

Experiences of a Canadian Muslim Woman.

.Kingston Community Foundation Breakfast, Dec 1/10.

I greet you with the Muslim greeting As salaamu alaikum – may peace be with you, and begin with Bismillah ur Rahman ur Raheem--- In the name of God the Beneficent, the Merciful.

I do this deliberately to show you what the fundamental principles are which must guide all Muslims--- peace, and the belief in God's beneficence and mercy, NOT Justice nor retribution nor vengeance. Whether they get practiced is another matter.

Thank you for inviting me to talk with you about my experiences as a Canadian Muslim woman.

The topic of Islam and Muslims is vast and complex and even though it is much discussed by the public and the media, for me the pervasiveness of the misunderstandings, stereotyping, and quick evaluations are disturbing and depressing. I often find that many non-Muslims have already made up their minds about Islam and Muslims, but I keep hoping that what I say will decrease prejudices.

I will not talk only of my personal experiences, but a culmination of what I have learnt from my interactions with other Canadian Muslims, also I would like to clarify that I do not speak for all Muslims nor that my interpretation of Islam is accepted by all.

Sometimes it seems to me that the latent animosity against Islam – partly due to the historical relationship - was given a new lease since the atrocities of 9/11, therefore making it almost reasonable to openly express prejudice for all things Muslim. Karen Armstrong is not the only scholar who states the Crusades have coloured the relationship between Muslims and Christians, and the negative repercussions continue to this day.

Islam as a religion is being blamed for many of the actions being perpetrated by the believers. This is not done when a person of another faith commits a crime; his religion is not faulted for his actions.

When I raise issues, I am talking about the action of a minority of Muslims, but often it is this minority's actions which attract the media's attention, and cause difficulties for all of us.

For example, it is difficult to respond to some of our youth's negative comments, when they tell us that although born here, their race, their ethnicity and certainly their Muslim names have caused them problems at schools, in employment and on the street.

It is not that each and every day in the lives of Muslims is fraught with racism but there are enough incidents to make lives difficult. Most Canadian Muslims live lives which include work, family and friends. Many are driving taxis because of difficulties in getting their credentials recognized, but many others are in professions and businesses.

Allow me to tell you a little about Islam. It is obviously not monolithic, homogenous nor lacking in diversity, no matter how hard the extreme conservative influences want to push us into a solid mass of believers.

Islam for me, and for most others, is the message of the unicity of God, the equality of all, and the compassion and the social justice that guides my life. The Quran assumes that women are intelligent, capable of making our own decisions and accountable for ourselves. This may sound strange to you because tragically many of the cultures and practices of Muslim majority countries belie what the Quran teaches.

I like the description of God as Light. I love the verse which states that God has ordained mercy on Himself and has breathed His spirit into humankind. I like the fact there is no clergy or hierarchy, and as a believer I have a direct relationship with the Creator. Islam also accepts that messengers- known and unknown- have been sent to all peoples. Islam is actually simple but that is not what gets practiced by some Muslims.

Like other religious texts, one can extract from the Quran what one wants. Certainly there are verses which are violent due to historical circumstances, but then there are many more which are gentle and kind. Even by accepting that the sacred text is the inspired word of God and is eternal, it is naïve and simplistic to assume that the text cannot be understood and influenced by the context of a particular historical period. This makes the text organic, evolutionary and allows for the development different interpretations, without diminishing the eternal core message.

For me as a believing woman, one of the more problematic issues is that although the Quran unequivocally states equality of all humans, it does not totally eliminate tribal patriarchal values and practices. For me these are harmful for women and girls, because we can directly relate many cultural practices - garbed in religious justification - against gender equality to this patriarchal structure of the tribe and the family.

I know these same teachings exist in other religious texts, but it seems to me that other faith communities are trying to eradicate the influences of these teachings, while we Muslims are not advancing adequately towards gender equality.

Currently there are over 700,000 Canadian Muslims, who live mostly in the larger urban areas. This is a dramatic increase of population in the last 30 years, as the Census of 1981 lists 98,165.

