Islam on the defensive

Scholars contend criticism of Islam's links to terrorism oversimplify complex tradition

By MARGOT PATTERSON

President George W. Bush has insisted that the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11 and the U.S. response to them are not about Islam but about terrorism. In the immediate aftermath of the events, many Americans, Islam clerics around the world denounced the terrorist attacks on New York and Washington that left approximately 3,000 people dead.

While Osama bin Laden, the alleged instigator of the terrorist hijackings, portrayed the attacks and the retaliatory bombing by the United States as a clash of civilizations and called on Muslims to rise up against the infidels, a chorus of voices both inside and outside the Muslim world said bin Laden's views represented a perversion of Islam.

More recently, some voices have spoken out to point out that the conflict between the United States and Osama bin Laden and his followers is more rooted in the nature of Islam and its defenders envoys.

Writing for The New York Times Magazine in a piece titled "This is a Religious War," Sudanese Salman Rushdie wrote a Nov. 2 New York Times opinion piece, "Yes, This is About Islam," in which he spoke of the need for a depoliticized Islam that would assume the secularist-humanist principles on which non-Islam is based. Nobelist and Nobel prize-winning V.S. Naipaul, long a critic of Islam, assailed the religion once again in an interview published in the Oct. 28 issue of The New York Times Magazine, asserting that a non-fundamentalist Islam was a contradiction in terms. More recently, New York Times columnist Thomas Friedman, in his article "Islam!

"This is not about terrorism. Terrorism is just a tool. We're fighting to defeat an ideology. Religious totalitarianism.

Suddenly Islam itself, not just Osama bin Laden and his terrorist network, is under scrutiny, the object of an intellectual investigation about its values, its history and its compatibility with modern society.

What is the claim here? Is Islam essentially inherently intolerant in the nature of Islam that makes it maladapted to modernity and vulnerability?

These are tricky issues, both because of the complexity of Islam and the diverse range of beliefs within it, and because Osama bin Laden's brand of Islamic fundamentalism is entwined with geopolitical grievances that are widely shared by people in the Middle East, regardless of their religious beliefs.

Moreover, in many cases the criticisms of Islam contain simplifications and misunderstandings, not only about Islam but about Western culture and history.

"The key question always has to be: Whose Islam are we talking about?" said Professor R.K. Ramazani, professor emeritus of government and foreign relations at the University of Virginia. "The reason for that is there are 1 billion Muslims in the world scattered all over the world from Indonesia to West Africa and they have extremely diverse subcultures. The way of looking at Islam in Egypt is not the same as in Saudi Arabia or in Iran. This is why it is so difficult to talk about whether Islam is prone to violence or fertile soil for terrorists.

It may be, in fact, the very diversity of Islam that accounts for the contradictions Islam, Page 4

Building relationships with Muslims

By ROBERT McCLOY

In perhaps the largest gathering of Muslims with non-Muslims in the United States since the Sept. 11 terror attack in New York, some 3,800 people recently packed a massive hall at Chicago's Navy Pier. Despite the vast size of the crowd, actual interaction was another matter.

On-one contact was a major purpose of the event co-sponsored by United Power for Action and Justice and the Council on Islamic Organizations of Greater Chicago. The 90-minute meeting on Nov. 18 also included prayers, brief speeches and three lightly rehearsed public conversations between pairs of Muslims and non-Muslims.

Since United Power's 1997 founding, thanks in large part to a $1 million grant from the late Chicago Cardinal Joseph Berninot, the organization has become a huge multi-ethnic, multi-racial, multi-faith tent enclosing 330 religious institutions, labor unions, health care groups and community organizations in greater Chicago. Its growth stems from unrelenting efforts to build scores of neighbor relationships and forge specific social problems second.

"We felt there haven't been enough grassroots coming together between Muslims and others since Sept. 11," said Gregory Price, a United Power leader and co-chair of the event. "People need face-to-face contact.

During the assembly, everyone was asked to separate from friends or family, "find someone who looks different from you" and talk with them and learn from them for 20 minutes. At the end of the meeting, almost evenly divided between Muslims and others, followed instructions, the deepening roar of a thousand conversations filled the hall.

