

Interreligious Leadership Education for Muslims in the United States

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An Argument for Inter-religious Leadership Education

The United States has become home to the most diverse Muslim population in the world; simultaneously, Muslim religious groups and Muslim civil society organizations have become more prominent in this country's cultural and religious life.¹ And even though Muslims in the United States continue to shoulder burdens caused by stereotyping,² bigotry, negative media attention, legal scrutiny, and surveillance,³ on the positive side, these dynamics have spurred on a plethora of institutions and programs that aim to strengthen Muslim representation in American government and civil society, including within the robust sphere of American inter-religious life.⁴

In order to navigate this complicated public sphere, Muslims institutions in the United States—religious or cultural centers, schools, advocacy groups, service organizations, foundations, etc.—need effective leadership and engaged constituents with institutional management skills and grounded religious insights. Both religious insight and management skills are needed to provide effective oversight, implement strategic growth and sustainability plans, develop compelling civic programs, and conduct successful community outreach. Muslim institutions in the United States require staff on hand that are competent in educational programming coordination, culturally relevant counselling, social service referrals, fundraising campaigns, media relations, and several other spheres of activity. Such organizations need the input and direction of learned religious leaders with competency not only in the vast realm of traditional religious learning but also with the ability to *apply* that knowledge *appropriately* within the communities in which they serve.⁵ These different needs demand a Muslim professional who is grounded in religious learning, competent in non-profit leadership, who can navigate the many traditional media and new media outlets, and who is effective on the growing circuit of inter-religious dialogue and engagement forums.⁶

Interreligious relations: Both Will and Skill

The will and skill to form inter-religious partnerships is key in many of the above-mentioned domains of religious and civic community building. In fact, the degree to which constituents and leaders of Muslim organizations are versed and vested in inter-religious relations directly impacts the degree of integrated within, rather than isolated from, wider American civic networks at the local, regional, and national level.⁷ Muslim individuals and families have formed affinity groups according to ethnicity, countries of origin, civic commitments, and political affiliations. At the same time, many grassroots initiatives are striving to build fluid and inclusive spaces wherein a full range of Muslim identities and affinity groups can interface and where frank yet civil conversation can occur on different aspects of diversity within and across Muslim communities.⁸ Many of the skills necessary to navigate the inter-religious scene also give Muslims practical strategies for engaging with pressing issues related to intra-Muslim diversity. Domestic inter-religious alliances may even contribute positively to dispelling inter-religious and intra-religious conflicts abroad.

Inter-religious Competencies for Muslim Community Leaders

For the reasons above, inter-religious education is a fundamental component of Islamic higher education broadly, and religious leadership training specifically. At present, leadership training for American Muslims encompass several distinct domains, and programs in Islamic higher education vary greatly depending on a student's specific field of interest and career path. Although programs in can take many different forms, the vast majority of programs would be enhanced with deliberate attention given to inter-religious learning.

Core competencies for Muslim leadership depend on the particular context but include: fluency in advanced religious scholarship, skills in congregational leadership including managing staff, organizational leadership, conflict resolution, interpersonal counseling, the ability to give referrals for further social support services, fundraising, media and public speaking skills, and inter-religious coalition building abilities. There is also need for imam training for preaching, and chaplaincy training that includes both religious knowledge and pastoral skills specifically tailored to hospitals, universities, prisons, in the military, and other civic institutions. Third, there is the need for experienced religious educators with competence in teaching general religious literacy, including providing instruction in reading and reciting the Qur'an in Arabic, clarifying fundamentals of faith and religious law, and giving guidance on how to imbibe Islamic morality and values in everyday decision-making. In this sphere, it is important for instructors to have inter-religious awareness, as they are on the front lines, so to speak, of teaching and modeling compassionate understandings of the religious other. In a related area, there is the need for community members to organize programs such as youth outreach, matrimonial services, dispute resolutions services, funeral services, and other family-gearred events. Given the increasing intra-religious makeup of many American families, even these arenas of communal life can entail inter-religious dimensions. Skilled non-profit professionals are needed to represent the needs and interests of American Muslims within their professional organizations and on the national scene; this task explicitly requires inter-religious engagement.

