Synopsis of the Friday Sermon delivered by Ameer Mustapha Elturk on December 6, 2013

Modesty and Chastity in Islam

The Prophet (SAW) in an authentic hadith said, “Iman (faith) has more than seventy or sixty branches. The most excellent of which is the declaration, ‘There is no god but Allah,’ and the humblest of which is the removal of what is harmful from the road. And modesty is a branch of iman” (al-Bukhari and Muslim).

The Prophet (SAW) emphasized the importance of tawheed, our basic creed that begins with the expression la ilaha illalah, or the testimony of faith, “There is no god but Allah,” which determines our relationship with our Creator Allah (SWT). He (SAW) also emphasized the importance of making the road-ways safe for all by removing any injurious or harmful object(s), thus being beneficial to the created. The third important branch of iman the Prophet (SAW) mentioned in the hadith was modesty, a subject most relevant to everyone particularly Muslims.

The following excerpt from IONA’s brochure on Modesty and Hijab reads, “There was a time in America when a woman did not go out in public with unrelated men, when men lowered their gaze to women and when women and men alike dressed tastefully with dignity and humility. Today, not only is it acceptable for women to dress provocatively, it is encouraged, particularly by the men who look on with no shame. It is easy to understand how the lack of modesty has evolved in the West in general, and in America in particular as virtuous ideals and morals are now scoffed at in the name of secularism. As the Prophet (SAW) said, without faith, there is no modesty. As our society loses its faith, so goes our modesty.”

As believers we should be concerned. The immigrants who chose to make America their home came from a different experience. Modesty was an essential part of private and public life. Traces of modesty can still be witnessed perhaps in some remote towns and villages where the internet and social media have not yet invaded their lives.

In today's society, modesty and chastity are fading away. Unfortunately, our children who are born and raised in America, particularly the last couple of generations, did not experience what real modesty is. Living in America (or anywhere in the world for that matter since the world has been transformed into a global village, thanks to the internet) and influenced by the glamorous celebrities and the entertainment industry, people have lost the sense of modesty and chastity. Lewd, rude, vulgar and obscene images and articles circulate freely through cyberspace without any accountability. The publicized immodest and immoral behavior is a new phenomenon. This trend began in the 1950’s.

Another excerpt reads, “The same immoral and indecent behavior was present in Arabia during the pre-Islam era. Over a thousand years ago, Islam sought to change the surrounding society that knew the word haya, roughly translated as modesty, bashfulness and shame, but did not understand its meaning. Nudity was not only common in every day life, it was even part of religious rituals. Islam changed the society in such a way that haya became one of its most cherished values. Today, we continue to celebrate this value and adhere to the teachings of modesty revealed by Allah (SWT) and exemplified by the Prophet (SAW). The Prophet (SAW) said, ‘Every religion has its characteristic, and the characteristic of Islam is modesty.’”

Modesty is an intrinsic quality in humans that manifests itself in a natural human urge to cover one’s private parts. According to the Qur’an, when Adam and Hawa’ (Eve) ate from the forbidden tree, they became aware their private parts were exposed and began to cover themselves with the leaves of the garden, as a natural result of their modesty. "Their nakedness became exposed to them when they had eaten from the tree: they began to put together leaves from the Garden to cover themselves. Their Lord called to them, ‘Did I not forbid you to approach that tree? Did I not warn you that satan was your sworn enemy?’” (al-A’raf, 7:23)

It was satan who seduced Adam and Hawa’ (AS) and stripped them naked exposing their shame. It is the same devil who is
stripping the clothes off of our society, the garment of righteousness, exposing its shame through the immodest, indecent and lewd behavior of people through TV shows, entertainment, art and music, all in the name of freedom of expression and modernity. A clear instruction has reached us from Allah (SWT), “O Children of Adam, We have given you garments to cover your nakedness and as adornment for you; the garment of taqwa (God-consciousness) is the best of all garments - this is one of God's signs, so that people may take heed” (al-A'raf, 7:27).

When iman goes so does haya’ or modesty and chastity. Modesty is an integral part of iman. The Prophet (SAW) categorically said, “One who does not have haya’ (modesty) does not have iman.” In a similar fashion the Prophet (SAW) said, “Modesty and faith (iman) are interlinked, when one goes, the other follows.” No believer is a believer while committing shameful deeds. This phenomenon can be understood from a hadith recorded in Sunan Abu Dawud, where the Prophet (SAW) once said, “When a person commits zina (fornication), iman (faith) leaves him, until it is like a cloud over his head.”

Modesty in Speech, Actions and Dress

Modesty in speech: One should not be surprised in this day and age to learn that not only adults but even primary school students use dirty and shameful phrases in their speech. It is quite common to hear words casually flow from their mouths. This phenomenon is attributed to vulgar songs, movies and television shows. It is believed that such language brings them the attention they desire. There was a time when people would refrain from vain talk, let alone gossip and licentious speech.

