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Islamic Values among American Muslims

I think that the one danger of interaction between my children and non-Muslim children is loss of Muslim identity. I think that integration into the non-Muslim environment has to be done with the sense that we have to preserve our Islamic identity. As long as the activity or whatever the children are doing is not in conflict with Islamic values or ways, it is permissible. But when we see it is going to be something against Islamic values, we try to teach our children that this is not correct to our beliefs and practices. They understand it and they are trying to cope with that.

This testimony from a young Muslim mother in the United States expresses the dilemma in which many members of the Islamic community in the United States find themselves today. Like all immigrants to the United States, Arabs, as well as those from other areas of the Muslim world, affirm the values of their faith's tradition at the same time that they try to function as full members of American society. The majority are eager to integrate to whatever extent is possible while still maintaining their Islamic identity, but some are sharply aware of the dangers that such integration may entail. Subjected to pressures from the culture in general, from their work environments, from their often more acculturated children, and from their own personal desires to fit in their adopted environment, people are faced with the daily struggle to try to maintain the standards of Islam that are held up to them by friends and family, by other

members of the Muslim community, and by the many available publications and tracts delineating how to live a truly Islamic life.

Of course it is the case that not all Muslims are what is generally called "practicing." Many, perhaps the majority, do not immediately see an incompatibility between Islamic values and Western life. Like liberal Christians and Jews or those who have no relation to organized religion, they differentiate between religion and state, religion and culture, and religion and customs. They relegate customs to local Arab ethnicity and can, therefore, freely shed them. Generally, they operate successfully within the American system. For others who do struggle to maintain a specifically Islamic identity and who do not make the above kinds of differentiations, life in America can present significant challenges. The material of this essay deals primarily with the issues raised for Muslims who are involved in organized religion (the "mosque"). It is also true, however, that the values of Islam have shaped and confirmed Arab cultural values and thus continue to influence, however indirectly, the expectations of those who do not participate directly in religious activities. This is especially true in the definition of gender roles and in setting the parameters for what constitutes proper social interaction between the sexes.

Earlier in this century Muslims immigrating to the United States from the Middle East probably were less often concerned with forming and maintaining an Islamic identity as such than they were with basic survival, making a life in this country and finding ways in which to integrate successfully into what they had come to hope was truly an American "melting pot." When they came together for community and worship it was as much for companionship with fellow speakers of Arabic and for sharing of common cultural customs as it was for the acknowledgment of a religious bond of Islam. Worship, when it happened, generally took place, not in mosques, but in private homes or in space loaned from local churches. There were no "professional" *imams* available; prayer leadership generally was assumed by people with no special training.

Over the years this situation gradually changed. In the second and third decades of the century mosques were erected in various parts of the country. A second wave of mosque building was necessitated by the dramatic growth in the Muslim community in the United States. As immigrants increased in number and became better educated and more com-

fortable economically, and thus more socially mobile, Islamic institutions became a necessary part of American life. By the mid-1970s local resources were enhanced by the availability of oil monies from Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states earmarked for minority Muslim communities in other parts of the world. Muslims in America have benefitted from additional funding that has helped them build mosques in many cities, provide more trained *imams* to work with Islamic communities, and enhance library and other educational resources.

The rise of Islamic consciousness in America, in the past decade, has been due to a number of factors. Recent immigrants from parts of the world in which a more conservative brand of Islam is generally observed have played the role of calling second and third generation Arab Muslims to an enhanced awareness of their Islamic identity and the necessity of observing laws and regulations that ensure that they are in line with traditional Muslim values. It is also the case that Muslims perceive a significant change in American values, and a serious lowering of ethical standards, since the hippie/sexual/feminist revolution(s). Thus, there is today a great deal of contemporary Islamic writing on Islamic values, stressing the importance of religion as the one element in the creation of a truly moral society. To be a Muslim is to belong to a kind of universal family, to share in a unity that depends on mutual cooperation. "It is basic and fundamental, it is a sacred spiritual unity that represents full awareness of fraternity and brotherhood by every individual in the community" (Hoballah, n.d.: 72). Such unity is divinely conceived and implemented, and the community is seen as the locus for a spiritual and ethical bonding not available in humanly instituted social systems. This vision of Islam is not always easy to reconcile with American society. "We indeed have high regard and great esteem for the West and its civilization," says Muhammad Abdul-Rauf, former *imam* of the Islamic Center in Washington D.C., "but there are elements in the West of which we disapprove" (1972: 136). Among these are what he calls the moral laxity of the West, including easy mixing between the sexes, the availability of pornographic materials, dating, and what he says are called euphemistically "premarital relations." Such practices, he affirms, are "unhealthy, immoral, and destructive."

