WHAT IS AN AMERICAN?

A Conversation with Shakila Ahmad

BOARD CHAIR AND PRESIDENT, ISLAMIC CENTER OF GREATER CINCINNATI

SINCE THIS IS A NATION OF IMMIGRANTS, the blending of cultures and traditions is what makes the United States unique. However, since the early 1900s, our nation has had an uneven and complicated record of welcoming immigrants. We spoke to Shakila Ahmad, board chair and president of the Islamic Center of Greater Cincinnati, who provided a timely perspective of American Muslims in the post 9/11 world.

Ahmad

"Our nation is founded on a pluralistic belief that together we are better and stronger than apart," said Ahmad. "To be an American is to be someone with access to tremendous opportunities and freedom."

She added that it does not mean the United States is perfect. "There are struggles we must overcome, but we're making progress…there is not a better place in the world."

Born in Pakistan, Ahmad's family moved to Indiana so her father could study at Indiana University. When she was nine, the family moved to Cincinnati. Like her parents, she pursued higher education and graduated from the University of Cincinnati McMicken College of Arts and Sciences.

She became the first woman named to the board of directors for the Islamic Center of Greater Cincinnati. In 2013, she became board president. Ahmad is also serving as the center's interim executive director, or imam. She also holds leadership positions with the YWCA Cincinnati, the United Way of Greater Cincinnati, the Cincinnati FBI Multicultural Advisory Council and the Cincinnati Mayor's Task Force on Immigration.

She rejects the notion that a low profile may be the best course of action in response to what she describes as a "dark, ugly xenophobic cloud of fear" lying across the nation.

"Many people do not know a Muslim person. This void creates confusion and fear…much of what is known is far from the actual teachings in the Koran."

U.S. Census data indicate Muslims comprise less than two percent of the country's population and less than one percent of Ohio's population. She attributes anti-Muslim backlash to the cumulative failure "to recognize, that as Americans, we now live in a global society. It's time for us all to move beyond self-perpetuating stereotypes."

Reflecting, she added, "As a nation of immigrants, we must look to our nation's past and the principles upon which the Republic was founded. Excluding Native Americans, at some point we are all immigrants to this country. Men like Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin and George Washington saw the beauty of a pluralistic society of immigrants."

She is not surprised "xenophobia" was Dictionary.com's *2016 Word of Year* or that the word was in Google's top search terms during 2016 — with a spike in November. "I've heard more than my fair share of xenophobic remarks regarding immigrants and other communities not seen as 'authentically American,'" noted Ahmad. "As legal citizens of this country, Muslims are a part of the ever changing, expanding social fabric of America."

It saddens Ahmad that her faith has been twisted by extremists who spread a message distorting the teaching of the Prophet Mohammad and the Koran. "It's inappropriate to label a global religion of 1.6 billion people with the senseless term 'Islamic terrorist.' It would be equally senseless to use terms like 'Christian terrorist' or 'Jewish terrorist.'" She added that to use such a broad brush overlooks the civic and social contributions Muslims make to our communities.

The concept of "*jihad*" is perhaps the greatest misconception about Muslims. "It is frequently used — inaccurately — by politicians and the media as well as by the Islamic State and al-Qaeda to further an agenda based on a lack of knowledge of the actual teachings of Mohammed," Ahmad said.

Misunderstandings about Islam fuel Ahmad's quest to develop educational programs about the true word of the Koran, and she works tirelessly to build interfaith relationships. In the fall, Xavier University will host an "Introduction to *Nostra Aetate*: Religious Pluralism and the Campus Community." The conference is a collaboration between the university and the Islamic Center to explore the value of interfaith relationships and the history of ecumenism.

"This work is important to us all," said Ahmad. "It's dangerous to turn away and say, 'I am not Muslim so it doesn't concern me.' As Americans, it concerns us all. It takes all of us working together to bring out the good."