere.

This doesn't mean that Muslim organizations have not done anything on this front. They have – but beyond the basic steps of opening communication channels with these agencies, there is a need to foster relationships on an ongoing basis. That is important for many reasons. We know that for any agency or institution to find more about certain groups of people, they have to rely on experts. But, which experts are these agencies relying on to find more about Muslims? If it's any of the so called anti-Islam experts who also give their opinions on mainstream media, then that explains the bias, concerns and fear of these agencies regarding Muslims. Logic dictates that Muslim leaders selected from the overall population would be better at explaining more about Muslims than any of the non-Muslim experts themselves.

So, as long as Muslims are being put under the microscope and the government needs to learn about Islam and Muslims, Muslim leaders should seize the opportunity to educate the government agencies about Islam and Muslims. If the government needs to know the truth about Muslims, it can get more accurate information from Muslims themselves rather than relying on the so called Muslim experts with an anti-Islam agenda.

4. Reorganize Muslims through well governed Masjids and Islamic Institutions

Every center needs to be organized and governed effectively to be able to achieve the overall vision of Muslims of America. By some estimates there are more than 2000 mosques in America some of which date back to decades. Yet, the same problems that haunted the earlier mosques, exist today as well. For one reason or another, national American Muslim establishments have failed to suggest working blueprints for the running of Islamic centers. As a result, the founders have always chosen to impose their wills and philosophies on each of the centers, some of which though may have worked but then again have alienated its patrons in other cases. There is no reason why national Muslim leaders should not be able to recommend workable solutions for a core set of services required for each mosque. Whether they choose to implement them or not is upto the discretion of local mosques but then there won't be any legitimate excuse for having badly run centers.

Plans with workable solutions can address issues related to setup of basic services for worship, funerals, Muslim marriage, Islamic schools, adult education, family counselling, etc. They can also include models for instituting non-Muslim awareness programs to help local non-Muslims learn more about Islam. However, the most important of all has to do with crafting recommendations of tested governance models for mosques and Islamic centers. Masjid-goers in many masjids complain of poor governance

structures that prevent building of better institutions needed to build better Muslims for the future. They complain of the politics and power struggles present in some of these masjids that in turn thwarts real progress. The debates around whether these centers should be based on memberships, or democratic in nature, or have a shura-like governing body, etc. rage on. A few tested governance models thus can provide centers with options that may help some of such woes.

5. Bring Forward the Right Imams and Muslim Leaders

Because an Islamic center or masjid is a critical and inherent part of a Muslim's ongoing and daily religious experience, the role of an Imam by default becomes just as important. Imams are spiritual leaders who are supposed to be knowledgeable in religious matters, deliver the weekly Friday sermons and are depended on by their communities for guidance on spiritual as well as worldly matters. Imams are expected to provide leadership to local Muslims by walking their talk (sometimes missing from a lot of Islamic centers) – rather than piling worshippers with emotional and empty talk while standing on the podium during Friday khutbahs (sermons). Imams need to uplift the morale of their communities by being role models. That is naturally a higher calling – more than them merely uplifting prayer-goers' moods with beautiful Quranic recitations.

But such Imams are not easy to find. Others, who step forward to fill that void temporarily – or in some cases try to provide that leadership, end up being – for the lack of a better word – controversial – not just within the mosques but outside the mosques as well. Within their local communities, such Imams ultimately get blamed for failing to prove their leadership. Some get blamed for their outdated thinking and not being in tune with the challenges of the present day Muslim Americans. Others with little religious education get the blame for not being knowledgeable about Islamic issues thus risking giving of “bad advice” to their local Muslim communities. Some of them even get blamed for compromising on basic Islamic values. And, to top it all off, some Imams also get in hot water with the government who may monitor them for ensuring that their speeches and messages are not stirring trouble.

All this has the potential to cause intractable damage to the next generation of local Muslims. Muslim leaders must find a fix for this. After all, this is about the future and that cannot be risked.

6. Get Muslims engaged in the democratic process

It took Muslims many years before they realized the need to start participating in America’s democratic process. More Muslims have voted in the past two Presidential elections than anytime earlier. American Muslims have finally realized that disagreeing with the democratically enacted policies without

having their voices heard through the democratic process translates to empty talk.

Various polls reflect the above trends. According to a Zogby poll, 86% of Muslims surveyed said it is important for them to participate in politics – seven times as many as who say it is not important. By similar numbers, according to the same poll, Muslims say it is important to them for their children to participate in politics.

Despite all this progress, with a few minor exceptions, Muslims have not managed to penetrate in the federal and state legislative, judicial and executive branches. Support from well governed Islamic centers can help the new generation come forward to represent Muslims at state and national levels, thus paving the way to make the Muslim voices heard nationwide more effectively. For this to happen, strategic planning needs to begin now to make this a reality in the years to come.

It is time for American Muslims to start thinking big – to widen their horizons – to think about excelling in their local communities and make them better while not compromising on their values. It is time for American Muslims to own the quality of the Islamic message that is being disseminated throughout America. The damage needs to start reversing now and every American Muslim is responsible to make that happen.