Muslims in this country look with increasing alarm to what they see as the rapid decline of the ethical-moral principles of American society and

find reassurance in affirming the importance of maintaining the values of Islam. They observe the increase of drug usage, rising crime rates, what appears to be a growing lack of respect for the institution of marriage, the problem of AIDS, and many other elements in American society that they deeply fear. They turn to Islam as a refuge and a guarantee that they and their families will not suffer the consequences of such deep societal problems.

Dating and Social Relations among Young People

At the heart of the concerns is the matter of male-female relationships, before and during marriage. There is obviously much in the American culture that runs counter to traditional Muslim views of the propriety of these relationships. The easy interaction between men and women in public contexts, women working alongside men, young people spending time alone together late into the evening, women dressing in ways that are considered unduly provocative—these and other issues worry Muslims as they try to define themselves and members of their families as American and at the same time as members of a community for which these practices generally are not acceptable.

The American practice of dating between young men and women has been of particular concern to Muslims. Recognizing that their young people are immersed in a context in which dating is encouraged (and in which those who do not date are even looked upon as somewhat odd), they do not wish to disaffect their youth or engender in them a lack of appreciation for Islamic ways. But neither do they want to permit the easy interaction of teens and young adults that they see all around them. A Lebanese father who has lived in America for several decades says:

dating is not our way of life. The way it is done is ridiculous. I see some people who date one person for three days, then drop them. . . . I am not against finding yourself a partner, but I am against the way they abuse this 'dating.' I don't have as much problem with boys dating girls as I do with girls dating (Haddad and Lummus 1987: 139).

The strictest interpretation of Islamic law would say that Muslim men and women (defined as postpuberty) should not be alone together with persons with whom marriage is a legal possibility for any reason. When a

man and woman sit alone together, says an often quoted *hadith* attributed to the Prophet Muhammad, the third party is Satan. A Muslim boy interested in seeing a Muslim girl is allowed to visit her at her home, provided that other members of her family are present. If he sees her in public, or takes her in his car, it must be in the company of an adult family member. His purpose for any such association should be the pursuit of marriage, not simply pleasure in female company.

Thus, for some the issue is not so much the dating as such as the necessity of a chaperon. "Dating," which can be defined as an arrangement for a marriageable couple to meet in order to discover each other, may be a useful thing, but this meeting should not be "unchaperoned" (Abdul-Rauf 1977: 103). The presence of a family member is understood to preclude the possibility of any untoward behavior such as kissing or fondling. It goes without saying that any kind of explicit sexual encounter before marriage is strictly forbidden. The now common American practice of young couples living together without benefit of marriage vows is totally unacceptable. The possibility of premarital sex for women is probably the most difficult of all American realities for Arabs to accept. While those who are Islamically committed see it as a religious issue, those for whom it is an Arab cultural value shared by many Christians, Jews, and Muslims take it no less seriously.

For many young Arab Muslims in America these restrictions on dating are extremely difficult to abide. Girls see their brothers allowed to date and resent what they see as inequity. Educated professional women find it very hard to operate with one standard of interaction in the workplace and another in their personal lives. The problem is compounded by the fact that many professional Muslim men who are eligible for marriage will not marry an Arab girl who has dated at all, but will marry an American girl who dated many men. Islamic parochial schools have sprung up in many parts of this country in hopes that such education will help in controlling the girls and shaping them to conform to the strictures of the faith. When problems do occur with girls protesting these strictures, the most common response appears to be for the family to ostracize her. She is left to fend for herself, without the support of her family ties or her inheritance. In a few extreme cases, documented in Arab communities in Dearborn, Michigan, and Milwaukee, Wisconsin, girls who have entered into sexual relationships before marriage have been killed.

Some Arab Muslim communities have found that the mosque provides

a helpful context in which to encourage young men and women to meet and socialize. There, under the watchful eyes of other members of the congregation, teens and young adults can interact with each other and enjoy the pleasures of sociability without explicitly countering the wishes of their parents or crossing the boundaries of culture or the strictures of the faith. It does not solve the problem of young Muslims wanting to join their non-Muslim friends in going to the movies or to dances with a date, but it does provide a helpful intermediate solution between dating and being forced (especially in the case of girls) to stay at home. Some mosques and Islamic Centers are looking to ways in which they can provide attractive social settings for the youth of the community.

