

## Lecture 2: Islam in U.S.A., its Prospects & Problems

*A lecture delivered at University of California, Santa Cruz, Oakes College on October 28, 1987*

I am a student of religion; and therefore shall confine my talk to describing the religious problems and prospects of Muslims in the U.S.A. This country is a land of emigrants, People from different countries have been landing on its shores since Columbus set foot on what he thought was India. They spoke different languages, belonged to diverse ethnic groups and followed various religions and beliefs. You will now find here followers of all major world religions; but the majority has been of white Protestant Christians.

### Arrival of Muslims

The first Muslims were brought here some two centuries ago, by European slave traders mostly from Western Africa. Those helpless Africans lost their liberty on the shore of Africa; their dignity was drowned in the Atlantic Ocean, and not long after their arrival at the plantations they lost their identity, culture and then religion in quick succession. But in recent past some of them reverted with vengeance to what they thought was their original religion, Black Muslims. Now Imam Warith Deen Muhammad, the son of the founder of the movement, is bringing them to the main Muslims' tenets and beliefs. They have built hundreds of mosques for their use, and they preach mostly among black Americans.

Beginning with this century up to the end of World War II, hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of Muslims came to the Western Hemisphere. An overwhelming majority of them was from the Middle East, Turkey, and probably North Africa. A considerable number of them proceeded ahead to South America and hundreds of thousands of them are now settled in Columbia, Brazil and Argentina, as well as in some Caribbean countries.

From 1950 onwards, other groups have emigrated from the Indian sub-continent, East Indies and Africa, apart from the former areas.

## Problems

Their problems may broadly be divided into two categories: Those related to their own religious and social conditions, and those emanating from the social and behavioural atmosphere of their adopted country. We may call them internal and external problems, respectively.

### A) Internal Problems

For almost all Muslim it is in reverse. In the Prophet's time, they had to leave their homes and families, their wealth and properties, and come to Medina for protection of their faith. Their hijrah was for God. But modern emigrant Muslims, with exception of those who were brought here forcibly, had not migrated to the Western Hemisphere for the sake of religion. They had come here for worldly motives, for material gain. The Prophet has said that one gets from hijrah exactly that thing for which he migrates. Accordingly, those new-comers to the Americas gained worldly benefits for which they had come; but as for their religious condition, the less said the better.

*The First Group:* Much more adversely affected were those who came during the first half of this century. I do not want to make sweeping general comments. There are always exceptions to every general statement. It seems that, with a few exceptions, most of them had but a superfluous knowledge of their religion, or had no knowledge at all. They were Muslims because they were born in a Muslim family and lived in a Muslim society. When the emigration undid the ties of family and society, it also released them from the hold of religious values and moral restraints.

They had come from less affluent society; and when they found themselves in midst of glittering material progress, they were dazzled, they were and entranced and lost the to look at the things in no wonder. Back their political leaders, military commanders and even some so-called religious scholars believed that the advancement of the West, and European and American prosperity had their roots, not in their academic research, scientific discoveries advancement, but in hat and trousers, writing their language, from left to right i.e. in Roman script, free mingling of sexes and dancing and drinking. So many new-comers adopted these “ingredients of advancement” as fast as they could.

Many of them lost their identity. Names were changed: Muhammad became Mo, Abbas became Abe, Maqboot into MacBuli, Jafary became Jeffrey, Zainab changed into Jenny and Rabab into Ruby. Behaviour changed and in some cases religion was changed too.

Those who were steadfast in Islam felt bewildered. They did not know how to check that trend. Unfortunately, in many places, society could not find any leader who could assess the situation, suggest the remedies and implement his suggestions.

*The Second Group:* Those who came here after World War II, were comparatively more conscious of identity of their Islamic heritage. Many in of knowledge; others came for trade and commerce, were sent with compliments of Field Martial Idi Amin of Uganda. Whatever the reason of their emigration, many of them wanted to continue their lives as practicing Muslims.

