AN APPRAISAL OF PEACEFUL CO-EXISTENCE BETWEEN MUSLIMS AND NON-MUSLIMS IN HOUSTON TEXAS OF USA

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to establish the factors for the possibility of peaceful co-existence between the Muslims and non-Muslims in Houston Texas, despite the spread of Islamophobia in the United States of America. The paper emphasizes a practical approach to the factors contributing to successful efforts of the religious figures in creating an environment of co-existence of different faith in USA. The efforts really help the peace to rain within the communities at large and in the world in general. Therefore, the project requires deep investigation and research to arrive at number of factors that can progressively build a peaceful environment in the global level, Consequently, the findings of the research will suggest some working factors as solutions to the challenges that societies are facing based on the pluralisation of cultures and different backgrounds that could be the course of rift and misunderstanding in the society. The research work will be supported with samples of the events and programs which are designed to build love and mutual understanding between the people of different faiths. The conclusion of the work will produce some practicable measures that can be applied to correct all the propagandas against the Muslims and Islamic teachings that have been distorted and misunderstood. It gives the assurance that people of different faiths can still be living together. Eventually, such efforts will lead to the goal of turning the whole world to a global village where the peace and harmony are conspicuously gaining grounds.

Keywords: Houston Muslim communities, non-Muslims, Coexistence, continuation of peace, Peaceful environment, Global village, Islamophobia.

1. Introduction

Coexistence: At the present time, it means a willingness to live at peace and perhaps even in mutual respect with others of different faiths, ideals etc. unlike oneself. It is also a way for groups of different faith, ideology, and background to live together peacefully with mutual understanding and tolerance of each other. Coexisting is nothing but a means of peace and willingness to live in peace. It is between the human races to live in peace with each other without the discrimination of races.
and tribes that are connected. Religious values are the foundation that America has been established on despite separation of church and state. The three most prevalent religions that are propagating the call to the importance of peaceful coexistence among the human race are Christianity, Judaism, and Islam in addition to secularism.

Houston is a city where the three major religions operate side by side. In the conservative atmosphere, the city has been very accommodating and welcoming to different faiths and races. This city is the fourth largest city in the United States since 1990; it is a model for a peaceful environment. You hardly differentiate between the Christians and Muslims, especially when any of the group is observing their regular congregational prayers, their characters and attitudes are almost the same. These by itself will be enough for the three Abrahamic faiths to be working together and winning the souls together. One, Mr. Thomas S. Kidd wrote a book called American Christians and Islam “saying that Orientalist thesis to American Christians beliefs about Islam, readers should note (strange as it may sound) that I do not consider this book to be about Islam which itself. It is about American Christians and the views they produced about Islam, which normally catered to constituencies within American Christian communities. I believe that American Christians views about Islam usually divulge more about American Christians than about any actual Muslims1. All the basics are that all the three faiths are the same and it should be treated as such so far the three are inviting to the worship of only One God.

Though, all the three Abrahamic religions preach peace, one can still find difference that can often create tension. Comparing these widely varying views of history could help shed light on both the difference and perhaps the similarities between western and eastern worldviews. Analyzing the three religions may also help people of good will from various faiths understand why others views things different and why they feel certain ways.2 All supposed to be one as the books of God says but it is also natural to have differences among the people, according to the teaching of the Quran, originally, humankind was one Ummah, but this unity was broken by various differences which the human beings created among themselves, Allah says:

“The people were but one nation, then they differed. And had it not been for a previous command from your Lord, the matter would have been immediately judged between them for what they differed.” (Q10:19). It emphasizes the main purpose of sending His Messengers to this world is to restore back the balance and unity (of humankind) as He almighty says: “ The people used to be one nation, then God sent the prophets as bearers of good news and warners, and He sent down with them the Scripture with the facts so that they may judge between the people in what they were disputing. But after receiving the clarity, the people disputed in it due to animosity between them.