I love telling the story that Muslims have been in Canada since 1854, that is 13 years before Canada became a nation in 1867, and the first Muslim child, James, was born to a Scottish woman, Agnes Love. In the early 1900s, immigrants from Lebanon, Syria, and Bosnia came to Canada.

The more recent post-1960s influx of Muslims is from all parts of the world. One of the points we stress often is that there is no ONE monolithic homogenous community of Muslims. We are diverse because we come from all parts of the world, of different cultures, ethnicities and races. We continue to arrive in waves and our experiences vary a great deal. The one identifying factor is that we are all Muslims but even there our practices and beliefs differ and I think this diversity and plurality is a major strength rather than a weakness.

As there is no longer a valid concept of Christendom, there really is no such entity as the "Muslim world", nor should one juxtapose Islam against the West. Flippant and easy it may be but surely the comparison between a religion with a geographical area is problematic. One of the problems of identifying a place called the Muslim world, ignores the fact that there are minorities who are not Muslim and who must be counted as full citizens of their countries.

The defining moment for all of us has been the attacks on the United States on Sept 11/2001. The world really did shift on its axis and for many years these events will be the yardstick of how we view each other, and how global affairs will be managed by the Western countries.

For a few months after 9/11, there was some introspection in the United States, as to why a group of 19 young men from middle class Arab families would fly planes into tall buildings – symbolic of the might of the United States – but soon this introspection stopped. Absolutely, there is no rationale to justify the killing of innocent people, but the rush for revenge by the United States has led to more killings and more devastation.

Without minimizing the discrimination and racism, the picture would not be complete without discussing the actions and reactions of some Muslims. Though there are efforts made by some Muslim organizations and individuals to counteract this discrimination, sadly there are many others who are creating more difficulties than offering solutions.

I have found that we Muslims are often defensive and unwilling to look at ourselves in a sincere and critical manner. We often look to blame rather than to analyze our actions to see if there are positive steps we can take.

Through our conferences, surveys and focus groups across the country, the Canadian Council of Muslim Women has identified **a number of concerns**. By focusing on these issues I am not ignoring the wonderful work being accomplished by many Muslims which often goes unrecognized.

1. It is important to remember the context of the lives of Muslims. Almost all Muslim majority countries have been colonized, and few in the last 50 years have developed democratic institutions, have scant human rights and lots of corruption. There is high disillusionment with the West, little expectation of their own governments and therefore people have turned to religion as the best alternative for them.

The political use of Islam has a particular agenda and the rallying call of Islam as the answer to all our woes, in my opinion, has neither worked nor has it had any positive effects for peoples.

2. It behooves me to be clear that there is a vast difference between those who are very conservatives in their interpretation of Islam, and those who are extreme and shift into violence. Both these groups are on the same continuum, but they are not the same. The teachings amongst some Muslims of a narrow, literal, very traditional and intolerant interpretation of Islam is hugely problematic for many of us Muslims, because their intolerance for any but their one interpretation makes them target other Muslims and non Muslims alike.

Sadly, this teaching has far reaching ramifications as it divides Muslims by emphasizing sects, it rejects any notion of evolution and change, it harkens back to an idealized past, it insists on only one correct version of Islam, ignoring the long and wonderful history of Islamic thought, and it works within the framework of patriarchy for the family.

As you well know there is a minority who are significant in the influence they have within their own countries. It is very difficult to counter religious extremists and it is these people who turn to violence against those who disagrees with their rigid interpretations, whether they be other Muslims or minorities such as Christians or Hindus in their midst.

Sadly, it is this group which is prominent with the result that all Muslims are judged by their actions.

There is hope! Along with all these issues, there are many scholars whose academic writings present a perspective of Islam which is moderate, pluralistic and tolerant - we just have to listen to them.

3. There is an increasing message being taught that as Muslims we need to identify ourselves so distinctly that our identity does not include anything beyond this version of what it is to be Muslim. The message is that as others do not accept you, it is better therefore to self segregate and become more outwardly Muslim, to identify with your own communities, rather than trying to integrate into a society which discriminates against you and your family.