I sat with Zulfikar Ahmed, 52, an engineer and Muslim, who came to this country in 1973. We discussed at first the holy month of Ramadan and the fact that the required fasting during that month is much easier when the month occurs, as it does this year, in November than when it falls during the long days of summer. "In July you must go without food, water or medicine up to 17 hours," said Ahmed. He was then eager to point out that the Qur'an absolutely forbids the killing of the innocent, and therefore no justifiable action exists for terrorism. When a reporter asked if some Muslims might view innocent deaths as an unfortunate byproduct of what they consider a justified attack on a symbol of U.S. exploitation, Ahmed said no, no, producing a booklet of quotations from the Qur'an. "Look here," he said. "Allah says no killing of the innocent ever. That is absolutely forbidden. Islam is a tolerant religion.

Ahmed said he personally witnessed the much-publicized incident involving a mob of some 500 that massed threateningly outside a large mosque in the Chicago suburb of Bridgeview the day after the attack. The group was quickly dispersed by police, and the next day some 80 students from Maria High School, a Chicago Catholic girls school, stood guard at the mosque. When their action was later cited from the podium, the audience responded with a standing ovation.

During one of the one-on-one dialogues at the microphone, a Maria student who had been at the mosque asked her partner, a Muslim college student, why she wore a head scarf in public. "It emphasizes inner beauty," she replied, "especially in a society where women are objectified." The Muslim student then asked for an opinion about Britney Spears' performance on MTV. "I think it's sick," said the Maria student amid more applause. "Role models like that shouldn't be role models."

Several Islamic leaders who addressed the crowd were explicit in their view that Muslims in Chicago have been too reluctant to enter the public sphere. The time has come, they said, to get involved in everything from soup kitchens to municipal government. The Muslim population, estimated at more than 400,000, now exceeds the number of Jews in the Chicago area. "Never again should there be so little relationship between us and our government that the government has to call for volunteers to translate our language in a time of crisis," said Nasser Nabani of the Muslim American Bar Association.

"Never again should there be so little relationship between us and the media that the word Islam immediately evokes terrorism. Never again should there be so little relationship between us and our neighbors that they had to ask us, 'How do you feel?' after 9/11."

As the crowd dispersed, there was much handshaking and exchanging of phone numbers and e-mail addresses. Mary said they were resolved to do what they can to make Nabani's "never again" call a reality.

Robert McCloy is a special report writer for NCR.
Islam/Diversity may account for contradictions

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in speaking about it, Fawaz Gerges, a professor of international relations and Middle Eastern studies at Sarah Lawrence College, speaks of an authoritarian streak that runs through Muslim culture "from the dining table to the bedroom." On the other hand, he acknowledges that numerous factors other than religion are responsible for the lack of democratic institutionalizations in the societies of the Middle East.

Few account of how can have democratic institutions if you have few democracies." Gerges added that "the power and culture, with socialization, with lack of economic growth, with hundreds of years of political oppression, Islam is just one factor in the equation. "If you look at the various voices within Islam, they are highly diverse. You have enlightened voices, conservative voices, fascist and reactionary voices," said Gerges. John O. Voll, professor of Islamic history at Georgetown University’s Center for Christian-Muslim Understanding, notes that of the four most populous Muslim societies, two — Indonesia and Bangladesh — are competitive democracies with female heads of state. Of the other two, India is the world’s largest democracy with a large Muslim minority that has actively participated in the political process since India was founded while Pakistan is currently a military dictatorship but also has some tradition of democracy. "Like Indonesia and Bangladesh, India and Pakistan have been headed by women, which should perhaps jostle some stereotypes of Islam, Voll said. The Georgetown professor described Islam as no more ill prepared to cope with modernity or democracy than Christianity or Judaism. "All you have to do is walk through the Mea Shearim area in Jerusalem and see the Hasidic Jewish concentrated there, who have some difficulty accepting modernity. Or listen to Christian fundamentalists," he said. "Jerry Falwell has as much difficulty conceptually coping with global pluralism as bin Laden."