1. American Christians and Islam by, Thomas S. Kidd
2. What’s Right With Islam by Imam Faisal AbduRauf Pg 173
And God guided those who believed with His permission regarding what they disputed in of the truth. And God guides whoever He wishes to a straight path.” (Q2:213)

Also in another quotation, He says “We have sent Our messengers with clear proofs, and We sent down with them the Scripture and the balance, that the people may uphold justice. And We sent down the iron, wherein there is great strength, and many benefits for the people. So that God would distinguish those who would support Him and His messengers on faith. God is Powerful, Noble.” (Q57:25) teachings of the Bible are also inviting to this unity and coherence among the Believers and the People of God, according to Philippians 2:1-3 “So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy, complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves”. Not only this, Bible also preaches that we should live together peacefully, Romans 12:16 “Live in harmony with one another. Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly. Never be wise in your own sight”.

The historic duty of Christians is seen as saving the world while consecrating their lives to the task while accepting with equanimity the possibility of failure. The world is filled with sin so let us try to improve it. Our goodness lies in loving our enemies in hopes of transforming them for the better. If they do not transform, we try to forgive them and so be it if we die failing. ³ Muslims also enjoy what is good and forbid what is bad according what Quran says: “O you who have believed, indeed, among your wives and your children are enemies to you, so beware of them. But if you pardon and overlook and forgive - then indeed, Allah is Forgiving and Merciful.”(Q64:14) Love for peace transcends the boundary of the other cultures or faiths.

It’s the character of good neighbors that will invite others and the relationship will start from there. A good character is the basis of civility. It enhances civilization and displays the goodness of people. A friend called my attention to Steve Deace, a news personality and talk show host, according to Mr. Deace, in one of his editions titled Coexisting at Christmas: Wal-Mart’s New Christmas Décor for Muslims, Bob Echlin, a guest, recalled that he and his wife went out to get a new tree topper for their Christmas tree. When they wound up at a Waymart, Mr. Echliman and his wife found a crescent moon with a star and no presence of a happy smiling man in the crescent moon. No. This was a crescent and star ornament that could only symbolize one religion: Islam, he said. I was blown away. Another guest, Bryan, also listening in, spotted this as well in another Wal-Mart store in October 2014. He regarded, “I have never known Muslims to celebrate Christmas as

³ ibid pg 173
Christians do\textsuperscript{4}). Having this mind for the Muslims will show them the feeling Christians good feeling toward them, particularly during Christmas festival.

Coexistence should be traced and fine-tuned amongst the three Abrahamic faiths in Houston, Texas in the United States. The city is one of the most peaceful cities in the United States in terms of conflict and religious conflicts. Many coexistence initiatives have been taken in Houston in hopes of creating opportunities for the youth to share with their peers the content of their faiths and to learn from each other for a better future. The youth are free to express their spiritual experiences without any prejudice. One effort was cofounded by the Boniuk Center for Religious Tolerance at Rice University, the city of Houston and Interfaith Ministries for Greater Houston in 2007. The main goal of this initiative is to create a peaceful environment for the future leaders to share their experiences among others. The founders believe that “when you learn about one another’s faith, traditions, you can help encourage greater religious understanding and respect in the city and the world”. Jews, Christians, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, Sikhs, Jains, Agnostics, Atheists, and everyone in between are invited to participate.

(1) Faith strengthening

Numerous verses in the Bible are strengthening the faith of the followers as to grow in faith based on the Bible teachings which no other religion can prove it better, in Matthew 19:26 it says “But Jesus beheld them, and said unto them, with men this is impossible, but with God all things are possible. Another quotation says: “Now unto him that is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think according to the power that worked in us.”(Ephesians 3:20) Faith solidify the love and the relationship among the people, with it believers reach the highest level of connection with God almighty.

Many scholars since the mid-twentieth century have noted growing ecumenism of religious traditions in the United States and increasing tolerance of religious differences. The argument goes that as boundaries between religious traditions weaken and tolerance becomes widespread, religion in general has become the basis for solidarity and trust among Americans. Beliefs found in all religious traditions provide individuals with the moral foundation necessary to be trustworthy citizens\textsuperscript{5}.

