

What can we do about Islam phobia in America today? BS Foad, M.D 2010

Most Americans are ignorant about the true teachings of Islam, and get their news from clips on TV. The news media are full of information about “Muslim terrorists” and “Muslim extremists” and portray a picture of anger and hatred towards America. Also the suicide attacks by so called Muslims in Iraq, Afghanistan after the 9/11 incident in this country have painted Islam in a negative way. Most Americans feel that Muslims hate the US and are intent on harming Americans, though they know very little about the religion of Islam

Some right wing pundits and ministers have labeled Islam as a bad violent religion. This wave of Anti-Islam is similar to the “Hate the Jews “phenomenon” years ago.

What do we American Muslims here do about this attack on our religion? To say it is wrong and biased is an understatement. To get angry and frustrated does not help. To blame the news media is useless. The Qur’an gives us guidelines as how we should behave:

Ye shall certainly be tried and tested in your possessions and in your personal selves; and ye shall certainly hear much that will grieve you, from those who received the Book before you and from those who worship many gods. But if ye persevere patiently, and guard against evil, then that will be a determining factor in all affairs.

Al-Imran 3: 186

There are 3 guidelines from the Qur’an:

- 1-Patient perseverance
- 2-Do not do wrong, rather be proactive and work hard
- 3-Understand that this is a long process that requires resolve and commitment

Patient perseverance

Patience in Islam is not a passive attitude in which you play dead and say: “There is nothing that I can do, Fate is already determined”. This is a wrong understanding of Patience in Islam. Patience means we work hard to change our fate, and that we never give up, and that we always have hope and trust in God.

We will be subjected to tests and trials in order to find out who is best in deeds, and who will strive and not give up, in contrast to others who give up and do nothing. To succeed and gain God’s pleasure we must show our true faith in the face of adversity:

Did ye think that ye would enter Heaven without Allah testing those of you who fought hard (in His Cause) and remained steadfast?

Al-Imran 3: 142

And We shall try you until We test those among you who strive their utmost and persevere in patience; and We shall try your reported (mettle).

Muhammad 47: 31

and never give up hope of Allah's soothing Mercy: truly no one despairs of Allah's soothing Mercy, except those who have no faith."

Yusuf 12: 87

We must understand that to be tested and tried is going to happen because it is the law of Allah, and because this test and trial is good for us. It will shape our character and behavior and we will emerge better Muslims, more determined and with stronger faith in Allah because of these tests and trials. We learn the value and meaning of patience and perseverance and coping with difficulty. When we are subjected to these tests and trials we are not surprised, rather we expect it and we know that we are on the right track. It is an opportunity for us to show our faith and commitment. Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) was asked: O Messenger of Allah who is tested most severely? He said: (The prophets, then the most righteous. A person is tested according to his faith. If his faith is strong, then his test will be harsher. A person may be tested often that he walks on earth carrying no sin. If a person's faith is weak, he is tested according to his faith) Ahmad & Bokhari

The methods that the enemies of Islam use differ with time. Sometimes it is an attack on the messenger and his character. Sometimes it is an attack on the Qur'an throwing doubts about its origin, or whether its teachings are valid at our times. Sometimes it is an attack on Muslims that they live in the past, or that they hate non-Muslims, or that they want to force others to accept Islam against their will, or that they want to enforce Shari'a law in America. But the concept that Islam will be distorted and that Muslims will be challenged remains true today as it has been in the past.

It is important to understand Qur'anic concepts rather than follow literal words. The Qur'an gives general guidelines, but does not restrict us with too many details. This way Qur'anic guidance is applicable at all times and for every civilization. The concept here is that we will face resistance and distortion and grief from those who do not share our faith. Therefore, expect this to happen and prepare for it. The Qur'an gives the solution which is summarized here in three basic concepts:

- Patient perseverance
- Not doing wrong and how to combat wrong information and wrong behavior
- Understand that this process is difficult and will take time, and that the road
Is long and requires resolve and commitment

How we apply these three solutions will differ according to our particular situation and where we live in and the norms of the society, and how best we can talk to, reach out to and interact with others

Taqwa or guarding against evil here means two things:

1-Working hard to correct misconceptions

2-It is important to have open Islamic centers and to reach out to the larger Community

