

Youth and Religion Project

Module 3

Gender and American Muslims: The Search for a Negotiated Order

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Perhaps no issue produces as much tension between American Muslims and their non-Muslim fellow citizens as that of gender roles and the relations between men and women. American Muslims, especially young people born in the U.S., are acutely aware of this. They are "Americans" in many ways and are exposed both to popular culture and to non-Muslim classmates and friends; they also tend to come from cultures decidedly more traditionalist about sex and gender. Moreover, the young people we have been studying are in a time in the lifecycle where issues of dating, romance, love, and sex are salient for people of all cultural and religious backgrounds. Thus, the distance between their immigrant parents' practices of sex and marriage, and American mainstream practices are, unavoidable.

In our research we have heard constant discussions - in interviews, in focus group discussions, in religious education classes, in publications - about proper "Islamic" attitudes toward gender roles and heterosexual relationships. And while all Muslims are not of one mind, of course, we find on balance a developing understanding of gender and gender relations among young people that is neither the middle-class "equality" of non-Muslim America nor the traditional gender roles of the Pakistani or Arab cultures from which many of the immigrants come. This understanding is inculcated in many places, of course, including the family. But we focus here on the many classes and programs on these topics we have witnessed in our fieldwork. It is a form of "secondary socialization" of young adults and teenagers.

The dominant American cultural interpretation of "equal rights" is the notion of treating people, as individuals, the same. A common response to that interpretation has been the legal challenge to barriers to women in public life, organizational memberships, etc. and some cultural androgyny - women wearing pants, playing sports, smoking in public, relaxation of sexual double standards, etc. In keeping with these trends, many Americans treat any outward manifestations of difference as inequality. Thus, there is a baseline assumption that Islamic clothing such as hijab (the head and neck scarf) is in and of itself an aspect of inequality. Well-publicized stories about things such as the Saudi prohibition on women's driving, or the Taliban's vicious treatment of Afghan women, further feed that notion.

In response, American Muslims are constantly attempting to dispute that assumption. In almost every discussion of Islam,

gender, family, or the like that I have heard during this research, Muslim speakers (both male and female) go out of their way to claim that "in Islam, women have equal rights," or "men and women are different, but that does not mean unequal," etc. I have heard both informal discussions and more formal classes offered at mosques on marriage and dating practices. Almost invariably these topics are discussed within the language of "rights" and "choice," a language that resonates deeply with Americans even as the speakers are actively reinterpreting the ideas for Islamic purposes.

At the same time, both in the structural fact of gender segregated practices, and in cultural understandings of some of the problems of American society, Muslim young people are being socialized into notions of a gender order that are quite distinct from dominant American ones.

Among Muslims almost all activities connected to social life are gender segregated. Prayer in the mosque, seating in religious education classes (although I was told once that gender segregation was not necessary in a teaching situation, only necessary in worship), classes in Islamic school, work groups or activity groups in Muslim youth organizations, and on and on, are done in gender segregated groups. Indeed, we were only able to gather information on a number of activities for girls and young women because we have female research assistants. This segregation is always described - sometimes as a response to a question but often unsolicited - as necessary, although for a variety of different reasons. Sometimes the justification is theological with reference to passages in the Qur'an; other times it involves an "ethical" or social rationale. But at the heart of each of these reasons is a basic distrust of human nature and its ability to resist sexual impulses.

According to a male speaker at a summer camp, speaking to junior high and high school age males:

You know what this means: you see some girl wearing little more than a handkerchief for a dress, and the guy in us (we're all guys) says wow! That's natural. We're human. But after that one look, we look away, because Allah has something better for us, paradise, not hell.

At another occasion we heard a young man proclaim, "whenever a man and a woman are alone in a room together, there is always a third figure present, shatan [Satan]".

Fear of untrammelled sexuality appeared in a number of different settings. Most of these - in the talks we heard - involved the threat women pose to the moral purity of men. And yet, in other settings we heard consistent references to the appropriateness of physical attraction and sexual love within the confines of proper Islamic marriages. In a class on Islamic dating and marriage, run at a large mosque, the guest speaker was a sheikh (a learned religious man). My notes on his talk reveal:

He contrasts Islam with Christianity—the true Christian shouldn't be married (e.g., the Pope) and should avoid women. Islam sees this as a contradiction of a law of nature.

But how is this natural attraction to be handled? The speaker quoted above noted:

A man can look at his prospective wife. This is unavoidable in the U.S. Since one will be living with the choice for the rest of life it is important that one look at one's spouse first. And, this should/can be done without her parents' permission. One can look at a young woman on the streets or in public. Indeed, one should look before one gets serious—it is important to protect the other's feelings, so that one does not reject them in a face-to-face meeting (say at the family house, etc.; that kind of rejection can be very painful to the young woman and her family).

He notes that this does not give young men license to hang out and look at women—rather, it is an important part of cementing the relationship by having the man and woman being an active part of choosing the marriage. This looking is a space provided by Islam, don't abuse by licentiousness. Allah knows your intention. Looking at a woman once is one thing; a second time is haram (also haram is the first look if with an impure purpose).

While the sex-segregated groupings is an obvious social dimension of this dynamic, the most visible individual sign of these concerns is the female head and neck scarf called hijab. Hijab is itself subject of numerous articles - both scholarly and journalistic - but the keyword is "modesty." Revealing too much of the body endangers the moral status of both men and women. For many, the primary danger is male sexuality, uncontrollably excited by female beauty. This is a traditional, and perhaps familiar formulation for many non-Muslim Americans, as there are Christian traditions that have also argued for the necessity of covering women's bodies lest male lust rage out of control. However, as noted above, for many Muslims, there is also a threat to male purity in a lack of modesty. Hijab helps protect women from men and men from women.