2. Displaying a mutual respect understanding amongst the religious groups.

\textsuperscript{4} Steve Deace Magazine December 4, 2004
\textsuperscript{5} Responses to religious diversity in nation and community: Examining the role of beliefs and inter-religious contact by Stephen M. Merino Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Arts May 2009 at The Pennsylvania State University The Graduate School College of The Liberal Arts
Houston is a model for cities to emulate where you can find people living together peacefully. ISGH’s Masjid Taqwa and Shifa Clinic are within walking distance of several churches, and Hindu and Buddhist temples. Despite the closeness of the different places of worship, news of commotion or violence are scarcely heard. It will not be over emphasized to mention that despite all these efforts, people still have to overlook some unfortunate reality that some level of racism, prejudice and discrimination still exist among the groups of faiths. This happens at times when people meet in functions that comprise of different people from different associations and organizations. A common goal for the adherents of Islam, Christianity and Judaism is to worship. As the Quran says “O you people of the book, come for... single word between us for us not to worship in other Good beside Allah ”, the Bible says “Here is the conclusion of the matter: Fear, God and Keep his commandments, for this is the while duty of man, For God will bring every deed unto judgment including every hidden thing, whether it is good or evil” (Ecclesiastes 12:13-14). This is in both the new and old testament. It shows that religious groups differ a lot in their concepts of beliefs, dietary, and their ways of beliefs. There is one thing that they all agree on which is the purpose of life, summarized as having faith in the almighty God and striving to please Him alone with their devotions. Christians are visiting mosques to learn more about Muslims and their religion while Muslims do the same. The Islamic Da’wah Center at the heart of Downtown Houston receives hundreds of non-Muslims visitors yearly who want to know more about Islam, As the main center for the Islamic Society for Greater Houston, the Da’wah center organizes interfaith dialogues between Imams and other religious leaders from time to time.

Houston Muslims Political leadership buttressed the proof of the possibility of coexistence in the city between the community members at large, it has developed an in-depth rap-our and mainstream landscape within the city. Houston was one of the first major metro politician cities in US to see a successful Muslim politician like Mr. M.J Khan to be elected to a high city office. He left the city of Houston Council position after being reelected three times which is the term limit for council members.6

3. Acceptance of Neutrality for the Areas of Differences

Both the Christians and Muslims agreed that Judaism is a predecessor but both have fundamental differences in their attitudes towards the Jews. Traditional Christians believe that it was the end of the process of revelation and that anything subsequent was necessarily false and noxious. While the Muslims have the belief that since Christianity was earlier, Christianity, like Judaism was an incomplete and now superseded religion but not in itself false and not itself noxious. With all these

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6 Islamic Horizon Magazine of Islamic Society of North America. January and February 2014. Pg. 33
both the Christianity and Islam differed from Judaism and both shared the same belief that both are preaching the almost truth. Each claimed to be the sole custodian of God’s final revelation to mankind and neither admitted salvation outside its own creed. The beauty of all is that both Jews and Christians universally agreed that Islam is a monotheistic religion while Muslims believe that both Jews and Christians are people of the book confirming that there is a difference between them and the nonbelievers.