Marriage

In many cases the mosque also serves as the locus for the ceremony of marriage itself. This practice, not common in the Middle East, is both a reflection of some of the ways in which the mosque has taken on the functions of a local Christian church, and another way in which to ensure the feelings of community and solidarity among members of the Muslim congregation. For Arab immigrants in the first half of the century this sometimes meant enjoying the celebratory atmosphere of the wedding with traditional Middle Eastern folk dances. In recent times this has occasionally led to problems in the relations between earlier immigrants and those more recently arrived from more conservative areas of the Islamic world for whom dancing in the basement of the mosque or the Islamic center is considered a highly inappropriate activity.

A considerable literature is available to American Muslims to assist in the matter of selection of marriage partners. Traditionally, of course, such selection was done by members of the respective families. This is a difficult custom to sustain in American society where families are mobile and young people, in general, grow up expecting to make their own choices. Islamic publications offer solid suggestions for those contemplating marriage, always on the expectation that such a marriage will be for life. One may be urged to pray, to ask questions, to get to know the prospective partner and his or her family as well as possible within the above-suggested restrictions, to be clear on what each partner expects from the marriage, and to have some sense of whether the prospective mate holds

firmly to the values of Islam and wants to raise children in ways consistent with those values.¹

Some Arab-Americans have picked up the custom prevalent in the subcontinent of advertising for a partner. Several Islamic magazines carry short notices under "Matrimonials" in which eligible men and women announce that they are seeking matrimony. These announcements generally list the age, education, and profession of the candidate, and the kind of partner for which he or she is looking. The Muslim Student Association, for years, has had a matrimonial section in its publications. During the last decade they have begun to use a computerized match-making system in an effort to provide better services.

Many Arab Muslims who are new to the United States are already married and do not need to worry about the problems of mate selection in a new culture. For those who come alone, often as students who intend to return home but who find those plans changed, the issue of marriage becomes very real. Marcia Hermansen observes that while some choose to marry men from their own home cultures who share their ideology and values, others break from their background and marry non-Muslim Americans (1991: 188-201). With the increased emphasis on Islamic identity in America today, and with more Muslims present in the American context, women who marry outside the faith experience stress both in their marriages and in terms of their own sense of self-identity. Hermansen also notes the interesting and increasingly occurring phenomenon of inter-cultural, as opposed to interfaith, marriages. As Arab Muslim women are finding it harder to secure marriages with Arab Muslim men, they are turning increasingly to members of other Muslim cultural communities, such as Pakistanis, to find husbands. Although this is acceptable in religious terms, she remarks, it represents a startling trend in the eyes of members of the parents' generation (1991: 12).

The question of interfaith marriage has engendered a great deal of attention and commentary in the American Muslim community. According to Islamic law, Muslim men may marry Christian or Jewish as well as Muslim women. While the Qur'an does not ban the marriage of Muslim women to Christians or Jews, it is Muslim belief that such marriages should not take place. The issue, of course, is the religious identity of the children, which is based on the affiliation of the father.² In the Middle East, where Muslims are the vast majority, this has not imposed any particular

hardship on women. In American society, however, things are different. The reality of many young Muslim men marrying outside of the Islamic faith, even though it is legally permissible, has created the obvious and very real problem of young Muslim women not having suitable marriage partners. Strongly encouraged by observant members of their families not to break Islamic tradition and marry Christians or Jews, they often face the alternatives of returning to the Middle East to find husbands or remaining single. While the latter is more tolerable in American society than in that of the Middle East, it is not an option that many Muslim women would choose. One estimate suggests that somewhere between 10 to 15 percent of Muslim women in the United States and 30 percent in Canada actually do marry outside of their faith, placing a heavy burden on parents who have to justify to the Muslim community their "failure" to raise their daughters properly.

