

Talking points:

Separate but equal- define

Black experiences

Tie it in with muslim women experiences - similarities

How islam is democratic

Alternative community - examples

My Islam is Democratic

In America the Constitution mandates ‘liberty and justice for all’. Obviously, if you are an African American, ‘liberty and justice for all’ was not, and in some instances, still a right unattained. In 1896 the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that “racially separate facilities, if equal, did not violate the Constitution.” Segregation, the Court said, “was not discrimination.”

The result was the forced segregation of blacks and whites in all aspects of life. Segregated water fountains, segregated spaces, separate entrances, separate schools and neighborhoods. On paper it doesn’t sound bad but in reality ‘separate’ cultivated a prejudiced mindset that Blacks are of ‘the other’, sub-human. And if that wasn’t enough, discrimination of Blacks was justified by the Bible, yes, the same faith tradition of Jesus who cared for all people. Till today we are still struggling from the residue of this ‘separate but equal’ mindset.

We in America are at least confronting the issues of racism and all things prejudicial as we recognize them too well. We have a plethora of civil rights organizations whose job is to ensure that the ‘justice for all’ clause of the American Constitution is held up.

In Muslim majority countries we have civil and Islamic based human rights organizations defending basic rights of the oppressed and especially of women. Muslim-on-Muslim oppression if you will. In this piece I will focus only on the religious aspect of ‘separate but equal’ in American Muslim communities and how as Muslims we have distorted, deformed the teachings laid out in the Quran, that is, men and women are spiritual equals in the eyes of God.

Here in America, Muslim women excel simply because they are given the opportunity. The issues we face here are not dire as those of the women in Muslim majority countries, but the root of the problem is the same – separate but equal.

Separate is never equal. It is a farce.

Remember when Blacks were forced to sit at the back of the bus, forced to enter through the back door, treated as second-class citizens? These are the experiences of many women in Sunni Islam today!

In many mosques in America women enter through the back door, prayer spaces are inequitable compared to men's spaces, and in some cases unsuitable to pray in. The leadership is always a man, the imam and all religious matters are almost always addressed by men and it is always the men who give the Friday sermons.

I used to belong to a traditional Muslim community, attended prayers regularly, volunteered countless hours and even sent my daughter to Sunday school there. Every time I set foot in that mosque I felt short changed. As a mother, do I really want my daughter short changed too? Don't I want her to experience the ideals of Islam at its fullest?

Progressive Muslims are often accused of 'innovating' Islam. Truth is, the way Islam is taught and practiced is what is deformed. If we Muslims claim Islam is about equality and justice then why the discrepancy between theology and practice?

January 6th 2006 I started a progressive Muslim community in Los Angeles. It is the alternative to mainstream mosque spaces. In my community equality and equity is synonymous. We believe the theology of justice and human dignity needs to be lived out and in that spirit, all are welcome. That after all is the meaning of the 'straight path' in al-Fatihah, a prayer we Muslims say so frequently but mindlessly.

In my community we pray like we do in Mecca, families get to pray together! We don't enforce segregation of the sexes but for those who prefer, man on one side, and women the other. This is not a new idea but a very old one that has died.

My Islam is democratic. We are all spiritual equals. There is no one imam who dominates the religious services. Men and women take turns to do the call for prayer, to lead prayer and to give the Friday sermons. The sermons at our Friday prayers talk about honesty, about mercy toward animals, of feminism in Islam, about adoption of children, about love, about ethics in Islam. The subject matters are as diverse as those giving the sermon - men, women, gays, Black, White, Latino, Asian, and Arab, and what binds us all is that we are all inspired by the Quran, and some hadith.

Man and women are equals in the eyes of God. I was raised on that and now I am finally living it out spiritually. Ameen.

*If you are interested in creating a progressive prayer space in your community, please email me at ani@aslanmedia.com

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