Islam: Misconceptions, Current Trends, and the Role of Social Movements and Education in Promoting Development, Conflict Transformation and Peace Building

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Abstract: Stereotypes of Muslim minorities cause them to face discrimination on a daily basis. Islam is a religion of peace, but non-Muslim majority groups have a prejudicial attitude toward Muslims. While there are basic tenets in Islam, Muslims, just like people of other religions, are engaged in intra-faith debates, particularly with respect to men’s beards, women’s veils, and food. Especially after 9/11, Muslims are stereotyped as terrorists to which many institutions pro-actively respond by implementing transformative community education and popular education programs that promote interfaith understanding, conflict transformation, and peace building (Lederach & Mansfield, 2010) in energetic social movements.

Introduction

Research Problem and Goal. The U.S. is a predominantly White, Christian, male-dominated society, where minorities experience discrimination to different degrees. After the September 11, 2001 attack on the World Trade Center in New York, the discrimination against Muslims intensified. Many Muslims fall victim to profiling. In many parts of the world where Muslims are minorities, they are prey to stereotyping. The goal of this paper is to investigate the role of adult education in promoting the civil rights of Muslims, unity in diversity, conflict transformation and peace building.

Research Questions. This research raises the following questions. What are the major misconceptions and stereotypes about Muslims and Islam in different countries? What are the basic tenets of Islam as well as the current debates related to Islam? In what ways do community and popular education aid in demolishing the stereotypes about Muslims and Islam?

Perspectives. This research studies how non-governmental institutions respond to the problems in societies where Muslim minorities live. They are engaged in non-formal education. They provide adult education which benefit community members and are a learning site (Finger, 1989; Holst, 2002). Non-formal education plays a crucial role in community transformation and empowerment. This research defines non-formal education as “any organized educational activity outside the established formal system...that is intended to serve identifiable learning clienteles and learning objectives” (Coombs, Prosser & Ahmed, 1973, p. 11).

A Survey of Definition of Terms in the Literature. Conflict transformation is the process of constructive change, involving comprehensive, pro-active, long-term, social-justice-related actions on the levels of “direct interaction and social structures,” (Lederach, 2003, p. 14). Dealing with the social and political causes of conflict (Lederach, 2003), conflict transformation aims to reduce violence, increase justice, and response to real-world social problems (Lederach, 2003). Addressing the root causes of violent conflicts, peace building strategies seek to meet “basic needs for security and order, shelter, food, and clothing” (Griffiths & O’Callaghan, 2003, p. 234). Peace building involves “the practical implementation of peaceful social change through
socio-economic development” (Ryan, 1995, p. 102). By involving activities that meet the basic needs, peace building de-escalates the conflict and improves “the relationship of parties engaged in…social conflict” (Ryan, p. xiv).

**Research Process.** There are three co-authors for this paper, two of whom are Muslims. This paper is a qualitative research that presents the following cases, which are the choices “of subject to be studied” (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994, p. 236), based on our working experiences with them. First, a case involves international educational programs of Northern Illinois University that promotes interfaith dialogue, conflict transformation, and peace-building. Second, a case in Palestine is Baitona, a non-governmental organization (NGO) working at the grassroots level. Lastly, community-based cases in the U.S. include the Council for American Islamic Relations (CAIR Chicago and Michigan) and Inner-City Muslim Action Network (IMAN) of Chicago. The emerging themes provide inputs for the generation of a model grounded on the data.

**Findings**

*Misconceptions and Stereotypes about Islam*

Some biological anthropologists and scientists argue male humans have an innate proclivity to be aggressive and to defend their territory with the use of violence (Wrangham & Peterson, 2005). Other biological anthropologists insist that violence is a result of culture and upbringing (Sussman, 2005). The sources of ethnic conflicts are historical, social, economic, political, cultural, or religious injustice, discrimination, or prejudice, clinging to stereotypes about groups and relating them to individuals (Kottak, 2000). Prejudice means looking down on “a group because of its assumed behavior, values, abilities, or attributes” (Kottak, 2000, p. 124). Muslims in many parts of the world face stereotypes and discrimination. Stereotypes refer to “fixed ideas—often unfavorable—about what members of a group are like” (Kottak, 2000, p. 125). Discrimination means “policies and practices that harm a group and its members” (Kottak, 2000, p. 125). In many parts of the world where Muslims are minorities, such as in the Philippines, the U.S. and Israel, Muslims are stereotyped as radicals and terrorists. In Sri Lanka, Muslims are stereotyped as good in business and earning money. In the Philippines, Muslims are typecast as lazy, uncivilized, dirty, and war-mongering. True, there are individuals who are Muslims who commit acts of terror but individuals do not represent the whole group, as there are Christians, Hindus, Buddhists and Jews who commit terrorist acts. In addition, there are individuals who are not Muslims who perpetrate terrorist acts. Hence, characterizing all people who are Muslims as terrorists is an unjust stereotype, discrimination, and prejudice.

