

“Religious Discrimination and Prisoners’ Rights” (A Muslims Point of View)

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Free Exercise of Religious Rights

The realization that at this late hour in the life of America, since its establishment by the founding fathers we find our citizens have to appeal to courts of law to secure that lawful right to exercise the freedom of religion. This in of itself is not a disaster, yet it reveals the nature of human society. They may start out with the best of intentions and have even an ideal framework, however our society is a dynamic one and the idea and the application are not always in agreement. We applaud the U.S. Supreme Court and its decision that supports prisoners’ religious freedom. The administration of justice is a complex one, however the fruits of fairly adjudicated decisions benefit us all.

The need to accommodate the various expressions of non-mainstream religious practices actually can enhance the American life and add to the vitality of our society. Individuals benefit and prisoners’ in particular are more likely to come back into society upon release and make meaningful contributions to a society that defends and supports their rights. On the other side of the coin when non mainstream religious expressions are suppressed it can contribute to anti-social responses and a sense of alienation and mistrust. Thus the rehabilitative aspects of religious principles can be clouded with an awareness of rejection and non-acceptance in the general society. In the opinion of this writer respect and inclusion is in our best interest.

Prison Security & Public Safety

Public safety and security are major concerns for prison officials and providers of organized religious services as well. In some instances the perception by prison officials is that the religious services are somehow illegitimate and merely fronts for screening behavior that is illegal. The need for safety is also a major factor in the teachings of Al-Islam with these ideas be found throughout the Qur’an and the sayings of the Prophet of Al-Islam Mohammed (p), as the converts to Al-Islam learn the principles of public safety and security they become upholders of the public good and less of a cause for concern. These factors have been acknowledged by prison administrators who regard Muslim inmates as model prisoners. We of the faith of Al-Islam have no interest in compromise when we are faced with the need for security, we uphold the regulations that ensure the safety, security, and general well being of all those we interact with.

Religious Discrimination & Litigation

We have come to understand much of what occurs as alleged religious discrimination is in some cases the result of unrealistic expectations of prisoners and sometimes extreme requests. We also recognize the legitimate rights of prisoners that are denied because of the inadequate knowledge of the prison staff, who may be encumbered by the own religious beliefs and in some case biases. It is the belief that knowledge and education dispels false premises and brings about greater clarity and appreciation for people and their points of differences.

Whereas we are an ever evolving society the accommodation and respect for this process of ongoing adjustment in our application of our citizenship rights and responsibilities while respecting others, brings out the best aspects of our form of democratic government. Prisoners’ have the right to address grievances in a civil manner, by appealing to administrative procedures within the prison system are actually encouraged so that prisoners learn how to correct alleged infractions or abuses in a manner acceptable to civilized society. We are actually very displeased with our prison system and believe it is in need of ongoing reform as our courts have affirmed. The system is not perfect.

Faith Based Provision of Services in Prisons’

Historically, faith based efforts have always been infused into the prison reform (correctional) efforts by well meaning organizations. As we survey the current landscape we access the needs of those who find themselves in they meet specific profiles, coming from certain predominant ethnicities and socio-economic circumstances. Consequentially these realities predispose these individuals to respond to Al-Islam in significant numbers, because it offers hope, and a path way out of what some have experienced as a life of despair. Al-Islam because of being relatively, (the new kid on the block) has a great surge of interest. There are other reasons as well. The need for volunteers is significant, we also have a great need for full time Chaplains to meet the ever growing request for counsel and guidance from our faith tradition. In administering services to prison inmates we find ourselves as providers have to here concerns related to parity as it relates to attendance at religious services, fairness in reference to dietary obligations, and some institutional policies that are arbitrarily applied.

There have also been documented cases of racial intolerance along with religious intolerance that have involved Muslim Chaplains being escorted off of the institutional grounds in a very humiliating and demeaning manner. The alleged bases for these actions are some what trivial and in some cases remain unresolved to this date. These matters are extremely serious and should not be allowed to go unchecked by the proper authority.

Church & State Separation: Challenges & Contradictions

The value of the attempts to balance the exercise of power and authority as I understand it is necessary and developed out of the collective experience and wisdom of the founding fathers of this great nation. The very realization that to have religion intricately involved in the governing of a diverse populace would pose at the very least perceptual concerns of favoritism and bias.

So in this regard institutions should not in of themselves display an implied sanction of any religion based on anything other than fairness and recognition of prisoners right to chose for themselves how they exercise their religious rights. The mere idea of who has been offering services longer should not give preferential consideration to one group over another. Most institutions historically have had churches, Catholic and Protestant associated with them and in some case Jewish Synagogues; these naturally resulted from the needs of the institutionalized population. The phenomena we observe now are a surge in Muslim conversions and the resulting need for facilities that accommodate the needs of Islamic worship needs. In some cases Mosques (Masajid) have been established within the institutions. This is to be commended. We also see in some institutions a more general worship space shared by all the various faith traditions.

A Brief Historical Overview

The religion of Al-Islam has had an ever evolving presence in the life of America. Among its adherents and practitioners have been the slaves brought these shores as chattel. Many very important events have brought the religion of Al-Islam into the forefront of the publics’ awareness. However these media driven images are not always good.

In some instances Muslims are misunderstood and stereotyped. Prisons have been viewed by some as a fertile ground for the infusion of terrorist ideology. However we find that most institutionalized Muslims converted to Al-Islam as a means to as better life. Al Islam surfaced as an alternative allowing them to seek to overcome a past life of crime, drugs, and a myriad of additional social maladies that resulted in their poor decision making and life style choices.

The presence of the early beginnings of Al-Islam in Americas prisons (or at least a variation thereof) can be found in the experiences of the proto-type Muslim community in America led by the late leader; the honorable Elijah Muhammad. These men were imprisoned due to their conscientious objection to being involved in World War II. Later at the behests of his family Malcolm X was encouraged to explore, those teachings as a means to change his life. It did. Muhammad Ali was also faced the possibility of imprisonment due to his position on the Viet Nam War. Imam W. Deen Mohammed in complying with the teachings of his father was imprisoned because of conscientious object status in relation to the Viet Nam War as well.

The far reaching wisdom and scriptural insight of Imam W. Deen Mohammed paved the way for the teaching of Al-Islam to reach unsurpassed levels by being acknowledged officially by state and federal institutions throughout the United States of America. Imam W. Deen Mohammed’s educating his communities leadership, positioned them to organize Imams’ throughout the USA and develop efforts to prepare Muslim prisoners and others to successfully return to their communities and become productive citizens and responsible men and women contributing to the beauty and diversity of this societal fabric we call America. Though we be only one strand, the eroding of one stranding can be the unraveling of the entire garment. Love and respect for all of humanity is crucial.