

MUSLIM PANELISTS RESPOND TO YOUR QUESTIONS: PART ONE

As promised, I met recently with a group of Muslims and asked them your questions. To their credit, they were not shy, reticent or unwilling to answer. They said they were eager to set the record straight. You may not be satisfied with some of the answers — I wasn't, either — but I am convinced that what this group said, they believe.

More than 200 of you wrote and gave me in excess of 500 questions. (I quit counting after that.) At least a third of the questions concerned the perception that Muslims are not speaking out against the violence being committed in the name of Islam. The second most frequently asked question was whether or not they could be loyal to the United States and still be true to their faith. More on those issues later.

If I was expecting a group of fire-eating, sign-waving, "Death to the Great Satan" Muslims, I didn't get them. I sat down with an employee of General Electric, a wholesale rug merchant, an information technology consultant whose partner is a Christian from Jerusalem, another IT professional and the head of the Islamic Speakers Bureau. The group consisted of four men and one woman. Three were converts to Islam — one black, one white and one Lebanese. One was a naturalized citizen from Syria, and the other from Egypt.

We began with Mansour Ansari, the rug merchant, saying that Islam is not a monolithic faith and that Muslims have divergent views of the faith, from both a cultural standpoint and by the way some choose to interpret the Qur'an, the book of sacred writings that Muslims believe was revealed to the prophet Muhammad by God, via the Angel Gabriel.

Anthony Costa, of Cartersville, and a number of other readers wanted to know why Sunni and Shiites don't get along. Why are they always fighting with each other? Soumaya Khalifa, the executive director of the Islamic Speakers Bureau, says that there is no difference between the two sects. She says she wasn't even aware she was Sunni until recently. "No Muslim approaches another Muslim and asks 'Are you Sunni or Shiite?'" Khalifia says. (It turned out that all the panelists were Sunni.)

Amin Tomeh, the IT consultant, says that from a religious standpoint both Sunnis and Shiites believe in one God and that the Prophet Muhammad is his messenger. It is the radical element of both groups that promote the animosity. Ansari says one way that Arab politicians and Muslim leaders maintain political power is to encourage Muslims to fight among themselves. He says about 2 percent of the Muslims who are Sunnis and 2 percent of the Muslims who are Shiites try to divide the other 96 percent. Ansari cites our own War Between the States in which Christians fought against Christians as an example. The war was not about religion, he says; it was about politics and control.

The group says much of the discord in the Muslim world originates from the Wahibist philosophy, a very fundamental school of thought that has its base in Saudi Arabia. One of its disciples is Osama bin Laden. They say the alliance between the Saudi ruling class and Wahibists is one of mutual convenience. Thanks to Saudi oil money, the fundamentalists have the means to export their hard-line philosophy beyond Saudi Arabia and for the most part leave the Saudi ruling family free to rule as they please. Interestingly, all of the panelists consider Wahibists a "fringe group" that loses as many adherents as it gains. I'm not convinced.

Spencer Connerat Jr. of Savannah, and several other readers wanted to know about how mosques are organized in the United States, and how decisions are made. The answer is that all mosques are locally operated. There is no hierarchy. No centralized organization. For example, the Pope is acknowledged as the head of the Catholic Church, but there is no equivalent authority among Muslims. Each local mosque makes its own decisions.

An hour into the discussion, we were just getting warmed up. Next week, I will tell you what Muslims say about women's rights, the State of Israel, infidels, terrorism and leaving the faith. I think you will be surprised at their answers. I was. Stay tuned.