In the post-911 U.S.A., American Muslims face the same forms of stereotypes and misconceptions as the rest of the Islamic world. Islam and hence Muslims are generally viewed as promoting violence and terrorism, are predominately Arab, and subjugate women by rigid interpretations of Islam. While only 18-20 percent of the world’s Muslim population is Arab, the U.S. population is comprised of a diverse background. According to the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR, 2010), there are an estimated 7 million Muslims residing in the U.S. currently. This population consists of a variety of ethnicities and nationalities, but primarily comprised of those of South Asian descent from the Indian subcontinent, and native-born African Americans (U.S. Department of State, 2010).
Basic Tenets and Current Intra-Faith and Interfaith Debates about Islam

Five Pillars of Islam. The word Islam comes from the Arabic root word *salam* which means peace and *silm* “which means submitting your will to...God” (*Quran*, 2005, p. v). Muslims, therefore, are people who submit their will to God. There are five pillars in Islam to which all Muslims subscribe: *shahadeh*, *salat*, *saum Ramadhan*, *zakat*, and *haj* (*Quran*, 2005). *Shahadeh* is the declaration that there is only one God and that Mohammed was His last prophet. *Salat* refers to the obligatory five prayers per day. *Saum* refers to fasting from sun up to sun down during the holy month of Ramadhan. *Zakat* refers to helping the poor. *Haj* refers to the pilgrimage to Mecca, for those who can afford it. All Muslims concur on these pillars.

Intra-Faith and Interfaith Debates. Today, as with any other religion, there are intra-faith debates among Muslims. Note that, as with most social phenomena, there is a difference between abstract principles and actual practice. The debates center on the arguments whether certain practices are either (1) obligatory, universal and religious or (2) historical, cultural and contextual. Take for example the veil. According to an ABC News report (2008), a misconception regarding Muslims in general is that women are oppressed and are forced to wear the *hijab*. The reality is that more often than not, many Muslim women view wearing the *hijab* as an act of empowerment, which makes them less likely to be viewed as sexual objects. Additionally, wearing the *hijab* has been viewed as a means for political activism for those seeking greater religious rights within cultures less accepting of visually observant Muslims (McDonald, 2006). There are those who insist that women must be veiled and veiled in a certain way. There are those who insist that beards and veils are an individual’s personal matter in relationship with God. Hence, there are contrasting images of Muslim women and men. For instance, Pakistan’s Benazhir Bhutto wore bright and colorful veils, while Jordan’s Queen Rania does not wear a veil at all. On the other extreme, the Taliban in Afghanistan, when they were in power, forced women to cover themselves almost completely under the pain of the penalty of torture and stoning to death. To counter Islamic extremism, Syria banned the use of the full face veil at universities in 2010 in order to keep its secular identity (BBC, 2010 July 19). “France’s lower house of parliament has overwhelmingly approved a bill that would ban wearing the Islamic full veil in public” (BBC, 2010 July 13). Egypt’s highest Muslim authority, Sheikh Mohamed Tantawi, dean of al-Azhar University, “called full-face veiling a custom that has nothing to do with the Islamic faith” and “will issue a religious edict against the growing trend for full women’s veils, known as *niqab*” (BBC 2010 August 9). The debate continues.

There are those who insist that men must have a beard. Few Muslim Southeast Asian men carry a beard, compared to many Muslim Arab men who do. Some Muslims refer to these practices as scriptural, religious and mandatory, while others refer to these practices as historical, cultural and optional. A third debate consists of what Muslims can eat. One group insists that Muslims must only eat *halal* food anywhere in the world, or food that has been properly slaughtered according to very specific Islamic teachings. Other Muslims explain that if *halal* food is not available, with caution and prudence and not contrary to general principles of Islam, they can eat other food. The debates go on where Muslims take one side or the other.

Role of Education in Promoting Development, Conflict Transformation, and Peace Building

All around the world, many organizations and institutions are working to uplift the status of Muslims and erase the negative image and stereotypes to which Islam has been attached. This research examines the International Training Office, Baitona, CAIR and IMAN.
International Training Office. Since academic year 2003-2004, the International Training Office (ITO, 2010) of Northern Illinois University, of which Dr. Lina Ong is the director, has been implementing projects that bring Muslims, indigenous peoples, and Christians from Cyprus, Palestine, the Philippines, Sri Lanka, and all Southeast Asian countries. The goals include conflict transformation and peace building. Many NIU faculty, staff, and students collaborate in these efforts in different capacities. They share their expertise in promoting dialogue, critical reflection, planning, and project implementation, all of which end up smashing stereotypes about Muslims and Islam as well as promoting interfaith goodwill and collaboration. Committed to strengthening the capacities of leaders from the public, non-profit and private sector organizations, ITO implements programs that address societal needs, including promoting inclusiveness and interfaith dialogue. Here are some examples. The Philippine Youth Leadership Program builds a new generation of Muslims, Christians, and indigenous persons as catalysts for social change. The Philippine Minorities Program trains Muslim and indigenous community leaders, NGO members, educators, youth educators, journalists, and religious leaders to develop a sense of civic responsibility and commitment to strengthening civil society. The Cyprus Bicommunal Leadership Program developed the leadership capacity of young Muslim Turkish Cypriots and Greek Cypriots, unleashing their potential to work collaboratively as catalysts for change in their communities. Led by Dr. J. Gajanayake and Dr. L. Jeris, the Grassroots Organizing by Women (GROW, 2010) enhanced “the capacities of leaders of four women’s NGOs in Sri Lanka to face challenges and to create opportunities to strengthening women’s participation in grassroots democracy.” Muslims are actively involved in all the above programs and efforts are made to erase negative stereotypes about Islam and Muslims.

