The below article was published on 1st July 2006 in *The Arab American News* (vol. 22, issue no. 1064) of Dearborn, Michigan, USA. It was written as a response to the issue raised by Asra Nomani (also published in the same newspaper) against the separation of men and women in mosques. This article does not deal with the various side issues that some people bring up as so-called consequences of separation. I have dealt with those side issues in various majalis in Toronto, especially on the issue of marriage. Moreover, this was written from a broader Muslim perspective since the newspaper caters to Muslim as well as non-Muslim readers.

Gender apartheid or respectable interaction?

By Sayyid Muhammad Rizvi

Asra Nomani suggests that the separation between men and women in mosques was established much later in Muslim history than during the days of the Prophet. She has also tried to link that with the Wahhabi influence on the Muslim world. Those views are either sheer ignorance on her part or plain intellectual dishonesty.

The separation of genders is found in mosques run by all sects of Islam, from Sunni to Shi'a, and from Wahhabi to Sufi, based on the explicit example left by the last Prophet. Separation is just a facilitator towards modesty, used according to circumstances, for maintaining respectable interaction as opposed to free mixing of genders in public spaces.

The first generations of Muslims in America established their Islamic centers with meager resources, modeled upon their cultural structures where women were assigned a smaller, inferior space. They also didn't realize the challenges of their new homeland. It is high time many religious centers were modified to address the needs of our time and place, as well as being made female-friendly.

But in their quest for user-friendly centers, Muslims shouldn't lose sight of their core Islamic values either. An Islamic center should not only reflect its unique architectural features in appearance, it must also infuse Islamic moral-ethical values into the community. Muslims should not just sheepishly imitate every norm that they see around themselves, especially when that imitation clashes with the Islamic texts they claim to follow.

Qur'anic and historical references

Islam is based on the Qur'an and the Sunnah of the Prophet. While it does not necessarily reject local social customs, it does expect its followers to modify whatever is against its values. One of the core Islamic values is modesty in interaction between genders.

The story of Prophet Moses and Prophet Shu'ayb's daughters, mentioned in the Qur'an (28:23-28) and traditions, reminds us of inward and outward modesty (haya'). When Moses fled Egypt and reached Madyan, he came to a well where he found a group of men drawing water for their flocks. Nearby, he saw two young women holding back their flock.

He went to the two ladies and asked, "What is the matter with you that you are holding back your flock?" They said, "We cannot draw water until the shepherds move away with their sheep from the well and our father is a very old man," meaning he could not do the task himself.

Upon realizing the modesty of the women who did not like to mingle with strange men, Moses offered to help. He watered their sheep for them, and went back to the shade for resting.

Upon returning home, the sisters narrated the incident to Shu'ayb, and he asked them to call Moses so that he could thank him.

Then, one of the two women came to Moses walking modestly and invited him on behalf of her father. They went back to the girl's house with Moses walking in front so as not to see her bodily features.

After Shu'ayb thanked Moses, one of the ladies said, "O my father, since we do not have a young man in the family, employ him to work for you; surely the best person that you can employ is the one who is strong and trustworthy." Shu'ayb not only offered employment to Moses, he made him his son-in-law.

This Qur'anic story teaches us that in Islam: **1.** Mixing and mingling of unrelated men and women is discouraged; **2.** Women may, whenever necessary, participate in the socio-political-economic spheres of society outside of their homes, but they must do so with haya'; **3.** Even in permissible interaction, haya' must be observed in dealing with the opposite sex; **4.** Islamic guidelines regarding separation or maintaining the distance between genders are not only for the mosque.

The vast majority of Muslim scholars, Sunni and Shi'a, accept the following traditions of the Prophet. We see that even when women came in hijab (Islamic attire) to the mosque for prayers, the Prophet preferred that at the time of leaving the mosque, the men stay behind so that the women could exit first. Later, still in his lifetime, a separate entrance was made for ladies so that there would be no chance for mingling inside. The Prophet did not even like the mingling of men and women in the streets. Even when women participated in the prayer at the mosque, the men and the women did not mingle; they maintained their distance. That is partly why some women asked the Prophet to dedicate a day for "ladies only," so that they could meet him and ask questions away from men.

Therefore, the norm in most Muslim societies has been to keep men and women apart by a barrier or designated separate spaces whenever there is a gathering of Muslims. It is clear that this norm can be traced back through the centuries to the example of the Prophet of Islam himself.

Why is modesty stressed in Islam?

The concept of haya' is manifested in Islamic teachings in different ways: the respectable interaction between men and women, the dress-code, and also the separation of genders in Muslim gatherings. One can also refer to chapter 24, verse 33, of the Qur'an for examples of how men and women should behave with one another.

The obvious result of ignoring the value of haya' in society is a rise in pre- and extra-marital affairs, marriage breakdowns and children being born out of wedlock. This is to say nothing, of course, about flaunting indecent behavior by shamelessly talking of one's illegitimate sexual relations – something which seems to have become a non-issue with some people.

The separation of genders in public has nothing to do with the superiority or inferiority of one over the other and it definitely is not "apartheid." Separation of the genders has to do with promoting decency and modesty. Separating men and women or enforcing modesty in their interaction also helps them stay focused on their work. That's one reason many successful corporations discourage employees from having romantic relationships with each other.

When it comes to a woman's involvement in society, surely Islam allows respectable and sanctified interaction; it clearly does not allow unnecessary mingling. One may make a personal choice not to follow this explicit guideline, but then one should not expect Islam to endorse such behavior.

I know of many Islamic organizations where in spite of a physical separation in the centers, women fully participate at all levels of the decision-making process. Of course, more and more centers need to do that, but on Islamic terms, not secular ones. It is not Islam that needs reformation; it is Muslims who need to be reformed, to reach higher levels of submission to God's will.

Muslim men and women shouldn't compete against one another; they should be complementing one another in promoting the good and preventing the evil (Qur'an, 9:71).

But do the so-called "progressive Muslims" even know what is really right and what is wrong according to Islamic teachings? I think not.

* * * * *

"These days we are often told that we must keep up with the times. Rarely does one ask what have the 'times' to keep up with. For men who have lost the vision of a reality which transcends time, who are caught completely in the mesh of our time and space and who have been affected by the historicism prevalent in modern European philosophy, it is difficult to imagine the validity of a truth that does not conform to their immediate external environment. **Islam, however, is based on the principle that truth transcends history and time. Divine Law is an objective transcendent reality, by which man and his action are judged, not vice versa.**
"What are called the 'times' today are to a large extent a set of problems and difficulties created by man's ignorance of his own real nature and his stubborn determination to 'live by bread alone'. To attempt to shape the Divine Law to the 'times' is there no less than spiritual suicide because it removes the very criteria by which the real value of human life and action can be objectively judged and thus surrenders man to the most infernal impulses of his lower nature. To say the least, the very manner of approaching the problem of Islamic Law and religion in general by trying to make conform to the 'times' is to misunderstand the whole perspective and spirit of Islam."

Dr. Seyyed Hossein Nasr
Islamic Life and Thought (Albany: SUNY, 1981) p. 26.