The Future of Muslims Interreligious Leadership Education

Muslim communities face some similar challenges as Jewish communities in particular with respect to higher religious education. Namely, as Or Rose points out in his reflection above, it is an intimidating proposition for leadership training programs to incorporate inter-religious dimensions into their existing curricular requirements, given the many other prerequisite skills that students must acquire in a relatively condensed period of time. This is also true for programs for Islamic learning; the requisite skills, particularly language competency and internalization of sacred texts,⁹ require a significant time investment that might otherwise preclude spending time on deepening inter-religious competencies.¹⁰ Another significant hurdle to both inter-religious education and inter-religious engagement is the salient fear Muslims could be led astray or otherwise confused by engagement with the religious other.¹¹ This is a legitimate apprehension if the inter-religious forum or curriculum is not carefully engineered and skillfully facilitated. As Or Rose points out, the field is in many ways at its infancy, but consensus around best practices are emerging, and long-time inter-religious facilitators, conveners, instructors, and funders are busy translating their experiences into standards and curriculum guides, as this forum attests.

In the various domains mentioned above, inter-religious and inter-cultural relations are pertinent and valuable skills. What would curriculum for nurturing these skills look like? There is a rich historical record of inter-religious relations to explore. The Islamic intellectual tradition also includes plentiful scholarly engagements with religious diversity, particularly in the areas of

law and exegesis. Some of this material is bleak when set against contemporary notions of pluralism, but working through the legal precedents, ethical imperatives, and historical accounts are both challenging and necessary. Inter-religious curriculum for Muslims can include works of comparative theology or give attention to the ways in which other communities have understood and reckoned with Islamic notions of prophesy, revelation, or sacred history. There is an increasingly robust literature on inter-religious relations written by Muslim academics, including Jerusha Tanner Lampety, Hussein Rashid, Homayra Ziad, Joseph Lumbard, Asma Afsaruddin, Tariq Ramadan, and other contemporary contributors to the field of inter-religious and comparative religious studies. There are also a host of compelling organizations with field placements for experiential learning, for instance the *Islamic Society of North America's Office of Interfaith and Community Alliances*, or the *Interfaith Youth Core*, among many others. A much fuller rendition of curriculum for Muslim inter-religious leadership training is possible, but here it suffices to observe that the field is in its infancy and has tremendous potential.

¹ For a recent anthropological and sociological account see Mucahit Bilici, *Finding Mecca in America: How Islam Is Becoming an American Religion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012).

² For a potent account see Jasmine Zine, "Between Orientalism and Fundamentalism: The Politics of Muslim Women's Feminist Engagement," *Muslim World Journal of Human Rights* 3, no. 1 (2006): 1-24.

³ For an excellent analysis of the legality and ethics of surveillance and its impact on Muslim communities in the United States, see Linda E. Fisher, "Guilt by Expressive Association: Political Profiling, Surveillance, and the Privacy of Groups," *Arizona Law Review* 46 (2004): 621-675.

⁴ For an account of this development in the initial years of this century, See Liyakatali Takim, "From Conversion to Conversation: Interfaith Dialogue in Post 9-11 America," *The Muslim World* 94 (July 2004): 343-355.

⁵ For further insights, see Quaiser Abdullah, "Formation and Education of Muslim Leaders," in *Religious Leadership: A Reference Handbook*, vol. I, ed. Sharon H. Callahan (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 2013), 693-701.

⁶ For an overview of such dialogue forums and their etiquette, see Takim, 348-54.

⁷ For a detailed analysis see Anna Halafoff, "Countering Islamophobia: Muslim Participation in Multifaith Networks," *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 22, no. 4 (2011): 451-467.

⁸ To give several such grassroots examples, The Prince Alwaleed Bin Talal Islamic Studies Program at Harvard University, in cooperation with the Institute for Social Policy and Understanding, hosted a forum in spring of 2014 for North American Muslim scholars, activists, artists, performers, community-builders, social entrepreneurs, and thought-leaders to brainstorm best practices and new avenues and for creating inclusive spaces, telling authentic stories, leading Muslim institutions, and meeting the needs of North American Muslims. The organization *Critical Connections* in Springfield, Massachusetts is another such initiative that sponsors regular educational programming related to Muslim diversity. Similar programming is also increasingly frequent at large Islamic cultural centers and regional Muslim umbrella organizations, including at events of the Islamic Society of North America.

⁹ This "internalization" process not only entails memorization and linguistic understanding, but more importantly entails the cultivation of the moral self in accordance with the wisdom gleaned from the interpretive tradition.

¹⁰ For an explicit comparison of transformations in rabbinical training to the contemporary Muslim experience see John H. Morgan, "Islam and Assimilation in the West: Religious and Cultural Ingredients in American Muslim Experience," *Journal of Religion and Society*, 16 (2014), 1-11. See particularly the sub-section "Muslim Clergy and Professionalization: Educational Leadership in Transformation," 3-4. Morgan rightfully points out the impact of

Christian forms of worship and leadership on transformations within American Judaism. I disagree, however, with several of the specific recommendations the author makes for further Americanizing the mosque environment.

¹¹ See Takim, 349.