So we learn from our mistakes, and we double our efforts. If we fail, we try again in different ways. And we learn from the experience of others who passed through similar experiences. The blacks were discriminated against for a long time. Civil rights were not won by being passive, but through sacrifice and hard work and patient perseverance. Jews were discriminated against, but they immersed themselves in social services and developed close ties with the media, and became engaged in all aspects of American life, especially medicine, the law, banking, movies and worked hard to gain the respect of others. Catholics were discriminated against and also worked hard to establish institutions and services that help the whole community. Therefore, we have our work cut for us. We have to work hard on several fronts:

1-It is not enough to have Muslim doctors. They must show that they care for the whole community by offering free clinics and being advocates for their patients

2-We must have Muslim lawyers and judges

3-We must have Muslim teachers and educators and university professors

4-We must have Muslim politicians

5-We must have Muslims in the news media as reporters, anchors, TV personalities and commentators

6-We must have Muslim musicians and TV stars and directors and producers

7-We must have Muslim social organizations that help not only Muslims, but the whole community

8-We must come up with Muslim answers to the problems facing our country: poverty, lack of decent jobs, decline of morality and ethics, drugs and the glorification of money and fame

This is the meaning of the Qur'anic verse: "Guard against evil, or be God-conscious". In this context Taqwa is not just a feeling in the heart, but it is a call for action and it is confirming our faith in what we say and what we do. It is responding to the problem that we face with positive action and changing our situation by our struggle and effort.

The verse also means that we do not respond to wrong by doing wrong ourselves. Surely there is bias and prejudice. Do we respond to this by hating those who out of ignorance believe that all Muslims are bad people? Or do we work hard to show that we are good people and that we do not have evil intentions and that we go out of our way to help everyone in our community!

Nor can Goodness and Evil be equal. Repel (Evil) with what is better: then will he between whom and thee was hatred become as it were thy friend and intimate!

Fusselat 41: 34

Repel evil with that which is best: We are well-acquainted with the things they say.

Al-Mumenoun 23: 96

And:

Tell those who believe, to forgive those who do not look forward to the Days of Allah: it is for Him to recompense (for good or ill) each People according to what they have earned.

Al-Jatheyra 45: 14

When Allah ordered Musa and Haroon to go to Pharaoh He told them to talk to him in a good way, and not be harsh or severe:

"Go, both of you to Pharaoh, for he has indeed transgressed all bounds;

Ta Ha 20: 43

"But speak to him mildly; perchance he may take warning or fear (Allah)"

Ta Ha 20: 44

We can see that wrong reaction is counter-productive and does not solve the problem. When Salman Rushdie published the "Satanic verses"; and when the Danish Cartoons were published, what was the reaction of the Muslims all over the world: Emotional outcry and violent demonstrations showing their anger that their beloved Prophet (PBUH) was criticized and his character and mission distorted. Their reaction did not serve any purpose except to show anger. It was a golden opportunity to explain to the whole world how the Qur'an was preserved and safeguarded in oral and written forms. To explain that scribes were selected and that their job was to write down verses of the Qur'an inspired to Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) is important. Others were entrusted with memorization of the Qur'an. If we understand that few verses of the Qur'an were revealed each day, and that these verses were recited in prayer and were studied and applied, it is not difficult to understand that many of the Prophet's companions memorized the

whole Qur'an by heart. Before the Prophet's death the Qur'an was preserved and safeguarded both in oral and written form. This is quite different from the Bible which was written hundred of years after Moses and Jesus died.

When the Danish Cartoons were published making fun of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) and portraying him as a war monger, again the Muslim reaction was wrong. We should have shown from the Prophet's life story and from his sayings his gentle, kind caring nature. We should have shown the noble character of the Prophet of mercy, that the Qur'an praised:

And thou (standest) on an exalted standard of character.
Al-Qalam 68: 4

Ye have indeed in the Messenger of Allah a beautiful pattern (of conduct) for any one whose hope is in Allah and the Final Day, and who engages much in the praise of Allah.
Al-Ahzab 33: 21

It is part of the Mercy of Allah that thou dost deal gently with them. Wert thou severe or harsh-hearted, they would have broken away from about thee: so pass over (their faults), and ask for (Allah's) forgiveness for them; and consult them in affairs (of moment). Then, when thou hast taken a decision, put thy trust in Allah. For Allah loves those who put their trust (in Him).

