

Alienated Youth or Outdated Institutions? A Conversation

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Al-salām ‘alaykum

[Rami Nashashibi] I know you recently moved back to Toronto after being away for some time; what have you found upon your return and what issues are you dealing with over there in that community?



[Shaykh Faraz Rabbani] I was away for ten years, and I work online, but one of the things that surprised me was the extent to which so many people are disengaged from the community, not just people who aren't very practicing. A good example is an old friend who used to work together in the Muslim Youth Association. She did her masters in the States and came back to Canada and she went to her local mosque which is one of the bigger mosques in North America, saying 'I want to get involved, I want to do some programmes.' They said, 'Well to do a programme, you have to be a member,' and so she said she would join the mosque. But they told her that membership was closed and they're completely not welcoming, practically saying 'Go away'. And here we have someone who has years of experience in dealing with social work and education, and they said 'go away.' They didn't actually say it, but that's the message that she got. She's very serious, and trying to see how she can work with the community, but there is that disengagement, and they just don't connect with their mosques because they're not welcoming places.

Now, for you as a person who is very involved in the community, what would you say are ways you could deal with that?

[Rami Nashashibi] It's interesting, because for me it's that conversation and that's why I asked you what you find; part of this conversation that's necessary is trying to be very clear about what are the things that are continually perpetuating disengagement. Through our work we have found that what has been the well-received – not just among the recipients of our service, the organizing that we do or the constituents who are most affected by the organising that we do. But even by the larger, younger Muslim demographic between 18 and 40, the thing that has mobilised them the most and engaged them the most, is literally finding a space that affords them the opportunity to get involved, build bridges, feel relevant – not only to the lives of Muslims but also the broader society.

So I can't tell you how many people who have been involved in our programmes – particularly of the second generation immigrant communities – who have been historically disengaged and have lived in suburbs most of their lives, and who come and find in IMAN an opportunity to work with people they haven't worked with before, build bridges, particularly across racial and ethnic lines, and just feel relevant to the lives and issues that are affecting our society. For us, we didn't think about that strategically before, but in the process of doing that and reflecting that, we discovered it was critical component that is unfolding, that allows a lot of people to feel uniquely connected to the work that we do.

[Shaykh Faraz Rabbani] Let's say you find yourself in the community situation where the people who are running things don't have that attitude; they're very insular – sometimes consciously but very often, unconsciously, they're not used to engaging in society and they don't know how to connect with youths, they perhaps don't know how to connect with university students, or professionals etc. They're very insular and they do their own thing.

Where my parents live is a complex of 77 Muslim town houses and one community centre; there's a lot of youth there but the people are in the community centre and the mosque or musala, and because of the way they structure things, I feel like I want to just get out of there. You hear me right?

I have tried to engage with them more but it's not a very welcoming environment, right? As someone who is concerned, and looking from the outside – in, and given my background as someone who has studied Islām, who could possibly teach, and try to connect with the youth. But looking from the outside, there are structures there in the community and in my own community where I live, that I could perhaps engage in. But these structures are not necessarily very welcoming. I could work with them and it may be a very frustrating experience, because they're very wary about it.

If I run a programme something, the dynamic with Muslim women that attend, becomes a source of tension for the administration. I went to Seattle and there's a programme there. Sisters are on the second floor of the mosque, and they asked for a separate session – a women's only session – and I said 'yeah, sure.' The mosque community said 'you can do that, but there can be no two-way conversation, and you can't be on the same floor as them, and they can't be on the same floor as you. And there can't be any voice communication. They can hear you, but they can't ask you questions. They have to submit questions via a little kid who has to come down and submit them.' We ended up doing the programme outside the mosque, but the point is it's hard to engage with these kinds of structures. The question is 'how?' How to work with them and not get frustrated?

[Rami Nashashibi] When I hear stories like that, I know that you and I are working at it from different perspectives, but certainly from my perspective, IMAN has tried to maintain as much of a healthy relationship as possible with the variety of institutions that exist in the broader Muslim Community in an urban area like Chicago. Some of those communities may actually have practices like those that you're talking about. When you look at those kind of practices and the profound insularity, the profound provincialism, the profound oblivious mentality, that exists sometimes, that are so deeply entrenched in some of the people who are leading these institutions, who are so unaware of how devastating and alienating it is for some people. I have confronted and engaged with a group of people who feel alienated by those institutions, but then become hostile towards them. That hostility is then not only translated towards institutions, but to Islām generally.