Baitona. Stereotyped as suffering from male domination, Palestinian women are expected to be submissive and play traditional roles only. NGOs provide adult education opportunities that respond to the needs of Palestinian women. Established in 2003, Baitona for Community Development is a well-known and active NGO in Gaza Strip. In general, Baitona provides education, health, and relief to civil society in Palestine. The following are its goals. Baitona aims to empower women and increase their involvement in society and participation in economic development by providing them with training and income-generating projects. It establishes educational centers where courses and services are provided that meet the needs of Palestinian society. Baitona provides leadership programs for women so that they can be more involved in decision making. Specifically, Baitona offers programs to develop the “personal and intellectual strengths” of women (Stalker, 2001, p. 298). It also provides child-care facilities for women seeking jobs. It also provides women with basic learning competencies to support their self-learning. Hence, Baitona offers adult learners, especially women, a chance to be empowered through education. Education and action transform the negative image of women as being submissive into powerful women who are capable of independent thinking and social involvement. The empowerment of women leads to the empowerment of their own communities as well.

CAIR and IMA. The Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR, 2010) enhances “understanding of Islam, encourage dialogue, protect civil liberties, empower American Muslims, and build coalitions that promote justice and mutual understanding.” It “opposes domestic policies that limit civil rights, permit racial, ethnic or religious profiling, infringe on due process, or that prevent Muslims and others from participating fully in American civic life.” CAIR allies with secular and religious groups “that advocate justice and human rights.” It “condemns all acts of violence against civilians by any individual, group or state.” It “supports
equal and complementary rights and responsibilities for men and women.” To fulfill its vision, mission, and principles, CAIR does the following work: civil rights work, media relations, government relations, education (including seminars, workshops, and conferences), advocacy, action alerts, publications, voter registration, outreach and interfaith relations.

Responding to “inner-city poverty,” the Inner-City Muslim Action Network (IMAN, 2010) provides “space for Muslims in Urban America by inspiring the larger community towards critical civic engagement” that exemplify “compassion in the work for social justice and human dignity beyond the barriers of religion, ethnicity, and nationality.” Propelled by “human compassion,” IMAN is a community-based non-profit organization “that works for social justice, delivers a range of social services, and cultivates the arts in urban communities.”

**Conclusion**

**Summary of the Findings.** In summary, Muslims are survivors of name-calling and stereotypes in predominantly non-Muslim societies, such as the U.S. They are given different blanket labels, such as anti-Christian, terrorists, extremists, savages and barbarians. Muslims are not all alike.

At Northern Illinois University, several successful programs for interfaith and inter-ethnic dialogue bring together Christians, Muslims, and indigenous peoples, who return to their communities to implement various projects that promote interfaith goodwill and inter-ethnic understanding. In violence-filled Palestine, Baitona workers organize the community, help the poor, and provide services to empower women and children. In terms of crisis prevention and intervention, CAIR pro-actively projects the multiple images of Muslims in the U.S. and quickly responds when a burning issue affecting Muslims erupts. IMAN (2010) in Chicago is a community-based organization which “works to serve and empower disadvantaged individuals and communities” through direct services, organizing and social justice, and the arts and culture.

**Importance to Research and Practice in Adult and Community Education.** This research is important to the practice of adult and community education. It shows how programs of organizations and social movements play an important role to advance the equal or civil rights of Muslims so that they will be treated fairly and equally in society at large. This research shares the best practices of organizations in working to dispel myths about Muslims.

**Implications of Applications of the Finding to Practice or Theory.** Especially after 9/11, Muslims face real problems of discrimination on a daily basis. The efforts of adult and community educators cited in this study to dispel misconceptions about Islam and Muslims prove to be constructive, effective, and successful. The findings imply that more community and adult educators need to take up this challenge of working to break myths and stereotypes, in particular, with respect to Muslims. They can do their share in facilitating the common folk’s knowledge about Muslims and Islam based on facts so that Muslims in society at large will be treated fairly, as everyone else in society wants to be treated fairly.

**References**


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