As is true with interfaith marriage in general, various kinds of problems are likely to occur when Muslim men marry outside their faith. Carried away in the excitement of mutual attraction, interfaith couples may be quite unprepared for the realities of marriage and family life. The young Muslim man may profess himself to be "modern," released from the bonds of an inhibiting religious tradition and ready to make a new life with his non-Muslim bride. As time passes, however, it often turns out that he is more influenced by his family and the dictates of his faith than he realized, causing hardships for the new wife. He may expect her to abandon the commitment to equality in marriage that characterizes so much of current American thinking and adopt the more classically Islamic model in which the husband is in charge of the wife and responsible for the decisions of the family. He may decide that, indeed, it does matter to him that his children be raised Islamically, imposing values that are foreign to his non-Muslim wife. Some Muslim women have written poignantly about what they know about cases of severe physical abuse of non-Muslim wives, based on the husband's misinterpretation of Qur'an 4:34 in which men are permitted to beat their wives "lightly" if necessary.³ In some rare, but not nonexistent cases, American women married to Muslim men discover that there is another wife in the home country. From the husband's perspective, he may find his wife unable to adapt to his family and their expectations, wanting more of his time and attention than he is able or

ready to give. "If she is an independent sort, her behavior may appear to her husband as overly assertive or unsuitable for a Muslim woman" (Hakeem 1985: 10). She may not understand or appreciate the particular values attached, in Arab Muslim society, to hospitality and the welcoming of guests in the home.

Even the best of efforts on the part of the non-Muslim wife may not alleviate all the possible problems in the minds of more cautious Muslims. As Dawud Assad notes,

Apart from her desire to cultivate such manifestations of Western culture as dancing and music, both of which are considered indispensable to acquire "social graces," . . . a non-Muslim wife may also be a Laodicean in matters of food and drink. Out of respect for her husband's sentiments, she may not touch wine and swine, and she may not even bring them home, but she would, very definitely, be tolerant of them. It is thus possible that she might impart unconsciously, in her children also an attitude of tolerance toward alcoholic beverages and swine's flesh" (Assad 1983: 7).

He further warns against the possibility that the wife may allow her daughters to leave the confines of the home and do such disgraceful things as wear a bikini at the beach before the eyes of thousands of men. His conclusion is, clearly, that such interfaith marriages should, if possible, be avoided. One of the real dangers of such marriages cited by concerned Muslims is the possibility that the children will grow up apart from the faith. Abdul-Rauf says:

I was deeply shocked and appalled, when I began my duties in the United States . . . to meet grown-up children of a Muslim father who confessed that they were Protestants, Catholics, Baptists or adherents of other denominations. The more the experience was repeated, the deeper my distress became! (Abdul-Rauf 1972: 31).

It is not surprising to find that requests for marriage counseling are on the rise among Arab-American Muslims. While some feel that intervention in the personal realities of a Muslim family by someone who is not part of that family is inappropriate, many others realize that the pressures of accommodating a society with very different values makes some kind of

outside counseling urgent. *Imams* find themselves forced to function as marriage counselors without benefit of any kind of professional training. A national network of Muslims has been organized with the explicit purpose of talking to young people contemplating an interfaith marriage to help them to be aware of the potential difficulties.

Birth Control and Abortion

Closely related to the concerns of marriage are issues of birth control and abortion. As non-Muslim Americans find themselves increasingly forced to take a stand in favor of or in opposition to abortion in today's society, Muslims have little such choice to make. Islam stands firmly against the taking of a life that is already considered to be in existence. Traditional Islamic literature allows abortion if it occurs before life is infused in the baby (i.e., when the baby begins to move). Recent medical opinion showing that life begins at conception has led Muslim jurists to revise their teaching and disallow abortion. There is some discussion of the possibility of abortion in cases where the life of the mother is in genuine danger.

The situation is somewhat different in relation to birth control. There is ambiguity as to whether, and when, it is permissible to practice birth control and uncertainty as to what Islamic teachings really have to say about the subject. A young Muslim woman who has emigrated from Egypt to the United States notes:

I am not sure what the Islamic position is on birth control.

Some say you should control the number of births, some say you shouldn't. In Egypt, the government is trying to limit the number of births; some are trying to find the *hadiths* that say there shouldn't be too many of us. But there are also people who believe that there are passages in the Qur'an that say no to birth control" (Haddad and Lummis 1987: 142).

And a female Lebanese Muslim immigrant reports:

I did not know what the stance of my mosque was on birth control. So I asked the *imam*. He said that if the contraceptive is not long-term, like when they tie the tubes, it is not *haram*.

But if you do something long term that would permanently destroy your chance to have children, that's *haram*" (Haddad and Lummis 1987: 142).

