

Editorial

In July 2007, the Association of Muslim Social Scientists (AMSS) launched its new website: www.amss.net. This event signals a reinvigorated AMSS that seeks to update itself and enhance its professional image. The launch comes after several years of hard work, conducted mostly behind the scenes, on behalf of the AMSS Executive Board. Under the guidance of Dr. Rafik Beekun (president, AMSS), a recognized expert in strategic planning, AMSS has undergone a complete overhaul, from a SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats) analysis to revising its by-laws and engaging in strategic planning, to implementation.

In order to recognize the separate but related nature of Canada to the United States (it is not simply the 51st state!), as well as the prominent role being played by Canadian social scientists in AMSS, the board has suggested a new name: The Association of Muslim Social Scientists of North America. This is, of course, contingent upon the membership's pending approval of the new by-laws. In addition, this name change helps identify us in relation to our sister organizations: AMSS-UK and AMSS-France. Each association is an independent entity sharing a common name, vision, and goals. The first AMSS international conference was held in Istanbul in 2006.

One theme of AMSS' new mission statement is that the organization will serve as an enabling environment for critical dialogue and debate between Muslim and non-Muslim scholars about issues of importance to the ummah and global society at large. The ability to dialogue is currently not one of the Muslim community's strengths. Dialogue is about talking, about sitting down with people from different backgrounds in order to understand their perspective on often controversial issues. The point is not to convince them that your position is the "truth" or vice versa, but to hear them as fellow human beings and have them hear you. As the National Coalition for Dialogue and Deliberation points out, "dialogue is not about winning an argument or coming to an agreement, but about understanding and learning. Dialogue dispels stereotypes, builds trust and enables people to be open to perspectives that are very different from their own" (http://thataway.org/index.php/?page_id=713).

Dialogue does not always come naturally. Such negative and ultimately futile human emotions as jealousy, revenge, despair, pride, and arrogance constantly interfere with the ability to talk intelligently and rationally with others. This is a skill that needs to be fostered. Unfortunately, while dialogue is a wholly Qur'anic concept, it is not a skill that has been fostered in our community. There are historical explanations for this shortcoming, most notably, the catastrophic experience of colonialism that tore Muslims away from their historical identity and ushered in a post-colonial era of strife, dissonance, and identity confusion.

The secularization of the Muslim world, initiated with the barrel of the European gun and continued under the barrel of a secularized Muslim elite's gun, resulted in an Islamic awakening, a desire and a need to return to the people's more authentic Islamic roots. But the counter-responses, born in a repressive context, emphasized a black-and-white world of good versus evil. Dialogue, in which the in-between grays and nuances exist, did not appear as a useful instrument for expelling the colonial powers or revitalizing the ummah's *Islamic* nature. Difference, strength, and inflexibility seemed to be more important qualities.

And thus the Islamists' discourse of "Islam" versus the "West," in which it had to be proved that Islam was superior in order to undercut western civilization's enticing and very real material power and hegemony over the Islamic world, was nurtured in this violent and repressive environment. The Muslim community today, still battered by western imperialist violence, easily segues into these Islamist discourses of uncompromising counter-responses. There is also a tendency to blame all of the ummah's woes on such outsiders as the Zionist Crusaders. Given the pain inflicted upon Muslims by western imperialism and Israel, such a tendency is easy to comprehend.

However, understanding why the Muslim community often reacts as it does is not the same as accepting that reaction as the most appropriate or effective, or even the best. Being able to trace the genealogy of a shortcoming in the Muslim community is a very important step to overcoming such a shortcoming. The second caliph, `Umar ibn al-Khattab, whom the Prophet (pbuh) entitled "al-Faruq" (the one who distinguishes truth from falsehood), once advised his community: "Criticize and appraise yourselves before you are criticized and appraised on the Day of Judgment, and weigh out your deeds before they are weighed out for you."