## **B) External Problems**

Let us now look at the problems which are the product of the U.S.A. society. Broadly speaking, these problems are of three types:

- (i) ignorance of, and prejudice against Islam and Muslims;**
- (ii) propaganda against Islam and Muslims by news-media, politicians, writers and speakers;**
- (iii) social and ethical problems.**

**i. Ignorance & Prejudice:** Prejudice is a product of ignorance. And unfortunately there is a lot of ignorance in the West about Islam. In one of the opinion polls, mentioned in *The Minaret* (May-June, 1986), it was found that nearly eighty two per cent of those whose number one source of information regarding Islam was mass media believed that the Muslims worshipped Muhammad. Reading this statement, I was reminded of a novel *No room in the Ark* which I had seen some twenty years ago, in which the novelist had described the Somalis as worshipers of Muhammad.

Recently there was a cover story in *Time* magazine, showing how the standard of education was going down in the U.S.A. It showed the decline in every field of knowledge. For example in history, majority of the students wrote that American Civil War was fought in Europe; Declaration of Independence was written by Abraham Lincoln; and so on.

After reading that story, I am now inclined to give the American public benefit of doubt. I would say that they know as much about Islam as they know about their own history or geography!

Many Americans identify Islam with Arabs, or Iranians, or some such ethnic groups. Islam is perceived as an anti-Christian or anti-Semitic religion. They have no idea that Islam itself originated among the Semitic tribes, nor do they know that the Islam and the Qur'an revere the previous prophets and have put the Jews and the Christians in a separate favoured category of Ahlu 'l-kitab (the people of the Book).

**ii. Propaganda Against Islam & Muslims:** I would like to quote observations of Mr. Herbert S. Wilson, a sympathetic non-Muslim who explained some underlying causes of anti-Islamic attitude in an article, "Misunderstanding Islam". He thinks, and I agree, that the mass media is the root cause of the wide-spread ignorance about Islam. It is generally believed that American news media is the freest, but people equate this freedom with accuracy. They think that the freest media must also be the most truthful. The same issue of *The Minaret* gives a quotation from Edward Mortimer, former foreign correspondent of *The Times* (London) in which he says: "Why worry? All that is expected of you is a good story, so let them have it. Truth? What is truth?"

I will give you an example of the level of truth and accuracy attained by journalists. After the recent blood-bath at Mecca, a journalist wrote that the procession was being directed by Ruhullah, wife of Ayatullah Khomeini!

As a result many highly opinionated statements are accepted as facts. Thus they begin to believe caricatures as facts. They began to sincerely believe that Islam is a backward religion, a stagnant culture; Muslims are fanatics; Iranians (or Arab, depending on the American government's politics of a given time) are blood-thirsty terrorists, the name of the game is labelling.

**iii. Social & Ethical Problems:** The above mentioned ignorance and prejudice is curable. The responsibility lies primarily on Muslims' shoulders to present Islam to the American public (forget about politicians) in its true perspective. Then the responsibility goes to the American public to learn the facts before accepting cheap journalism as truth. Of course, it is a very slow process, but not impossible.

But I am not so optimistic about the social and ethical, environment of the country. Of course again it is not a generalization. And I am not going to pass judgement on any trend of thought, or mode of life. It is

the individual's concern, not mine. Everyone is free to behave as he likes, and so am I, to say what I believe is the state of the affairs. As I said the individuals' behavior is not my concern. But it becomes my concern when it tries to engulf Muslim children and make them lose their footing. Muslim parents' primary concern nowadays is not the prevailing ignorance about Islam, or the against Islam. Their immediate thought is as to how to protect their upcoming un-Islamic ways being as the of advancement. The real problem is that family-ties are now loosened and, in many cases, totally broken. People now do not think any bad thing that it might bring disgrace to their families.

The United States' constitution is based on the principle of separation of the Church and the State. Its roots go deep into the history, as many of those who came here in early days of colonization had done so to escape from religious persecutions in their countries of origin.

But the Constitution does not say that the society too should be divorced from religion. From a Muslim's point of view, it is unfortunate that the ethical values which had prevailed even half a century ago, have greatly diminished; this has opened the doors to a vast array of trendy ideas and mushrooming cults in the midst of spiritual emptiness.

People still say that it is an overwhelmingly Christian country, I wish it was.

Jesus Christ had said: "You have heard that it was said by them of old times: Thou shalt not commit adultery; but I say unto you that whoever looks on a woman to lust after her, has committed adultery with her already in his heart." (Matt 5:27-28)

And what are the burning questions, dominating of the American society nowadays? They are: Whether be free or not; whether sex education should be given in schools or not; licentiousness and promiscuity have become norm of the day, so that chastity is considered abnormal. Magazines, novels, movies, TV shows and video industries, all thrive on sex and violence. Advertisement becomes a flop if it does not show a woman's body in various degrees of nudity. This commercialism has turned womanhood into a sort of merchandise.