Similarly, the militancy some people associate with Islam is equally present in the other monotheistic religious traditions, where an emphasis on the primacy of one god and one truth leads to divisions between believers and unbelievers. Intrinsically in Judaism, Christianity and Islam is the idea that you serve your God through charity and love and also through war, Voll said, noting that all three religions contain strains that make it possible to argue both for and against the concept of the just war. People sometimes conveniently forget that while Jesus said, "Love your enemy," Jesus also said, "Do not think that I came to bring peace. I came to bring the sword," Voll said.

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"In the same way, the Quran says fight against the unbeliever and the Quran also says God created us as diverse people so we could learn from each other and compete with each other in doing good." Some scholars suggest that the focus on Islam after the terrorist attacks is misleading because it bypasses anti-Americanism as a staple of Arab politics, irrespective of religion. "The United States has managed to alienate most of the rising social classes in the Arab and Muslim world," said Gerges, author of American and Political Islam: Clash of Interests or Clash of Cultures? The Islamists do not differ from other social and political groups in anti-American sentiment.

Accumulated grievances

Munirz Ahmad, professor of political science at Hampton University, Hampton, Va., noted that a host of grievances have accumulated in the Middle East. They relate both to America's perceived blind support for Israel, despite Israel's violations of U.N. resolutions and international laws, and to U.S. support for dictatorial, oppressive regimes that serve the United States' own short-term strategic purposes. With no way of legally changing the regimes they live under, people are driven to violent, underground activities. Often the mosque is the only place where people can freely meet and mingle. "Islam has become an important variable in this whole drama only because the people who indulge in terrorism are doing it in the name of Islam," Ahmad said. "That's the only Islamic relevance to the events of Sept. 11. No less. No more."

Like others, Ahmad said Osama bin Laden's extremist viewpoints are unrepresentative of Islam. Ramazani calls bin Laden's views downright "un-Islamic" and "fringe perspective within Islam." Fringe perspective it may be, but theologian Fr. James Frederick does believe it's a mistake to dismiss the religious faith bin Laden and his followers subscribe to as un-Islamic, even if it is atypical. Frederick, a professor who teaches comparative theology at Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles, draws an analogy with Christianity and its troubled and troubling history of anti-Semitism. "The idea of justifying Christian anti-Semitism from the teaching of Jesus is just wrong," Frederick said. "Therefore, there's the temptation to say that Christians who are anti-Semites are not true Christians. That kind of approach can excuse Christians from looking into their own tradition, and into some dark and ugly corners of the history of Christianity."

Muslims, too, have an obligation to look at their own tradition and the social, institutional, political and theological problems Islam faces, said Frederick, who described Islam today as challenged both by secularism and the effects of colonialism. "In United States we've worked out this tentative arrangement where religion is relegated to the private sphere but on occasion takes on this very public voice, like...
Martin Luther King, Jr., said Fredericks. "That is why we are struggling with. In a lot of Muslim societies, they've tried to become modern nations like in the West where religious freedom prevails. What's brought them is corruption, economic injustice, immorality and social inequality. So what I hear them saying is that no, this is not what we want. We don't want to become decadent like in the West. What we want is a society based on justice and morality, and we're not going to find this in the Western secular model."

Instead, many Muslims are looking to a revived Islam that they hope will provide the basis for a just society. "Some of these Islamic voices are not all that different from Christian moderation theologies," Fredericks said. "Both are very public religious voices calling for justice and critiquing economic injustice, immorality."

Fredericks noted that Christianity's adaptation to pluralism and secularism is the result of long and painful struggle. It was only in 1963, at the Second Vatican Council, that the Roman Catholic church officially endorsed freedom of religion. To the world, two kinds of Christians disagree with the current Western model of privatized religion: Jerry Falwell and Je-suit Fr. John Garrigus, both of whom believe Christian faith and morality should be very much in the public sphere.

Unlike Christianity, Fredericks said, Christianity worked out its way of living with modernity without also having to deal with the cultural inter- tensions imposed by colonialism, Fredericks said. "Modernism was forced on Islam through colonialism. The fact that we would have violent reactions and that we would have many, many voices in the Islamic world saying at times contradictory things has come as a surprise," said Fredericks.

"What Westerners need to take seriously is that the secular model is not the only way to being a modern nation, I don't think Westerners understand that. We just presume that any Muslims who say 'We want a Muslim society' are lead- ing their people back to the 'Middle Ages.' Westerners can't imagine any other form of life than to be modern.