One of the Prophet (SAW)’s gems of wisdom is, “Whoever believes in Allah and the Last Day should speak a good word or remain silent.” To be quiet does not mean that one is dull or boring. One must say things that are meaningful and beneficial. He (SAW) gave good news when he informed us, “Whoever guarantees me (the chastity of) what is between his legs (i.e. his private parts), and what is between his jaws (i.e., his tongue), I guarantee him Paradise.

Not only should we refrain from useless and profane speech, the Qur’an instructs us to speak in a moderate tone. “And be moderate in your pace, and lower your voice; for the harshest of sounds without doubt is the braying of the donkey” (Luqman,31:19). Unfortunately, we live in a culture where loud yelling matches are encouraged, particularly with reality and talk shows, with no regard to the lost value of this great faculty of speech.

Modesty in walking: Both men and women appear to have lost their modesty and shyness even in walking. Some walk arrogantly and in a challenging, defiant or rebellious manner while others walk in a sexually seductive manner enticing the opposite sex.

Ads and programs of lustful men and women are shaping the way we dress, walk and behave. There was a time in America where segregation of the sexes was a natural trend. Women dressed very modestly and walked bashfully lest they attract attention toward themselves, particularly the attention of men. This natural phenomenon is an inherent trait within people.

The Qur’an mentions the story of the two women who sought to fetch water for their animals. They stood aside to avoid mixing with men. Musa (AS) helped them. Soon after, “one of the two women approached him walking bashfully, and said, ‘My father is asking for you: he wants to reward you for watering our flocks for us.’” (Al-Qasas 28:25). Their father was an old man who could not do the job and they had no male siblings. The natural instinct of modesty and shyness has always existed.

We must recognize the obsession of sex in our culture and safeguard ourselves and families from such inclinations. The Prophet (SAW) described women who dress immodestly and walk seductively and shamelessly to be forbidden from entering paradise. He (SAW) said, “There will be women who are dressed yet appear to be naked, swaying and walking in a seductive and provocative manner. They will in no way enter paradise, nor will the smell of their fragrance be able to reach a distance of 500 years.”

Modesty in Dress: Men and women are dressing up in ways that leave little to the imagination. The purpose of provocative dress is simply to draw attention to ones’ self. Islam mandates certain dress codes for men and women alike. There is a clear and decisive scholarly consensus on the mandating of hijab for women. In the Qur’an, Allah (SWT) states, “Say to the believing women that they should lower their gaze and guard their modesty – they shouldn’t display their beauty and ornaments except what [must ordinarily] appear thereof and they should draw their headcovering over their bosoms, and not reveal their adornment”(al-Nur, 24:31).

Allah (SWT) commands the Prophet (SAW) to tell the believing women to take a series of steps: 1) to lower their gaze, which is mandated for both women and men alike; 2) to guard their chastity or sexuality, again applicable to both; and 3) to conceal their natural beauty, which scholars have interpreted to mean the whole body except for the face and hands.

The word, “headcovering” or “khimar,” more familiar in our times as hijab, refers to the cloth that covers the head. Women at the time of revelation wore their headcovers tied back behind their necks, leaving the front of the neck and opening at the top of the dress exposed. The revelation confirmed the practice of covering the head, and directed women to tie the headcover in front and let it drape down to conceal the throat and dress opening at the top.

In addition to the headcovering, modest dress includes opaque, loose fitting clothing that does not reveal a woman’s shape.
Make-up and perfume would defeat the purpose of dressing modestly as it attracts negative attention from the opposite sex and exploits one’s sexuality.

According to the Prophet (SAW), “There will be women who will be dressed but they will be naked. Their heads will be like the humps of camels. They will not enter paradise and will not even smell the scent of paradise while it can be smelled from a far distance.” He (SAW) also said, “If you have no modesty, do as you wish.” Today, it is not uncommon for women to dress provocatively in public and complain when they are not respected or treated negatively.

The fact of the matter is that we live in a hyper-sexualized world obsessed with appearances, and this presents severe challenges upon the Muslim spiritual psyche. The way to restore this natural quality of modesty is to gain iman and taqwa, through which one is able to refuse to unveil what requires to be hidden. We must restrict ourselves from immodest speech, dress and conduct. We must also resist the temptations that lead to such immodest conduct. It is indeed a struggle.

One may infer from the many hadiths that begin with, “Whoever believes in Allah and the last day…” the wisdom of the Prophet (SAW). Usually such a preamble is followed with specific instructions. It means that if you truly believe in Allah, then conduct yourself in a manner pleasing to Allah (SWT) and if you truly believe in the hereafter, then hold yourself accountable before Allah (SWT) holds you accountable. If we keep this in mind and do our very best to remain conscious of Allah, our sins would be reduced and our speech, dress and conduct would be in line with modesty and chastity.

Allah (SWT) praised the ummah of the Prophet (SAW) for being the best ummah on the basis of its mission. We have been entrusted with the final universal message to be shared with the entire world until the Day of Judgment. It is we, Muslims, who need to set the correct example and be models for others to emulate, rather than emulating those who do not have the guidance and wisdom of Islam.