Interestingly, in many of the notes gathered by our female research assistants, while hijab is a topic of discussion among young women and girls, the discussions are less about modesty and moral purity and more about social ostracism, visibility, and the like. Perhaps the "modesty" angle is obvious to young women, but our research assistants did not report the types of "fire and brimstone" warnings we witnessed among young men.

Here is another paragraph from field notes taken at the summer camp referred to above. The speaker, in his early 20s, was explaining to younger men:

As Muslims, we should lower our gaze around women. Now that doesn't mean that we stare at the floor all the time so that we walk into walls —we're Muslims, not airheads —but we should conscientiously tell ourselves to look away when confronted by temptation. That energy should be saved for the time to be spent with one's wife, that one relationship that we enter with someone who has saved herself for marriage just as we save ourselves for marriage to someone with whom we will eventually enter paradise

According to many Muslims, however, there is not a double standard in Islam as the admonition to cover the body and act modestly applies to both men and women. So, for example, during outdoor "community service day" in which a group of college-aged Muslim volunteers were cleaning, painting, and doing yard work in a poor neighborhood (on a June afternoon) I took the following field notes:

Near the end [of the post-prayer lecture] was an admonition to the women working to keep their hijabs buttoned completely and to the men to have their shirts tucked in as they worked. He said, men, we don't need to see your backs! I did notice that while many of the [male] volunteers had on t-shirts, they were generally t-shirts whose sleeves hung all the way to the elbow. None had on shorts or sleeveless tee/tank tops.

Male modesty in appearance was a point made a number of times in the functions we attended. Both Steve Warner and I report in our field notes from various site visits having had a sense of being slightly immodest in our own dress — khakis and short sleeve, open-collared shirts — when surrounded by Muslim men in the draping shevlar chemise clothing of South Asia or others in Western dress, but long sleeve shirts buttoned all the way to the wrists and the neck.

A short paper cannot do complete justice to the complex balancing act Muslims are doing as they negotiate a new society,

its culture, and the traditions of their faith. But the second generation is clearly working to find that negotiated order in gender matters. They are generally appalled by what they see as American culture's permissiveness regarding sexuality and the body. But they cannot accept the traditional restrictions that many associate with Arab or Pakistani culture. Thus, the need to figure out how to be co-workers with professionals of the opposite sex, and to find marriage partners with the "arranged" customs their parents may have used.

We don't suggest for a moment that we endorse all the solutions being offered now by young Muslims. But we do note the active work young Muslims are engaged in to work this out. I close here with a vignette from our field notes about a skit done by two leaders of the summer camp session referred to above, this time in a mixed gender setting (although boys and girls were not sitting together):

N [one leader] played Joe Muslim, and S [another leader] played a girl, who, depending on whether he was wearing his kufi or not was a Muslim sister (Fatima) or a non-Muslim fellow student (Christine). In the first scenario, Joe and Christine have just taken an exam, and she greets him out in the hall after the exam, excitedly asking how he did on the exam, putting her hand on him and giving him a hug and then inviting him to go out for coffee. (Very haram!) How does he deal with this? Use body language to keep your respectful distance and politely refuse her offer. One of the women objected here that it isn't always Christine who makes such overtures; sometimes Joe Muslim makes such overtures to non-Muslim women. After acknowledging such a possibility, N went back to his point that Muslim men are often the hapless objects of such overtures [thus the sister's bid for a bit of gender equality in the discussion was ignored]. The next scenario had Fatima greeting Joe after the exam, and he ignores her, rushing along with his face to the floor. This occasioned laughter from both the brothers and sisters, and I had the strong impression that N had hit a real chord. This approach, too, is un-Islamic. As a variation, the third scenario had Joe rushing past Fatima using the watch technique, where Joe keeps his eye on his watch as if he has a very important appointment to make, once again ignoring Fatima's friendly greeting ...this, too, is an unbalanced way of acting, insulting to the sister.

In the next scenario, Joe is shown treating Fatima properly; he is polite, reciprocates her question about how he did on the exam, and inquires about her family. In this scenario, Joe occasionally looks at Fatima, but mostly he looks a bit past her and sometimes looks down, consistently averting his gaze but trying not to be rude; and, of course, he avoids touching her and avoids making any gestures about going out for coffee. Above all, he does not stare at her, by which he meant looking her steadily in the eye. N said that the same approach should be used with a non-Muslim woman: be polite; after all, Christine is a potential Muslim. The general rule is to avoid close

proximity with the opposite gender, avoid one-on-one isolation, being alone in the same room together, and avoid personal questions. (Several times, N illustrated the inappropriate personal question with what s your favorite color? the point being that even such a benign inquiry invites a move toward a personal cross-gender friendship, which is to be avoided.)

The same woman who had objected that Christine isn't always the aggressor then asked for an illustration of how sisters should deal with men, and it took a bit of time for N and S to arrange a new scenario. [the brothers consistently avoided looking at the sisters, even when one of them spoke up the men really do practice the lowered gaze. I thought that the whole workshop was premised on the assumption that it is women who are potentially a threat to men s purity; that women do not have such problems or that they will be protected by their brothers. At worst, the assumption was that women are not moral agents.] Eventually, N played the non-Muslim man who approached Fatima (mispronouncing her name as fa-TEEM-a) with the same kind of approach with which Christine had approached Joe. Played by S, Fatima deflects his overtures, and when he asks her to go out for coffee, she counters by inviting him to the Muslim club meeting. After the scenario, N said that such an invitation is an excellent idea, and even if you don t have a Muslim club in your school you can invite someone to the Islamic center.