Al-Imran 3: 159

When the minister in Florida threatened to burn the Qur'an again the response was wrong. Rather than giving him publicity and asking him to reconsider he should have been ignored. He would have burned only paper. The Qur'an cannot be removed from the hearts and minds of Muslims all over the world. The Qur'an states:

Nay, here are Signs self-evident in the hearts of those endowed with knowledge: and none but the unjust reject Our Signs.
Al-Ankabut 29: 49

We need to have our Islamic centers open to the public, and we need to reach out, educate others about Islam and become proactive

We must learn from the experience of minorities before us that faced similar bias and prejudice. They immersed themselves in American society and became actively engaged. People no longer feared them and understood that they were good people trying to work hard and raise their families and are an integral part of the community. This process involves several steps:

- 1-Having open Islamic centers that welcomes non-Muslims and explains the basic Teachings of Islam
- 2-Having educational programs for non-Muslims to explain the true teachings of Islam, not the twisted concepts shown on the news media portraying the wrong ideology of the terrorists
- 3-Engaging the community at large, reaching out to help those who need our help among the poor, needy and disadvantaged
- 4-Working with social and civic institutions for proper common goals
- 5-Collaborating with schools, colleges and universities
- 6-Working with non-Muslim clergy for better understanding and cooperation and stressing the many things that we have in common with Christians and Jews
- 7-Developing a network of social support structures that helps not only Muslims, but also non-Muslims
- 8-Developing the political base that organizes Muslims and raises political awareness
- 9-Having the ability to respond quickly to the news media, and developing good working relationship with them

It is this concerted effort and sub-organizations that will be extremely useful in changing the image of Muslims in America. It will take years, but the work must start now. We are lacking in organizational skills and in the spirit of volunteering, but we must learn, adapt and evolve.

If we elect to close our Islamic centers and just concentrate on our own members, and not worry about the larger community, then we are signing our death warrant. Others will be fearful of our intentions, and in this charged climate it is easy to fuel sentiments of hate, bias and prejudice.

Our faith dictates that we become actively involved. The Qur'an states:

And say: "Work (righteousness): soon will Allah observe your work, and His Messenger, and the Believers: soon will ye be brought back to the Knower of what is hidden and what is open: then will He show you the truth of all that ye did."

At-Tawba 9: 105

It is only through hard work that we may be able to change our fate. The Qur'an states:

Verily never will Allah change the condition of a people until they change it themselves (with their own souls).

Ar-Ra'd 13: 11

Do not expect immediate results: it is a long process that requires hard work, resolve, patience and commitment

Building something takes time and effort and is a slow process. Therefore, we should not be looking for immediate results. On the contrary our effort and our bridges that we built over years could be destroyed within minutes by those who are ignorant and claim to be Muslims. All it takes is a terrorist attack that kills innocent people or applying Shari'a in a wrong way that is not suitable for our times, then Muslims will be looked upon as hateful ruthless people, and Islam will be labeled as a religion living in the past, rigid and irrelevant to our lives today.

It is disappointing to find out that the work we have done for years being demolished in few minutes. But we cannot give up or stop our efforts to educate, work with and reach to non-Muslims. To give up is against faith in God and it means that we do not have true faith. The Qur'an explains on the tongue of Jacob (Israel):

and never give up hope of Allah's soothing Mercy: truly no one despairs of Allah's soothing Mercy, except those who have no faith."

Yusuf 12; 87

We must serve God not only in good times, but also when it is difficult. We cannot give up and turn back when times are tough:

There are among men some who serve Allah, as it were, on the verge: if good befalls them, they are, therewith, well content; but if a trial comes to them, they turn on their faces; they lose both this world and the Hereafter: that is loss for all to see!

Al-Hajj 22: 11

Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) said:

(I wonder for the affairs of the believer: All his affair is good for him, and such fate can only happen to someone who has faith. If he is enjoying a blessing from

God, he is grateful, and this is good for him. And if he is experiencing difficulty, he patiently persevere and this is good for him)
Narrated by Muslim.

Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) used to say in his prayer:
(O Allah I ask to make me steadfast in my affairs, and to make me resolute and committed in doing what is right; and ask you to make me grateful for Your blessings, and to be able to worship You in the best way; and I ask you a sound heart, and a truthful tongue)
Nesa'ee, Termedhi & Ahmad

To be steadfast in doing right and in following the truth, and not worrying that others are not helping us or supporting us is explained by Prophet Muhammad (PBUH):
(There will be a group of my nation holding on to the truth (at all times); those who do not agree with them or support them do not harm them (or detract from their work), till the will of Allah comes to pass)
Muslim, Termedhi, Ahmad & Bokhari

This Hadeeth tells us:

- To continue our work despite lack of support is important. We cannot give Up because others do not agree
- We should always follow the truth
- The will of Allah will come to pass, nothing can prevent it. Allah has full Control
- This Hadeeth gives us hope and encouragement that as long as we confirm The truth in our work we do not worry about criticism or lack of progress, or being unable to achieve our objectives. This will come in due time, when Allah wills such a change

What to do about Islamo- Phobia?

