

“I need respect, not male protection.”

Recently I spoke at a dinner organized by REHMA, a seniors' organization in Toronto. There must have been about 300 people, most of whom were Muslims, and so I decided to challenge them as my co-religionists.

I told them of the dreams we had almost fifty years ago, when the community of multi-ethnic Canadian Muslims was small but warm and welcoming. We shared a dream for the future of Islam and Muslims in Canada.

We were optimistic of the future of Islam and of Muslims, and our vision was for Muslims to practice Islam which would be one of deep tolerance, celebrating its diversity, and be forward thinking. As Canadian Muslims we would play a proud and active part in our country. That was what we worked for.

We hoped that Muslims would emphasize the fundamentals of our faith, not get entangled in details, treat women and men as equals and not always judge our actions as bida [bad innovations] or haram [invalid and sinful]

Has this dream come true?

Has the increase in our numbers and in the mosques and Islamic centres led to greater tolerance, diversity and scholarship? Undoubtedly racism and discriminated dog our lives, but as Canadian Muslims have we been courageous and willing to look at ourselves and our actions? Along with demanding and defending our rights, have we stood up for the human rights of others?

There have been examples of our fellow Canadians who have stood beside us to ensure that our rights have not been trampled – the Toronto Actions for Social Change [TASC] which has advocated against the security certificates for some Muslim men; the dozens of organizations who supported the One family law for all Canadian women; and the recent coalition against the Quebec Bill 94. This Bill if legislated would insist that the face be uncovered for provision and obtaining of essential services, and is aimed against some Muslim women.

I can speak for our organization which has joined others in standing up for the rights of others, and I would like to see more Canadian Muslim organizations involved in activities beyond the Muslim communities.

Within the Muslim communities, I wish that as a Muslim woman I would be treated as an equal amongst believers and not as someone to be segregated in religious or social gatherings. I wish I could enter all the mosques from the wide clean front doors and not from some side hidden alleyway, so that I too could pray in an open space not

cloistered from view in a rear gallery or separated room. Honestly, I need respect not male protection.

When I have raised this with some Muslims I have been chided that this is a minor point. But I would remind you of the African American woman, Rosa Parks, who decided to sit in one of the front seats of a bus rather than moving to the back. The dominant group asked: Why the fuss? After all the bus was going in the right direction whether she sat in the back or the front?

Ah! But there is a profound difference, isn't there? Just apply this to the places provided for women in too many Muslim gatherings.

Before we explore the question of our future role and responsibilities as Canadian Muslims, let us examine the way I have phrased "Canadian Muslims."

CCMW has deliberately called ourselves Canadian Muslims rather than Muslim Canadians or Muslims in Canada. This is significant, because we are proud to claim our citizenship with all other Canadians, and then acknowledge other vital aspects of our identity such as our faith and our diverse ethnic or racial origins.

So what of our future as Canadian Muslims?

I think as individuals and as groups we need to make thoughtful decisions as to what will make us distinct, what are the essentials of Islam we should hold on to, what reasonable accommodations will we ask for, what accommodations are we willing to make for the common good, and most importantly who will be the leaders worth following?

The tide of conservatism is strong in all religions just now, but as Muslims we need to fight against any form which demands of us to adhere to a narrow, intolerant and monolithic interpretation of Islam.

We are blessed to be part of the great Canadian experiment of how peoples and religions can exist in harmony, and be the wonderful example of diversity and tolerance within the framework of the Charter of Rights and Freedoms. Will Canadian Muslims, even with racism and prejudice as part of our experience, work to become an integral part or will we aim to remain separated and segregated?

As a believing Muslim I passionately hope that we constructively fight for justice, be examples of our tradition of compassion and equality, and reject the path of anger and bitterness which will destroy our own souls.

What a dreamer am I, but what is the alternative?