4. Loving one another for the sake of God
There should be love and peace between people because we believe that the God referred to is the one and only God. All religions teach love. Love is a universal concept beyond particular cultures and religions. Though the interpretation will vary from society to society, love is regarded as a positive quality among all of mankind. This will help strengthen the community. The theme for the 2011 yearly Islamic Society of North American (ISNA) Convention was Loving God, Loving Neighbors, Living in Harmony. It was said that “this process begins with the self, drawing close in our relationship to God and fortifying our soul. Houston has been leading in many important ways of creating better life for the people of the city and its environment, making positive impacts on many social services and relief organizations that specialize in taking care of the people. Some organizations engaging in these acts include Houston Shifa Services Foundation (HHSF), a clinic for Muslims and non-Muslims, Helping Hand for Relief and Development USA (HHRD), and Amana Refugees Services, based in Houston with the mission to help refugees in the Houston community integrate successfully in society. Their services are for both Muslims and non-Muslims as part of loving for your brother what you love for yourself. Another effort sponsored by the Muslim community is that of a group of young Muslim professionals who regularly volunteer their time at the Houston Food Bank. This group founded Muslim Go, which combines volunteerism with participation in athletic events supporting a good cause. By emphasizing the important of loving our neighbor, we realize that we are responsible for all of the communities we belong to. Loving our neighbor manifests itself when we sincerely build positive relationships with members of the different communities we belong to.

5. Tolerance
Tolerance has been defined by Merriam Webster Dictionary as “Willingness to accept feelings, habits or beliefs that are different from your own” or according to Oxford dictionary, It can be defined as “The ability or willingness to tolerate something, in particular the existence of opinions or behavior...
that one does not necessarily agree with” These are true meaning of tolerance in all the Abrahamic religions. A Persian scholar of 13th century; Mawlana Jalal-Ad-din Muhammad Rumi said that “Christian, Jew, Muslim, Shawan, Zoroastrian, stone, ground, mountain, river, each has a secret way of being with the mystery, unique and not to be judged9. God almighty is the best Judge, it is not for any human being to condemn or to judge others, and people should learn how leave together in peace. “Don't be in a hurry to condemn because he doesn't do what you do or think as you think or as fast. There was a time when you didn't know what you know today.”-Malcolm X-. People must be ready to tolerate one another for peace and harmony to rain between the different groups of faith and cultures. Houston was named the most diverse city in 2012. People of different cultures, religion and ethnicity are dwelling together as a community of one family. The Houston region is described as the most racially and ethnically diverse metropolitan area in the United States. You can enter any neighborhood and find people from Argentina living next to someone from Iran and someone from Ghana living next to someone from India. You can also see Christians living in the same neighborhood with Muslims. According to a report from the Kinder Institute of Urban Research from Rice University and the Hobby Center for the study of Texas, the Houston metropolitan area is now the most ethnically diverse large metropolitan area in the country with two suburbs, Pearland and Missouri City, leading the region in diversity. The findings come from the University based on an analysis of census data from 1990, 2000 and 2010.

One of the essential keys to coexistence between different faiths is tolerance. This is one of the most important aspects of human rights globally where every individual is free to practice whatever he or she believes. Freedom is nothing to Islam nor to the Christians Kingdom or Judaism. Allah says in Quran 2 verse 256, “There is no compulsion in religion; Verily the Right path has become distinct from the wrong path. Whoever disbelieves in Taghut and believes in Allah, then he has grasped the most trustworthy handhold that will never break. And Allah is All-Hearer, Al-Knower”. One of the essential parts of the beliefs Jews, Muslims, and Christians is to believe in all the prophets, books and the Angels. As the Quran says “The Messenger Muhammad believes in what has been sent down to him from his Lord and (so do) the believers, Each one believes in Allah; His Angels; His Books; and His Messengers. They say ‘We make no distinction between one another of His Messengers’ and they say ‘We hear, and we obey. (We seek) your forgiveness, Our Lord and to You is the return of all”’. Also in the Bible, tolerance has been illustrated as a tool to propagate the

