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Conflicts Among Hawaii's Muslims

The islands of Hawaii are known for gathering people from all corners of the world who have developed an encompassing culture enabling them all to live in relative harmony. Japanese, Chinese, Hawaiian, Filipino, Indonesian, Malaysian, European American, Brazilian, African American, Samoans, and many other cultures intermingle in Hawaii through the media of language

(English pidgin), food, and familiarity with each other's history. Different cultures accept a give-and-borrow attitude among each other without necessarily feeling a loss to the essence of their own identity; this is what makes Hawaii's culture appealing and workable for its residents. Muslims constitute part of that cultural mix: the Muslim Association of Hawaii estimates that about 3,000 Muslims live in the state of Hawaii.

Visitors to the islands should not be surprised to find female Muslims wearing hijab while playfully snorkeling at Hanauma Bay, alongside their male Muslim friends who might be surfing on Waikiki beach, or watching an Army Muslim Chaplain running in the morning exercise at Schofield Barracks Army base with his platoon carrying a crescent flag representing Islam. The reason is that Hawaii's Muslim community is truly ethnically diverse, evidence of which can be found at the state's single mosque attached to the Manoa Islamic Center in a suburb close to the University of Hawaii's main campus. Turks, Indonesians, Yemenis, Pakistanis, Palestinians, Indians, Egyptians, African Americans, European Americans, Chinese, Japanese, Tunisians, Moroccans, and Malaysians, among others, meet there for Friday prayers. Potluck meals provide a social occasion for additional, gender-segregated gatherings. While the women pray in a separate room from men they can still view the prayer leader (imam) through a closed circuit television. For some, this conservative atmosphere is welcome, while for others it reinforces undesirable cultural customs originating from some of the home countries rather than strictly Islamic requirements.

Conflicts in community building

Hawaii's Muslim community offers the perfect human lab to test the belief that the Muslim community (ummah) must be united regardless of individual ethnic background. Yet, based on the case of the single mosque in Hawaii, Muslims appear to have been unable to build a local umma within the larger Hawaiian social community. Many members of Hawaii's Muslim community identify multiple conflicting cultures in the Islamic Center as one of the reasons they do not communicate effectively. Language serves as the principle initial barrier, as many Hawaiian Muslims choose to speak their native language, rather than the common language of English. Secondly, some fear that by interchanging cultural traditions and customs they risk jeopardizing their closely held ethnic identity. While mosque members meet for social events such as potlucks, the unspoken norm is to stick to one's own ethnic group; and there is generally a sense of individual members competing to maintain their own ethnic roots by refusing, or lacking the will, to learn the customs and traditions of others.

Members of the different ethnic groups also tend to hold strongly to their own "local" beliefs that may contradict another group's beliefs. For example, Arab Muslims and Indian Muslims engage in eternal disagreements about whether or not the hijab is a divine requirement or a personal choice, and whether men and women must be segregated in social events. This multicultural environment could have promoted healthy discussions, education, and learning among the different Muslim ethnic groups leading to bridges of understanding; but it does not seem to happen. Instead, members get branded as either right or wrong, or conservative or liberal. Where is the midway?

One often reads about the larger Muslim communities in California, Michigan, and New York, but rarely has the opportunity to know about the Muslim community in Hawaii. Despite Hawaii's rich cultural mix and accommodation of Asian and Pacific ethnicities, Hawaii Muslims do not appear to have successfully built a harmonious community within the larger Hawaiian society.

Hawaii's geographic location, cost of living, and lifestyle, many of these Muslims do not settle in Hawaii permanently. Hawaii also has a relatively large number of Muslims serving in the US military, whose members must periodically relocate to other duty stations. Muslim civilians who know that they are eventually moving back to the US mainland are not eager to invest considerable amounts of time and money into the community or its physical infrastructure. All of these factors contribute to a sense of fractured and apathetic community. One of the results of such apathy is the absence of a full time Islamic school, or an ongoing youth program. Indeed, while some families are opting for assimilation, others prefer to move back to the continental United States, or respective homelands, for more spiritual and communal support.

Muslim residents in Hawaii can learn from Hawaii's historical lessons of acceptance. What makes the islands of Hawaii such a hospitable gathering place to many different cultures is the principle of cultural exchange that allows knowledge, understanding, and acceptance of difference. The Japanese, indigenous Hawaiians, Portuguese, Chinese, Filipinos, and many others achieved this communal spirit by creating, for example, an English pidgin language so as to communicate better with one another. Building cultural bridges over ethnic and linguistic divides promotes compassion towards each other. Accordingly, particular Muslim ethnic groups should not aim to impose their cultural beliefs on the others: intolerance within mosque communities creates in turn intolerant Muslims within the umma. Muslims in Hawaii would be better off understanding and respecting each other first before demanding to be understood and respected by non-Muslims. The same condition applies to Muslims worldwide.

Why are Hawaii's Muslims not able to surpass communicative difficulties for the sake of the umma, which supposedly everybody has such a genuine desire to build? Perhaps they have conflicting definitions in the first place of what an umma is, or ought to be.

For many of Hawaii's Muslims, developing a sense of belonging to their community is important. Because of

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PHOTO BY MONA DARWICH-GATTO, 2004

A family stationed in Oahu, Hawaii

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