There is sufficient support for the possibility of using birth control under certain circumstances that some members of the American Muslim community do not feel it is essentially un-Islamic. The moderate view suggests that if there is a legitimate reason for needing to limit the number of children in a family, and if it can be done without unnecessary suffering on anyone's part, it should be seen as within the general purview of Islamic acceptability. This is not to deny the fact, however, that birth control without a good reason is unacceptable, and that Muslims have always put great value on the desirability of increasing the Muslim population within a given family and for the enhancement of the global community.

Raising Children

The issue of how to raise children in the context of Western society is one of the more serious problems facing Arab Muslims. If children are sent to public schools they quickly learn the values of the prevailing society that many Arab families disavow. Some Muslim communities are trying to set up parochial schools where students can learn Islamic values as well as become educated in the academic disciplines. There is great difference of opinion, however, as to whether or not this is advisable. Some question the possibility of providing education as thorough and good as is available in many of the public school systems in America. And some are worried about the costs of such private education. Others are concerned that the training provided in an Islamic school might be too conservative and fear that harboring children in an Islamic environment might make it more difficult for them to integrate into American society when such integration is finally necessary. As one Muslim parent said:

We discussed [parochial education] in our mosque, and I was opposed to an Islamic school instead of public school for my children because I think that doing something like that would tend to alienate them from the rest of the community, instead of integrating them, and any lack of confidence they had about being Muslim would make it worse (Haddad and Lummis 1987: 15).

For those who are particularly concerned with establishing a home atmosphere conducive to learning and understanding the Islamic way of

life there is abundant literature available. One can read how to maintain an Islamic atmosphere, what are acceptable Islamic standards of behavior, and how to set an example of sound Muslim family life in which parents show respect and consideration for each other and for their children. Parents are encouraged to regulate the activities of their children, especially during their leisure time, and are urged to bring a Muslim child into contact with other Muslims at every possible occasion. By involving themselves in activities such as working in local or national Muslim organizations, teaching in Islamic schools, or working on specifically Islamic projects parents can model for their children the importance of relating commitment to activity and can demonstrate specific ways in which the Islamic ideal of care for the community can be lived.

Muslims are concerned that because of the high incidence of broken homes in American society, and because both parents are so often working, their children will not see among their non-Muslim friends families who do things together as a unit. Members of Muslim families are expected to spend as much time with each other as possible, both in the home and doing outside activities. A girl is encouraged to be a companion to her mother going on shopping trips and other kinds of outings, planning meals and family activities and talking with her about what is going on in her life. Boys may enjoy being involved in sporting activities with their fathers or participating in some way in their professional lives. Arab children are expected to relate to members of their family as other children might relate to friends made at school or in the neighborhood. They join in family social activities more frequently than do other American children, participating, for example, in dinners or parties rather than retiring to another room to watch television. Parents are warned not to use television as a kind of babysitter and to monitor very closely the programs that their children watch. Fearing the separation from family context that they see happening in many American families, Arab Muslims hope that by keeping their children involved with them in as many ways as possible they can transmit to them the values of close family life in an Islamic environment.

An emphasis on solid family life as the nucleus of a vibrant and smoothly functioning society is, of course, not exclusive to practicing Muslims. It is shared by members of all of America's religious communities, and while many Americans appear to be adjusting to what is called the

breakdown of the family there is much in American culture—structural, emotional and ideological—that continues to support the family as an ideal.

❧ *Observation of American Holidays*

One of the issues with which Muslim parents must deal is the degree of involvement they allow their children, and themselves, in some of the holidays celebrated in the American context. Earlier generations of Arabs in this country tended to participate in many of the holidays observed by the rest of the culture without careful discrimination of what might or might not run counter to Islamic values. Under the guidance of more conservative *imams* and the influence of more recent immigrants, they are now raising questions about the appropriateness of celebrating some of these occasions. Some holidays are considered questionable because they tend to foster a sense of self-centeredness in children that may not be advisable. Some see that birthday celebrations, for example, lead to an exaggerated sense of personal importance. They encourage an attitude that recognizes that birth, life, and death are gifts from God and nothing deserving of special congratulation. Recognizing the pressures of living in a society in which school children are highly fussed over on their birthdays, most parents will acknowledge the importance of some recognition of this occasion.

Valentine's Day presents another kind of problem. On the one hand many Arab Muslims appreciate it as a way of stressing the importance of a loving relationship between spouses in the family context, as they do Mother's and Father's Days. On the other hand, many feel that because Valentine's Day has become so commercialized it cheapens and even vulgarizes relationships and promotes cheap romanticism in young boys and girls. Clearly the focus on "romantic" attachments between young people raises warning flags to Muslims who are not planning to allow their children to date and be involved romantically at an early age. Some have suggested that if valentine cards must be exchanged at school a child should be encouraged to give them only to good friends of the same sex. Such people feel that attendance at Valentine's Day parties should be discouraged.