9 The Essential of Rumi by jalal Ad-din Muhammed Rumi. Mowlânâ Jalâloddin Balkhî, known in Persia as Jalâl ad-Dîn Muhammad Balkhî and in the West simply as Rumi, was born on September 30, 1207 C. E. in Balkh Province, Afghanistan, then on the eastern edge of the Persian Empire. Rumi descended from a long line of Islamic jurists, theologians, and mystics, including his father, who was known by followers of Rumi as “Sultan of the Scholars.” When Rumi was still a young man, his father led their family more than 2,000 miles west to avoid the invasion of Genghis Khan’s armies. They settled in present-day Turkey, where Rumi lived and wrote most of his life. (http://www.poets.org/)
religion of God and spread peace among the followers. God says, “As for the one who is weak in faith, welcome him but not to quarrel over opinions. One person believes we may eat anything, while the weak person eats only vegetables. Let not the one who eats despise the one who eats, for God has welcomed him. Who are you to pass judgment on the one who eats for God has welcomed him. Who are you to pass judgment on the servant of Another? It is before his own master that he stands or falls. And he will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make him stand” (Romans 4:1-4). God also says “with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in Love” (Ephesians 4:2). Houston is one of the cities you will enter during Christmas and you will find Muslims celebrating the festival with Christians, I entered into a company called AL-Razaq Computing Services\textsuperscript{10} where the owner is a respected and reputable Muslim in the community and I saw a big Christmas tree and when I asked about it he told me that Islam preaches good dealings, tolerance and justice between the Muslims and the non-Muslims and since many of the employees are Christians, we have to show them the sense of accommodating by rejoicing with them.

Tolerance is something that people should practice at all cost, despite the perceptions and atrocities that people commit in the name of religion of which none of the religions have enjoined their adherents to engage in. One of the golden opportunities that people enjoy in the United States is the freedom of religion in which people are free to practice any religion they choose for themselves without force.

Hijab in Houston is a special dress code for Muslim women and girls, it is a dress of modesty and religious command. It has never happened that State of Texas or the City of Houston have stopped denied the Muslim women that right, school girls are also allowed to wear their Hijab to School in both public and private schools. It liberates the woman and the girls from the sexual gaze of men, and they treat women equally if all the visible signs of sexual attractiveness are removed\textsuperscript{11}.

The City is a very safe place where Muslims and non-Muslims are free to practice their religion.

6. Events, designed to build love and mutual understanding

1-Mayor of Houston and Ramadan Iftar (Breaking fast):-

Despite the call for secularism that has been rampant, it emerged in Western Europe in the seventh earth century and did not establish and enforce irreligion as a new state doctrine but rather to establish the notion or the freedom of religion.

\textsuperscript{10} Al-Razaq Computing Services in Houston. Founded in 1993 by Idrisa M. Iscandri. It is an Operations Management and Business Systems Integration Firm, providing solutions to commercial enterprises, city, state, federal, and other government entities.

\textsuperscript{11} Houston Chronicle of January 11, 2004 Titled: Hijab debate Is it not just a French affair.
This is another development that was introduced in Houston by Mayor Bill White who held office, from 2004-2010; this is developing a close bond between the local Muslim community and the elected city government. It has been attended by successive elected mayors for the past 12 Ramadan. This is an opportunity for city officials including Mayor to celebrate one day of Ramadan. This is an opportunity for city officials including Mayor to celebrate one day of Ramadan together called “Mayor iftar” as a way of creating an harmonious peaceful coexistence between the Muslims and those that belong to other faiths. There was a year during the time of Mayor Bill White where he mentioned that he would also choose some days to fast alongside Muslims. This is a sign of the highest level of humbleness, togetherness and love. It would be amazing to see the Muslims, Christians, and Jews rejoicing together after the years of religious conflicts. Christians gradually come to the conclusion that only in this way would it be possible for adherents of other faiths to live side by side in reasonable peace. Mayor Annise Parker’s visits to Masjids (Mosques) in Houston, shows solidarity and sense of belonging to the community.

2-Amaizing Faith project Dialogue

Dinner Dialogues are the cornerstones of the interfaith programs. They focus on conversations held in homes where groups of Houstonians gather to learn about the faith practices and traditions of the host family (or a community member). Among the benefits of this dinner dialogue is that it creates a safe space for Houstonians to develop new friends and the dinner also serves as an education experience. It allows for the formation of new relationships across traditional religious boundaries. It is a way to strengthen the fabric of our city through genuine exchange of ideas and understanding with one other.