[Shaykh Faraz Rabbani] It fosters a spiritual crisis in people, right? not only in those institutions, but in the religion itself. They start questioning even sometimes, their relationship with Allah, saying 'What kind of god would permit these things to happen?' All these kinds of questions come up and I get a lot of questions like that from people, particularly from Muslims but others as well. People feel upset in the way that these community institutions are, but the question would be, how do we positively engage with them?

And for me the challenge is that many of these issues have a religious implication, and coming from the capacity of someone who is regarded as a religious scholar, if I take a religious stand on it – and I have to be discrete- but it's a challenge. You want to maintain good relations with the smaller segments of society and the institutions. How does one engage with these people?

[Rami Nashashibi] It's a really good question, and for me again, because I'm not coming from a religious perspective, my priority isn't so much reforming an institution, as it is realising the need to create alternative spaces that nurture that identity culturally at least, and lend a sense of reconnection to a broader Muslim identity that is empowering and will hopefully also lead to a reconnection to another group of scholars to reaffirm and strengthen

a sense of spirituality outside the confines of those institutions. That doesn't mean that I give up altogether and not engage with these institutions, but certainly some of them you have to recognise are led by a group of people who aren't going to transform quickly enough to catch a vast number of young people who are thoroughly, unequivocally 'done' with them.

At the same time I've tried to have conversations with them, even recently, because these are sincere individuals who really do love their Lord and that's an important thing to still bear in mind. There was an incident once, where I was with a sister working in the office. We were setting up information for one of the mosques and we were being invited there to raise funds as well. She was helping at the table on the men's floor and she was accosted by four or five brothers. Now, she was also African American, a woman, in a mosque that was predominantly Arab and one of the brothers in the mosque who had kind of the roughness of the 'Arab' can sometimes come across pretty rough, and perceived as giving orders – like 'get downstairs, get downstairs!' and she stormed out of the mosque and I told her that probably that wasn't the best thing to do, but she was really devastated emotionally.

Now, I spoke with him for some time afterwards talking about where we want our sisters. Even if in some cases we feel they are not comporting to our sensibility culturally, do we want to drive them out of the mosques? Don't we want to create a space where they can at least talk with us and be conscious of how we engage? It took some time in this conversation with the brother and again, he was a very beautiful person, very humble, very apologetic, and I think he was able to think more critically about how his engagement was interpreted by her. It was probably the first time he had a conversation about the broader societal consequences of engaging women in the community like that.

[Shaykh Faraz Rabbani] That's really important. It's not just to say 'ma' Al-salāma' to these very conservative elements of our community, but that rather positive engagement is very necessary. Very often they don't see the consequences of their actions and the repercussions. I think sometimes when they do see that, they become increasingly aware that this is not a religiously desirable consequence, and they've never thought about it that way. This could be what they understand the ruling in Islam to be for example, or just the way we do things, or these are the ways we 'have to' do things. And they can't see outside that, but while we may not be able to work with certain segments actively, or as actively as we would have wanted to, I think that communication is needed; that good will even if they're acting in ways that we don't accept, they're not doing it out of ill-intent.

[Rami Nashashibi] You create lines of communication, and you know what I think is missing at times? I don't know how often you've been in these types of conversations, and I'm sure I'm lying and you've had a lot of them, but I've talked with several of our brothers and sisters; we don't get an opportunity to sit in and have these types of conversations where people who maintain a certain set of practices or positions, are similarly but critically engaged about their positions. About how their positions, or approach to Islām could inadvertently perpetuate certain social consequences.

I'll give you an example, and I'd like to get your opinion on this. From an activist perspective what I've also found is that certain approaches to scholarship – whether it is deemed as Salafi or more traditional scholarship – I feel that it sometimes perpetuates this disengagement from society. Meaning I find people who have studied, thoroughly, in certain parts of the Muslim World, who have almost hermitically sealed themselves off from influences of those parts of the world, and have compartmentalised very conveniently, their Islāmic learning environment, and then their engagement with the rest of the world. And I see these even sometimes in the seminars – you have these four day seminars in a university, let's say on the South Side of Chicago, about the merits of great Islāmic scholarship of the 13th Century, and for me, what is disturbing about that, is not that I'm not excited about people getting back into their tradition, but if what people leave those seminars

with is: firstly, you've been in a place and space for four days studying another place and space that you're removed from by at least 600 years and thousands and thousands of miles, and there wasn't a point in the seminar where there was a connection between where you are now – meaning the university you're in. How does that relate to the society that space is living in? What are the racial issues about being on a university space that is often very sealed off from minorities in the South Side of Chicago for instance, which predominantly tends to be white. Why aren't those issues factoring in to any of the analyses and what bothers me sometimes about this scholarship is –