For the most part Easter is simply ignored in the Islamic community,

with the exception of possibly allowing children to participate in egg hunts. Parents are urged to explain to their children that this is a Christian holiday that is not related to Islam or Muslims. Memorial Day and the Fourth of July are observed by most Arab Muslims as occasions for family picnics and celebrations as well as for affirming their membership in American society. The Fourth of July serves as a reminder to many of the ideals that they expect American society to live up to, and sometimes of the disappointment that they feel with the directions in which they see the society presently going. Halloween is acceptable if children observe strict rules and go trick-or-treating with their parents; children are especially encouraged to join the UNICEF efforts at this time. Thanksgiving again provides an opportunity for affirming family solidarity and an occasion for thanking God for the blessings given to the Islamic community as well as to the American nation.

Christmas is perhaps the most problematic of the American holidays for Muslims. While some have emphasized that they share the appreciation for the birth of Jesus from the Virgin Mary, and thus can join in recognition of that event, they are increasingly pained at the extreme commercialization of Christmas in the United States. The extent to which they see Christmas intended as a celebration of the birth of "the Christian God" is also a problem for Muslims. This, of course, is anathema in the Muslim understanding. These problems have led to an increasing feeling among members of the Arab Muslim community that they should not observe Christmas. Some Muslims do celebrate Christmas in ways similar to those of secular or unchurched Christians, with a tree and exchange of presents. As one of them put it, "After all, Jesus is our Prophet."

For Christian wives of Muslim men a lack of enthusiasm for Christmas, or refusal to allow its celebration in the home, can be painful. And when Muslim children are exposed, at school and in numerous other ways, to the excitement of having a Christmas tree, receiving presents, and talking to Santa Claus, they may find it hard to understand why their own family has decided to ignore this holiday. The growth of the Muslim community in America and the immigration of many who are committed to a more culturally defined Islam have led many families who earlier used to have trees and exchange gifts to decide not to do it anymore. Children are taught that Muslims have their own holidays (*eid*s) and that it is not

necessary for them to try to participate in Christian celebrations. As one Muslim has commented:

When we came to this country in 1973, one of my daughters was three years old. When she was four years old, that was the first Christmas for her. In our neighborhood there were no other Muslims. She was playing in other kids' houses and she saw Christmas lights and all sorts of things there. She asked me why our holiday doesn't have Christmas trees and lights. I tried to make her understand right there, saying, "Now look, they are Christians. They have their religion and they should celebrate it. We have our religion and we have our celebrations at that time." From then on and until today, every *eid*, even if sometimes I can't afford it, I buy each of my children a gift (Haddad and Lummis 1987: 95).

❧ *Women and Work*

Muslim families are concerned that their children learn to accommodate traditional Islamic values with the values of the culture in which they must live. They recognize that what seems to work in an Arab culture in which Muslims are a majority may need to be modified in Western society. And, they recognize that, in their home countries, significant changes are taking place in ways that also serve to call into question some traditional Islamic norms. One of the areas in which there is a great deal of conversation, in virtually all Islamic communities today, is that of women and work. Should they work outside of the home? If so, what occupations are or are not appropriate for them? And what are the practical limitations on Arab immigrant women to finding jobs in many areas of this country?

The traditional Islamic view that women belong in the home finds expression in much contemporary counsel offered to Muslim families. Again Muhammad Abdul-Rauf:

To make the gentle woman who is to be loved and adored the source of authority which exudes awe and instills fear and require her to struggle for her living and for the living of her male partner would be unjust. The dependent male would renege and be relegated from his virile nature to that of a

weak, meek creature. Yielding to an aggressive wife, he would have no legitimate outlet for his ego and innate aggressiveness or he might seek unhealthy outlets in drugs and assaults on society (1977: 61).

For many families the relegation of the wife exclusively to the domain of the home is neither desirable nor practical. Economic realities in America, as in many Arab countries, necessitate her finding some way to augment the family's income. But for many Muslims it is clear that some jobs are simply not acceptable for women. For those with limited education, for example, a natural place to look for a position might be in a restaurant. But the Muslim prohibition against the consumption of both alcohol and pork products make it difficult to work in establishments in which one or both are served. "I think being a waitress is fun," said one woman, "but then I am not serving drinks. Also, I couldn't work in a place that serves pork, it would turn me off. I can't stand to touch the stuff." Such concerns, of course, relate to both men and women as they try to avoid putting themselves in situations that might compromise what they understand to be the regulations, and the value structure, of Islam.