Graham Fuller, a former U.S. Foreign Service officer and a retired vice-chairman of the National Intelligence Council at the CIA, views the discussion of Islam as part of a broader discussion of the borderline between religion and politics that relates to all religions. Interestingly, in the case of Islam there are many more explicit ideas of good governance expressed in the Qur'an and there are in other Hebrew, Bible or the New Testament, Fuller said.

"The word democracy does not appear in the Bible, the Old Testament, or the Quran and the words of the Prophet there is explicit recognition that one of the necessities of good governance is that the ruler must consult the people as to what is to be done. Muslim activists inter- pret that as meaning democratic gov- ernment. Most Islamists strongly seek democracy in their own countries because they believe they would do well in such a society," he said. They claim the United States does not want to see democracy come to the Middle East be- cause the United States does not want Islamists to come to power, whether moder- ate or radical."

"In other commentaries, Fuller said political Islam is simply one of the more potent contemporary expressions of a deep-seated set of grievances that has de- veloped in parts of the Muslim world. While many Muslim movements are turning to the political ideas expressed in the Qur'an as their inspiration for overcoming unjust and corrupt regimes, only a tiny portion of those movements have turned violent, he said.

"To say the problem is in Islam any more than to say the basic problem in Northern Ireland is Christianity or acts of Jewish terror in Israel is Judaism ... is to blame the religion for distortions or selectivity and narrow interpretations of it," said Fuller. Though Americans are focused on the dangers of religious extremism, Fuller said most Muslims would point out that the most shameful crimes of the 20th century were committed in Europe, not in the name of religion but ideology.

Americans focus on menace

If a common impression is that Islam is a religion of extremists, some scholars said, it's in part because Americans, which is unnatural, are engaged by what they perceive as menacing.

"One of the reasons that Americans perceive Islam as anti-democratic and anti-pluralist and prone to violence is that we tend to be more interested and engaged with those dimensions of Islam that are threatening to us and less interested in those dimensions that are compat- table with our values," said R. Scott Ap- pleby, a professor of history at the University of Notre Dame and the author of The Ambivalence of the Sacred: Religion, Violence and Reconciliation. "That image of Islam as a defiant force against the West, as a militant body seeking to take its place in a more democratic values, is precisely what the Islamic extremists want us to believe," Appleby said. "It's only a small percent of a larger, more complex picture of Islam."

Some of the recent criticism of Islam suggests that many Americans misunderstand their own history.

One of the most common statements made about Islam today is that it needs a Reforma- tion. That opinion, Voll noted, ignores the fact that the Reformation ushered in almost a century of Europe's bloodiest wars.

"People pick a symbol and then they conveniently forget the historical reality," Voll said. "What most people mean when they say what Islam needs is a Reformation is that it needs to have thinkers who formulate Islamic theology in modern terms."

According to Voll, Islam has such thinkers. "The classic case is the great Egyptian intellectual Muhammad Abduh, who lived at the end of the 19th century and who provided a reinterpretation of Islam in modern terms," Voll said.

The recent scrutiny of Islam may offer a mirror in which Americans can see not only other's values but their own. At least some of the responses to reports of Is- lamic terrorists' religious motivations sug- gest how far materialistically secular Americans have progressed toward secularism, how far removed is the power of religion as a motivating force.

In an essay titled "Visions of Sacrifice" in the Oct. 17 Issue of The Christian Cen- tury, Appleby discusses Ataturk, secularist John Ashcroft and journalist Bob Wood- ward's professions of shock at a letter written by Mohamed Atta, one of the Sept. 11 hijackers, containing prayers and exhortations to martyrdom.

"One of the reasons America misun- derstands Islam is that we've lost touch with the kind of devotion and self-sacrifi- ce that traditional religion can evoke in its followers," Appleby told NCR.

In his essay Appleby writes that Muslim extremists hate Americans because we cast off orthodox Christianity in the 1960s for a materialistic, liberalized, com- promising approach to faith, which they despise in their own co-religionists.

"They hate us, most of all, for ignoring them and for underestimating the power of their faith," Appleby writes. "And faith, it is, however, twisted, distorted, un-Islamic and sinful we deem its expression."