Purveyors of narcotics are hunted down and punished. Why? Because these drugs corrupt the body. But manufacturers of nasty video films showing all types of violence and explicit sex are free to amass millions from their trade. Nobody cares that such films, magazines and shows corrupt the soul. Here I am reminded of the question put by Jesus Christ: If you have gained the whole world and lost your soul, what have you gained?

Journalists and even some academicians vie with each other in inventing some long-winded, high-sounding names for religious sins. Theft is called kleptomania, fornication is pre-marital sex, adultery is called extra-marital sex. In this way they take out the sting of sin from sinful behavior and put a garb of

normalcy on these shameful actions. The sinners are no more ashamed of their behaviour. They proudly announce their homosexuality, their lesbianism and sodomy. Only this month a huge demonstration (estimates range between two to five hundred thousand) was taken out in Washington in which sodomites and lesbians proudly announced their sins and demanded “recognition”. In the midst of all the arguments for or against abortion, I have not seen any journalist exhorting the society that it should re-establish the ideal of chastity. Ways are suggested as how to prevent pregnancy, but nobody speaks of chastity.

I think here I should quote a parable given by our first Imam, 'Ali (peace be upon him). He said: “Gabriel came to Adam and said to him: O Adam! I have been ordered to let you choose one of the three things. Therefore choose one and leave the other two. Adam asked: What are the three things? Gabriel said: Wisdom, modesty and religion, Adam said: I choose wisdom. Gabriel said to modesty and religion to withdraw and leave Adam; but they replied: O Gabriel! We both have been told by God to remain with wisdom wherever it may be. So Gabriel said: Then do what you have been told and he ascended to heaven.”

## **An Encouraging Factor**

From a Muslim's point of view it is fortunate that some religious communities and denominations, like the Roman Catholics and the Orthodox Jews, are striving to hold fast to their religious teachings.

The Muslims should join hands with all those communities who are trying to stem the flood of licentiousness and irreligiousness. Twists of the Middle East politics should not prevent them from standing shoulder to shoulder for the sake of common causes of ethics and morality.

## **Prospects**

Muslims are now fully aware of these problems. Now they are awake. Perhaps their biggest difficulty is the lack of unified leadership. Nowadays a tug of war is going on among various groups of the Muslim intelligentsia here because of their having allegiance to this or that Middle Eastern country and trying to pull the Muslim ummah in this or that direction.

However, there is a feeling that before exposing their children to the above-mentioned unhealthy environment, they must immunize them through proper religious education and training.

Steps have been taken in some big cities as well as some small places to establish religious schools. The mosque is a center of Islamic activities, and now there are hundreds of mosques in U.S.A. and Canada.

## Concluding Observations

Muslims at present are more concerned with preserving their own religious identity. They are not paying much attention to spreading the message of Islam among non-Muslims. There are some Sufi groups who are engaged in this field. Also Islamic Information Service, an organization in Southern California, is producing since Ramadan 1985 television shows on Islam, which is heard from LA to Buffalo, (*The Minaret*, Summer 1987). Some conversions have been made through personal contacts. And that is how it should be.

Islam was not spread by sword; it spread through noble virtues of the Prophet and the Muslims. Just an example will suffice here. The Prophet used to pass a house every day. An old lady used to stand, with the basket of garbage in hand, waiting for the Prophet to pass. When the Prophet reached near her, she threw the garbage on his head. The Prophet never admonished her. One day the routine was broken. The Prophet asked the neighbours where the old lady was; he was told she was sick. The Prophet sought permission of the lady and entered the house. She thought he had come to take revenge. But the Prophet asked her how was she feeling and if there was anything he could do for her — nursing her, getting medicine or food for her.

The woman was surprised. And she at once accepted Islam. You see, there was no theological argument or philosophical discussion. It was only the noble virtue of the Prophet which attracted people to Islam. And lastly, I will tell you another anecdote which will show you in miniature how this godless society pollutes our children's minds: A teacher in a Muslim madrasah in U.S.A. was teaching young Muslim kids on a weekend. When she narrated the above story of the Prophet, a small kid got up and fired his question: "Why didn't he sue her?"

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