[Shaykh Faraz Rabbani] But one thing about that – sort of as a defence for scholarship – is that if you ask a lawyer about a particular situation, they'll approach it from their understanding as a lawyer. If you ask someone who is an economist, they'll approach it as an economist. Any issue you deal with, with a religious scholar, will give the religious angle. So the problem is when we deal with religious scholars, we have this expectation that they're superman or supershaykh, and supershaykh can just fly in and solve all the problems of Gotham City and leave, and that's not the case.

I think there has to be an engagement with our scholars to be aware of these things; you can't expect the scholars to understand everything that goes on in the inner city – they don't live there. How many people have they dealt with directly there? And I mean in terms of religious concerns – marriage issues, some other religious question or other – but are they aware of the issues they experience? They may well have concerns about approaching this religiously, and they have concern out there. But has someone ever worked in that environment, dealt with them? Saying that these are the people, these are the issues, these are the concerns that people are going through, who complain that scholars aren't so sensitive to the problems of our youth. But how often have we sat down with them, discussed the issues with them, but in a positive way, instead of just putting them down saying 'you're not good with youth etc.' And I think you'll find that when that takes place people get increasingly aware and you're empowering the scholars as well, you're making the scholars community leaders, and I think that conversations are important.

[Rami Nashashibi] For me, it's not pointing the finger at scholars. I think for me, identifying the necessity for space that allows scholars, activists, to have honest conversations with one another, where they are learning from each other. Also, opening a space for it – because you're absolutely right, you can't expect a scholar to be the superman, know-it-all person for everything.

The problem is, is when the environment that's created around scholars lends itself towards that perception that the scholar – him/herself – is not deliberate enough about indentifying the fact that I am not the person to come to for all of these issues, or that I need to understand the issue better. I know you do this as part of your work, but in Chicago a phenomenal illustration of this is Dr. Omar. Anyone who knows his history knows that he is a bonafide, legitimate and one of the most qualified Muslim scholars in North America.

Yet when it comes to positions or fiqhi movements, this is a man who will deliberate intensely with people in other areas and fields and who have a certain understanding of the dynamics he wants as a particular societal space before he tries to rule definitively about a position. I think that what he has gone out of his way to do, is to try and be in conversation with artists, with activists, and people in certain spaces so that his scholarship has more relevance to the direct lives of the people as they leave those seminars.

[Shaykh Faraz Rabbani] Sometimes what happens if people have access to these things, you often find that scholars are living in 'ivory mosques' and even if they're interested in these things, they don't have the connections, they don't have the resources to engage in that reach out. I have met so many scholars who are concerned with the environment and people ask why they're not comfortable enough. They don't feel they're able to address the issue meaningfully.

If there was a communication of Muslim environmentalists and they became aware through that conversation, about books and literature and resources, so that they would feel able to talk about these issues meaningfully. I think that's very necessary, and a model here that we can learn a lot from is the community of the Prophet (saw) in Medina. If we think we have problems in our community, look at Medina. One of the worldly reasons the people of Yathrib (which is what Medina was before the time of the Prophet (saw)) asked the Prophet to come was because their society was a mess. Their two tribes Ous and Khazraj had been fighting and couldn't get along with the Jews so some of the richer elements had their connections with the Jews and the Bedouin from outside were an economical threat. There were all kinds of issues that were splitting that society. But when the Prophet came, came with him these Meccans. The Meccans considered themselves to be cultured and civilised, the custodians of Arab civilisation, culture and religion, even from before Islām, they considered that Mecca was the pivot around the religious practice that the Arabian Peninsula revolved. And they looked at the people of Medina as being uncouth villagers, very agrarian, unsophisticated with their traders and so on, and the Meccans themselves had this whole social and economic hierarchy, but he brought them together. There were tensions, and sometimes fights almost arose within the Medinans, and also the Medinans and Meccans, and as people started coming into Islām – people from different tribes and so on.

There's a lot to learn from the Prophetic Sirah. Not just for religious inspiration, but also for social inspiration, how we engage in these matters. How did the Prophet (saw) deal with difficult people, with community challenges.