In some areas the reality is that a significant number of Arab immigrants, male and female, do not have the education, skills or language preparation to equip them to participate in the workforce. Barbara Aswad notes in a study of Arab immigrant women in Michigan that such factors as fewer part-time jobs, the inability of many women to see themselves in the workplace, and "increasing Islamic values operating in a host country which lacks premarital chastity values" all come to play in making it difficult for many women to secure outside employment (Aswad 1994).

In general it can be said that the more conservative the family, the less likely the idea of a woman working outside the home unless it is a real economic necessity will be accepted. These families are also the ones that place a high premium on women dressing in a modest fashion. These issues, thus, become related, and it is clear that for many Muslims the question of how women dress in the workplace is essential to the acceptance of the occupation. The other major criterion for conservative Muslims is the extent to which a woman will be put into close contact with men on the job. Occupations that are respectable and allow a woman to function in a primarily female context are most desirable, such as teaching in a girl's school or serving as a doctor to other women. There seems to be a

clear correlation between the length of time an Arab immigrant has spent in America and the degree to which she, and her family, accept the idea of her being professionally employed. Implicit in the general understanding of the woman's role is the expectation that whether or not she works outside of the home she still has primary responsibility for the care of children and management of the household.

❧ *Appropriate Dress*

Perhaps few issues are of more interest in the Arab immigrant community these days than that of appropriate dress for women. It is apparent that the concern in many Arab countries that women dress "Islamically" has strongly influenced the attitude that Arab Muslims in the United States and Canada adopt toward their dress. The influence of conservative *imams* and other members of a community may be helpful in encouraging women who have not heretofore done so to adopt modes of clothing that provide a more complete covering. Yusuf al-Qaradawi, in a manual entitled *The Lawful and the Prohibited in Islam*, at the beginning of his section on appropriate dress for the Muslim woman cites this narrative from the Prophet:

I will not be a witness for two types of people who are destined for the Fire: people with whips . . . who beat the people . . . and women who, although clothed, are yet naked, seducing and being seduced, their hair styled like the tilted humps of camels. These will not enter the Garden nor will its fragrance reach them.⁴

Al-Qaradawi continues with his assurance that the Prophet did not appreciate seeing a woman wearing a man's clothing, nor vice versa, and that women should not pluck their eyebrows, wear wigs and hairpieces, dye their hair, or otherwise interfere with their God-given attributes. (Among the suggestions of appropriate dress for females is one that advises girls going swimming in public places to wear a long-sleeved tunic and head-covering.)

In some cases Muslim women consider such interpretations to be ridiculous and inappropriate. Women who have long worn Western dress often deeply resent the criticism that they hear from others. An American born Arab woman expresses her concern this way:

Women are always encouraged in and out of the mosque to cover their hair and wear long dresses. . . . Men can wear what they please pretty much but they are fussy about clothing of the women in the mosque. Now I think women who go to the mosque to pray should be covered; I don't think any woman would go in there with a short skirt or short sleeves, or what they call these saris with so much showing or not have their head covered. But—how women dress outside of the mosque is their own private business. I don't want to go to college with my head covered, and wearing a short skirt does not make me a bad Muslim. I am a Muslim and I am proud to say it, but I want to say it in ways other than dressing in obnoxious clothing. I want to blend in as far as my clothes go. I want to look normal (Haddad and Lummis 1987: 133).

The double standard of wearing one kind of dress in the mosque and another on the street also applies, for some Arab women, to the difference in their work and their home clothing. Hermansen speaks of the sense of "schizophrenia" some women feel when they are forced to change from looking like other American women at work to clothing demanded of them when they are in contact with other Muslims (1991: 193). In general Arab Muslim women are less likely to favor wearing conservative clothing in public than those from some other ethnic groups, and thus are more likely to find themselves caught in the middle, between their desires to assimilate into American society, and the pressures to be "Islamically acceptable."

