The Erosion of Islamic Ideals in the Creation of Modern North American Muslim Communities

By Hooman Keshavarzi, Adjunct Faculty of Psychology, Argosy University (Schaumburg, IL)

To understand the challenges and problems common to the Muslims in developing an Islamic community in the West, one must understand the Islamic perspective on human interaction and the concept of community. As conceptualized by psychologists, cultures are divided into the individualistic and collectivistic dichotomy (Oyserman, Sakamoto & Lauffer, 1998). Collectivism places an emphasis on the extended family, interdependence, humility, authority, putting the needs of the community above one’s own, and a strong interconnected community. Individualism on the other hand is rooted in the nuclear family, autonomy, independence, and an ultimate focus on the self (Oyserman, Sakamoto & Lauffer, 1998). The Islamic culture can be viewed as being collectivistic in nature. The rules of Islam have also been fashioned to complement this worldview. Therefore, if one does not understand the Islamic perspective with regard to the community, they may have trouble understanding its rules. This is because the North American community at large is the opposite of the Islamic community. The concept of individualism where families are isolated in the nuclear family does not exist in Islam, nor is it compatible with its rules. This is also the case with gender roles and interactions in Islam. If one does not understand the Islamic perspective with regard to the complementary roles between the genders in this community, it will be difficult to understand the rules designed for such a system. For example, Islam divides the domains of the world into two spheres of life, the public and the private. The public sphere of life is the domain of men, the private sphere that of women. Therefore, the man is supposed to be the traditional breadwinner and the woman a homemaker who takes care of the children and maintains the household. Each one can be seen as a guest in one another’s domain. The woman, when entering the public, is expected to remain “private” by concealing herself and metaphorically taking her house with her (Popenoe, 2004). By this, she communicates that she is outside her domain for some necessity. On the other hand, when the man enters the home, he is made aware of the happenings of the household and is informed of the responsibilities that need to be carried out in the household. Both report to one another about the happenings of one another’s domain and take counsel on their respective roles. These gender roles can be characterized as complementary within the system (Popenoe, 2004), as responsibilities are distributed equally. However, in keeping consistent with the collectivistic nature of Islam, the woman does not remain isolated in her home, as is the case with the attempt to apply the rules of Islam in the modern North-American Muslim family. She rather receives social and emotional support through the proximity and availability of the individuals within her community, which include her friends, family, and neighbors. Also, she does not feel isolated as a mother because Islam instructs families to have lots of children and to support one another. Essentially, communities and extended families raise children, in stark contrast to the nuclear-family structure, where the woman would be isolated in her house with her children. This way both children and mothers have social outlets.
Additionally, the emotional and social attachment between the spouses in the modern era is unprecedented. This has increasingly become the case with the formation of the nuclear family. This is a natural attempt to compensate for the lack of a community, thus attempting to plug in the family as a micro community. This complicates matters for Muslims, in this type of system; the woman does not have any social supporters other than her husband. Consequently she becomes dependent upon him for support. When he is not available or unable to provide this support it creates tensions in the relationship. Furthermore, if a man desires an additional wife, this attacks the wife even more. She feels that she is being abandoned by her strongest and only companion. This exacerbates her feelings of isolation and may cause depression. Traditionally, Muslims were not as attached to their spouses as they are in the present North-American Muslim family. This is because Muslims in the East historically have had a strong sense of community. The spouses were not the only members of their community. It would not be uncommon for men to have more than one wife, travel frequently on business trips, study religion, and spend time in the community. Women, on the other hand, would frequent one another within their communities, spend time with their extended family, and let their children stay with their grandparents, have women’s religious gatherings, lessons and entertain guests.

In light of all of this, it is evident that the current Muslim community in North America can be likened to atoms that have not yet formed a molecule. Muslims are fitting the mold of the nuclear family and are becoming acculturated as individualists while attempting to follow the rules designed for collectivism. This is dangerous and flies in the face of the Islamic perspective. The first generation of Muslim immigrants have attempted to replicate some of the collectivistic notions in North America, but most have resulted in communities based more on ethnicity than religion. Immigration to this part of the world was for most not a religious venture, but upon arrival it became clear that stronger religious practice became a necessity. As a result, clerics were brought over to fill the functions of the mosque and were restricted to just that. This can be likened to the Christian concept of the separation of Church and State, where the primary function of the churches is ritual worship. Because of the diversity of the North-American Muslim community, this can only maintain itself for a short while before it breaks down.

Finally, it is necessary that Muslims not attempt to assimilate into the normative patterns of the nuclear-family construct, but aim instead for a higher goal. This requires a transition toward re-establishing a community rooted in the essence of religion and a lesser or secondary focus on the legalistic tradition. So long as the foundations of an Islamic community is absent in North-American communities, the symptoms of depression, marital dissatisfaction, gender-role confusion and distress will remain. Psychological literature suggests that the strongest elements of religion which functions to alleviate psychological turmoil and permits positive mental health are related to the degree of social support and networking that religion has to offer (Adamczyk & Palmer, 2008; Gorsuch, 1995). Muslim communities must, perhaps now more than ever, serve as a model for Americans Muslims and non-Muslims alike.

**References**