Islamic Society of Greater Houston (ISGH) is another avenue for better understanding, coexistence and the peace found within the different faiths of Houston. It has been consistent in its outreach efforts and initiatives. Church and academic groups visit ISGH facilities to promote greater harmony and deeper understanding of Islam and Muslims. Another center in Houston is Islamic Dahwah Center; It has been accommodating people from different faiths that are troupin in for the purpose of learning more about the religion of Islam. Students from nearby University of Houston and Students from different schools in Houston visit the center from time to time to experience the harmonious nature of the Muslims. It is always amazing to see them around the Masjid especially when these people visit during the Jumat service.

God's creation must be harmonious at all levels: scripture, nature as revealed by science, and Muslim metaphysical thinking must all smoothly fit together in a God-centered picture of reality and harmony should be by the teachings of these group or faiths, as all the holy books and messengers of God preach. There should be communal harmony as all the religions teach that the foundations of
peace is for all mankind to accept one another as human beings that God almighty created into nations and tribes, and he almighty God says that the most noble among you is the most pious, not that Muslims nor Christians are only the nobles. Allah says: Q 43:13 “O mankind, we have created you from a male and a female and made you into nations and tribes, that you may know one another. Verily, the most honorable of you with Allah is that believer who has Al Taqwa (the pious) Verily, Allah is All knowing. All aware.” And categorically, Allah mentioned in chapter 2:256 of the Quran. He says: “There is no compulsion in religion Verily; the right path has become distinct from the wrong path…” According to Bible, God say Jesus said unto him “Thou shalt love the lord, thy God with all heart, and with all thy soul and with the entire mind”.

This is the first and great commandment and the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. On these two commandments lay all the law and prophets (Matthew 22:37-40). The same teaching from the bible also confirmed that the neighbor should be treated nicely. And who are these neighbors? They are Muslims, Jews and any groups of faiths or individuals. God says in Leviticus 19:18 “Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against anyone among your people, but Love your neighbor as yourself. Love the Lord”. Also in Leviticus 19:13 “You shall not defraud your neighbor, neither rob him. The wages or a hired man is not to remain with you all night until morning…” All these are noble teachings. It is also worth mentioning that the top official or foundation for ethnic understanding (FFEU), visited I.S.G.H headquarters to explore ways to promote greater solidarity and harmony between the two religions communities - Jewish and Muslim.

Mr. Walter Ruby of the FFEU in its 2006-2011 report on Muslim and Jew Relations said “since our first modest initiative in this field five years go with a visit to a Muslim high-school in New York, FFEU’s grand breaking Muslim and Jew, Jewish programming has expanded around the world; bringing together tens of thousands of Jews and Muslims from different five continents to engage with each other and build ties of growing friendship and trust.”

7. Conclusion

Freedom of religion has to be sure for the entire citizen and the Immigrants of the States, people are to be free of practicing any religion or culture that they choose. All of the states had either bill of rights of other specific constitutional provisions assuring religious freedom. It gives Americans the honor to enjoy a great degree of religious freedom. At least three hundred religious bodies exist in the United States of and quire remarkable, sometimes even bizarre, activities have been

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countenanced as legitimate exercises of religion\textsuperscript{13}. Coexistence is a must for all the religious people; this is what all the religions preaches, and the leaders should see it as their responsibility to nurse it, grow it and spread it among their followers. All the basics are that all the three faiths are the same and it should be treated as such so far the three are inviting to the worship of only One God. Freedom of the religion should not be a license to freedom of attack that create enmity and build hatred. It is not without limits. No freedom is absolute and liberty can never be equated with license. The cherished right of the individuals to free exercise of religion after conflicts with equally valued rights of other individuals and the interests of the society\textsuperscript{14}. People need to learn more about Islam and the differences between the teachings of Islam and the Muslims. They should abstain from generalizing issues against the Muslims, Islam is a religion of peace and unity.

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