By adding more and more to our identity markers – our religious practices, our distinct values and our clothing – we are emphasizing our differences rather than our similarities with our fellow Canadians.

Our concern is that this is not only shortsighted but plain dangerous for Muslims. If we do not participate then we cannot be part of any changes.

4. We are concerned that Muslim women speak about their discrimination not just in the larger society but in many Muslim communities as well.

The number of mosques and Islamic Centres are increasing rapidly, sometimes being built by other countries who also export a particular message with their financial support.

As Muslims are a religious minority, these mosques do provide a focus for Muslims as people can gather to pray, to educate themselves and their children on Islam, and because other services such as funeral services are provided. However, sad to say, there are issues within these centres. Most are not open to practices of diversity within Islam; do not take into consideration that we are living in Canada; and last but not least, do not treat women well.

Many Muslim women want to actively participate in the leadership of the centres and are not encouraged. In many centres and mosques, gender segregation is practiced which does not advance equality of women and girls.

5. We are concerned that some of our youth are facing the double tensions of racism and the narrow intolerant teachings of some Muslims. There are some organizations on the internet whose pervasive messages influence many Canadian Muslims, especially the youth.

Because of our concerns for the youth, our organization, CCMW, has 2 projects currently, one is working in schools with Muslim girls teaching them leadership and

confidence skills, as well as developing an educational resource kit for educators. The kit is full of information on topics about Muslim girls as well as educating teachers themselves. The other project is to work with youth across Canada to teach them the value of civic engagement so that they are active in creating changes in their local communities. What this is doing is to counteract the negative influences of disengagement or any form of radicalization.

6. The concept of reasonable accommodation, originally used in employment situations, has been extended to other areas such as accommodation of the religious values and practices of newcomers.

I am grateful that in Canada we have the concepts of pluralism and accommodation rather than the old American model of assimilation. However, criticisms of Multiculturalism are growing because it seems to many that the push for cultural and religious accommodations are fragmenting the country and working against the cohesion of shared, common values as Canadians. I think there is space within a democracy for individual and group rights, but it can be a misuse of Multiculturalism if priority is given to specific group rights without considering the common good.

As Canadians we are still in the throes of defining some of our common values.

I will give you the example of polygamy to show how complex and unclear Canadian values and laws are in regard to such issues. In Canada it is a criminal act to either perform such a marriage or to be a partner in a polygamous marriage. That seems pretty clear, but when religious communities, such as the Mormons, appeal to the Charter's protection of religious freedom, then nothing is clear anymore! The B.C and federal governments have taken the case to the B.C Supreme Court as a 'constitutional reference case' to see if there are grounds for proceeding with criminal charges.

Another example is the Canadian government's new thorough and helpful Citizenship Guide which is to assist newcomers. However in the Guide, under equality of women and men they state –'barbaric cultural practices that tolerate spousal abuse, honour killing, FGM or other gender based violence will not be accepted.' I wish this was worded differently because it is implying that most of these are being practiced by Muslims. Also using specifics does not demonstrate the whole issue of violence against women nor what equality really means in Canada.

The controversial topic of what women wear is high on the agenda of reasonable accommodation. France banned the hijab in schools and is now considering the ban on the niqab. Holland and certain parts of Belgium are also considering banning it.

Quebec's introduction of Bill 94, which states that the face has to be uncovered for the receiving of government services as well as for the provision of these, is currently being consulted upon.

There is a lot of heated discussion around whether any State should prescribe women's clothing and if so, then where will this stop?

So what can be done by you and me?

May I please ask that you differentiate Muslims as individuals rather than as a cohesive group bent on destroying or colonizing the West! Don't blame Islam for the bad actions of Muslims, it is no more peaceful or violent than other faiths. Don't fall into the trap of cultural relativism as this works against us Muslim women who are trying to create changes within our communities.

Do see the larger picture of global affairs and how these impact on countries, communities and individuals.

Me? Along with many others, I continue my struggle for understanding and change within society at large and within the Muslim communities.

Thank you for listening to me and I hope there is time for some questions.