The strains on the Arab Muslim family in America today can be great as members continue to struggle with their Muslim, and Arab, identity, and various kinds of problems can surface. Children may resent the pressures to remain within the family and may finally rebel. Younger people, especially, may have difficulty understanding the fact that traditional Arab family structures leave little room for personal privacy, a right highly valued in American society. And like other members of Western society, Arab Muslims struggle with the care of the elderly. The growing trend in America to move older people out of the home into retirement and nursing-care units cuts directly against the Islamic values of honoring, respecting and caring for the senior members of one's family. As one young woman immigrant says:

I personally could not put an elderly relative in a nursing home. But I can understand how Muslims do. I have seen women in this country going out and working eight-hour shifts, taking care of three kids, cooking dinner, doing the washing, and after a while also taking care of the person who is bedridden and needs constant attention. . . . But personally, I just feel that a person in a nursing home is doomed to die, there is no reason to live (Haddad and Lummis 1987: 87).

Yet the realities of American mobility and the trend towards more retirement homes in the society have led at least one Muslim community with a substantial number of second- and third-generation members to include a plan for construction of a home for the elderly in their community adjacent to the mosque.

Islam and Feminism

One of the greatest strains on the family and on Muslim society in general in this country may indeed come when Arab Muslim women find themselves caught in some of the kinds of feminist discussions that have been so prevalent in American society in the last few decades. Whether or not feminism is compatible with Islamic values depends, of course, on how one defines those elements that make up a feminist point of view. What is clear is that much of what is valued in Islamic society is held up to criticism and even ridicule by some in the West who cannot seem to free themselves from unfortunate kinds of stereotyping. Nouha al-Hegelan describes what she calls the "born yesterday assumption" of many Western women.

Westerners begin by comparing the Arab/Moslem woman to her sisters in the West. Using Western women as a standard is only part of the insult. The injury is magnified by the added assumption that the Arab woman began her struggle yesterday—as if she was somehow born whole out a newly tapped oil well—a veiled, uncivilized non-entity (n.d.: 2).

What is increasingly clear to Arab women in the United States is that whatever they may think about matters of women's rights, it is incumbent upon them to formulate their ideas, not only in conversation with Western women, but in clear distinction to much of what those women hold to be valid.

Azizah al-Hibri, a Lebanese lawyer/professor and spokeswoman for the maintenance of Islamic values, has cited several concerns she has had when interacting with American feminists. First, she says, the American feminist movement tends to see its own experience as applying cross-culturally to all women. Second, even educated American women, well-intentioned in trying to learn about Islam, become frustrated when they cannot translate a Muslim position into their own Judeo-Christian experience. Third, many of the concerns of Arab Muslim women are clearly political in nature, and in her experience, al-Hibri has found American feminists unwilling to risk involvement in those issues.

Tactical considerations at home override the ideology of sisterhood; and to appease their conscience, American feminists turn with even greater vigor to denounce U.S. policy in Nicaragua, hoping to drown with their loud voices the faint moaning of dying Muslim women in the East (1988: 7).

Few Arab women have been as articulate as al-Hibri, but more and more are realizing that there are clear distinctions between the values of American feminism as it has classically been formulated and Muslim values and ideals, and that it is possible to formulate a feminism that both allows for freedom of opportunity for Muslim women and does not compromise basic Islamic values. They see that Western feminism is often politically unaware or unmotivated; that it focusses on freedom and opportunity for the individual rather than for the welfare of the larger group; that it emphasizes sexual rather than cultural identity; that consciousness-raising, for Western women, is based on the desire to avoid exploitation by males, while, for Arab women, it is to avoid exploitation by outsiders; that Western feminism is often anti-male in ways that Arab Muslims consider degrading and undesirable; that Western feminists apparently value sexual liberation and identity of sex roles in ways that are repugnant to Muslims. "I am looking for an alternative to Western feminism," says Negiba Megademeni, a young Tunisian Muslim. "Sexual behavior that may strike an American feminist as liberated may strike me as just another form of slavery, and a rather neurotic form at that."⁵

All of these concerns, then, are part of the conversations taking place on many levels throughout Arab Muslim society in the United States and Canada. The importance of the family, of the respective roles of women and men in society, of socializing children in order that they might avoid

the problems of Western society, of finding appropriate ways to care for the elderly—all of these issues necessitate formulating responses to the pressures of American society that neither compromise the ideals of Islam nor take refuge in what some consider to be an unwieldy and unrealistically conservative dogmatism. Resolution and common agreement on many of these matters, at present, is less likely than the realization that a range of responses is both appropriate to the rapidly changing contemporary Western context, and possible to justify under the umbrella of an Islamic system designed for the universal application of the faith.

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