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The news media portray Islam in a negative way because of the actions of terrorists who call themselves Muslims, and most Americans are ignorant about the teachings of Islam, and get their information from TV, hence they view Muslims as hateful people, and view Islam as a violent backward religion.

The Qur'an tells us how to combat this bias and prejudice through patient perseverance, doing good and not wronging others, and emphasizes that this process is long and requires resolve and commitment:

"You will be tested and tried in your possessions and your own souls, and you will hear a lot that will grieve you from those who were given Divine revelation before you, and from those who worship multiple gods; but if you patiently persevere, and guard against evil, indeed this requires resolve and commitment" Al-Imran 3: 187

Patient perseverance

Patience in Islam is an active process where we work hard to change our fate, and that we never give up, and that we always have hope and trust in God.

"And We shall try you until We test those among you who strive their utmost and persevere in patience, and We shall try your reported mettle" Muhammad 47: 31

"And never give up hope of Allah's soothing mercy: truly no one gives up of Allah's mercy except those who have no faith" Yusuf 12: 87

Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) told us that every person is tested according to his faith: if his faith is strong, his test will be more harsh (Ahmad & Bokhari). Therefore, we should expect tests and trials

Taqwa or God's consciousness here refers to our efforts in correcting misconceptions about Islam and the Muslims, and in the process not doing wrong ourselves or harming others

We should learn from the experience of those who witnessed similar bias and prejudice like the blacks, Catholics and Jews. Guarding against evil or being God-Conscious or Taqwa is not just a feeling in the heart, but it is a call for action, and it is confirming our faith in what we say and what we do. We do not respond to wrong by doing wrong ourselves. Emotional reaction and anger does not solve the problem, rather contrasting the truth to the falsehood being propagated. *"And say: "Work righteousness, for God and His messenger and the believers will witness what you do" At-Tawba 9: 105*

It is only through hard work that we can change our fate. God will help us if we start helping ourselves:

"Allah will not change the condition of a people until they change themselves" Ar-Ra'd 13: 11

By explaining how the Qur'an was preserved and safe-guarded, and by explaining the teachings of the noble Qur'an and how it improves our character and behavior, we can combat myths about the Qur'an. By explaining the life story of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) and his noble gentle character, we can contrast this truth to the false image propagated in the news media. We show the truth, and at the same time demonstrate our commitment to free speech and that every person is entitled to his opinion, since there is no compulsion in Islam.

"Goodness and evil are not equal. Repel evil with what is better" Fusselat 41: 34

It is not enough to have Muslim doctors caring for their patients. We need Muslim teachers, Engineers, Lawyers, judges, journalists and people working in the arts and news media. Our social organizations and political action groups must be mobilized and the efforts of various agencies coordinated and streamlined.

Our Islamic centers should be open and we should welcome non-Muslims to our mosques and explain our Islam and what we believe in and our activities at the Islamic center. We need to reach out and work with and

collaborate with religious and civic organizations in addressing the challenges facing our community, and coming up with answers for our problems, and how we can improve life for everyone in our community. If we close our centers people around us will become suspicious and their fear will turn into prejudice. We have nothing to hide and we are loyal law-abiding citizens. The open tours at the Islamic center have been a great success story and we need more projects like this one to attract people to our center and to feel it is a good safe place.

Our youth should reach out to other kids of different faith. They need to know how to behave as a Muslim minority among a non-Muslim majority, and be proud of their faith and tradition and also of being Americans.

This process will take time and requires resolve and commitment. We can never give up or despair

There will be many set backs and failures. This should only increase our resolve as we try again and work harder.

We cannot be fair-weather people like the Qur'an described:

"There are among people some who worship God on the verge: if good befalls them, they are well content. But if a trial comes to them, they turn on their faces; they loose both this world and the Hereafter" Al-Hajj 22: 11

Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) used to say in his Du'a: (O Allah I ask you to make me firm in my affairs; and to show resolve in doing what is right; and to be grateful for Your blessings; and to serve You in the best possible way; and I ask You a sound heart and a thankful tongue) Nesa'ee, Termedhi & Ahmad.