In this era of dialogue, the sad truth is that Muslims deserve at most a passing grade and, more often than not, a failing grade. This conclusion is

not meant to diminish the excellent leadership and work of the countless Muslim activists dedicated to interfaith dialogue, to inter-civilizational dialogue, and to the promotion of peace. On the contrary, I applaud their work and wish to bolster them and encourage others to join their path. Clearly, those who encourage violence rather than dialogue and peace as a solution are attracting a huge number of Muslims – especially Muslim young people – to their cause. We must work to stem this tide, both for our own sake and for the sake of the global community.

Muslims are trading in the currency of “truth” – my truth is true and yours is false, and therefore I must vanquish you. A very common Muslim practice here is to compare the best of Islam (in theory) with the worst of Christianity (in practice) and to deny that Muslims who make mistakes or commit crimes are “real Muslims.” Such an approach mirrors that of the Orientalists and Islamophobes, who seek out atrocities committed by Muslims and blame “Islam.” Such a methodology is also damaging, since it creates resentment on the other side. Resentment undermines good dialogue.

True dialogue, for which all people should strive, is the exact opposite of this: My truth is true for me, yours is true for you, and what can I learn from you and you from me? While many people who engage in such an undertaking come to it from the concept of relativism, dialogue and appreciation of the “other” can also come from a concept of absolute truth, such as belief in the Qur’an as the word of God. In fact, the Qur’an itself sets out dialogue as the appropriate way for peoples of different faith traditions and belief systems to interact with each other:

O humanity, We created you from a single (pair) of a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes, that you may know each other (not that you may despise each other). Verily the most honored of you in the sight of Allah is (the one who is) the most righteous. And Allah has full knowledge and is well acquainted (with all things). (49:13)

If it had been the will of your Lord that all people of the world should be believers, then all people on Earth would have believed. Would you then compel humanity, against its will, to believe? (10:99)

The entire *Surat al-Kafirun* is the most impressive statement of “live and let live” to be found in any religious scripture:

Say: “O you who reject faith. I do not worship that which you worship, nor will you worship that which I worship. I will not worship that which you have been wont to worship, nor will you worship that which I worship. To you be your way, and to me mine.” (109:1-6)

In spite of these Qur’anic injunctions, Muslims today are afraid of this kind of encounter. Dialogue requires being well-grounded, well-centered, and self-confident in one’s own perspective. But due to their bitter colonial heritage and the current Islamophobic onslaught, Muslims suffer from low self-esteem and fragile identity. This makes it hard to dialogue, even when it is a matter of discussing the different orientations inside the Muslim community, let alone outside. Unity, which is a *fard wajib* (obligatory duty) upon Muslims, remains elusive. For example, many leaders and members of the laity even in North America refuse to work with their Sunni, Sufi, Shi`ah, Salafi, *madhhabi*, progressive, and conservative counterparts – and all of this while promoting the notion of cooperation and integration with the dominant Christian, secular, atheist, and multi-faith society in which we live!

And so we have reached this state, this low point in our history, where a group of Muslim doctors in the United Kingdom is alleged to have plotted to blow up innumerable innocent civilians. It is unfathomable that any person who is trained to heal and cure would be able to twist their training into ways to kill and maim innocent civilians. And given the medical legacy bequeathed to the western world by classical-era Muslim physicians, such actions are an even greater betrayal of our medical heritage. People should not read the Qur’an in search of the motivating factors for these horrific actions, for the answers lie in psychology. Moreover, the Muslim community must shoulder the blame for not fostering a culture of dialogue in its midst, thereby allowing the canker of “violence as a solution” to fester.

Through its conferences, publications (including AJISS), seminars, and its website, AMSS hopes to redress this unfortunate situation. To develop the skills related to dialogue will be of great benefit to the ummah and to global society as a whole. We urge you to continue to support AJISS and AMSS as institutions and visions. We also look forward to greeting you as new members, conference attendees, and visitors to our website.

Katherine Bullock
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