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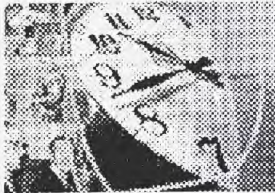
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Peace be upon us: The truth about Islam, Part I

By Christine Lyall
Terra Staff Writer

MIAMI (Oct. 1, 2001) -- Hasan Sabri, the imam -- or prayer leader -- of the Islamic Center of South Florida in Pompano Beach, Fla., is not altogether surprised that Americans have come to associate the religion of Islam with terrorism.

"I told a reporter once, about four years ago, that every time I turn on the TV and I see a Muslim name or a Muslim face, I know that something wrong has happened," said Sabri, a soft-spoken, eloquent man of Palestinian origin. He noted that Muslims are people who follow Islam.

"It's unfortunate, but this is the kind of coverage that the media have been dealing us," said Sabri. "It's no wonder that in the minds of many people, terrorism and Islam have become very closely related, even though this religion is a peaceful religion that encourages righteousness and encourages caring for fellow humans, regardless of their religion."

And yet, it has happened again -- only this time on a much larger and more horrifying scale.

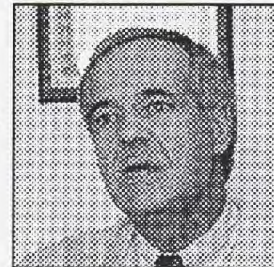
On the morning of Sept. 11, 2001, Sabri turned on his TV and watched the same terrifying events as did the rest of the world: four airplanes crashed, successively, into the north and south towers of the World Trade Center (WTC) in New York City, into a wing of the Pentagon in Washington, D.C., and into a grassy field in rural Pennsylvania. Hundreds of people died on impact, and within an hour after the airplanes hit, the WTC's Twin Towers collapsed, taking thousands more lives with them.

It didn't take long for the media to report that the airplanes were believed to have been commandeered by hijackers allegedly connected to Osama bin Laden, a Saudi Arabian militant who has been hiding in Afghanistan and is known both as a terrorist and as an Islamic extremist. In other references, bin Laden has also been called an Islamic Fundamentalist.

While the evidence has mounted against bin Laden, thereby validating many people's suspicions, the association between Islam and terrorism has grown



Hasan Sabri
(Terra Photo)



Dr. Stephen Sapp
(Terra Photo)

ever stronger among non-Muslim Americans. As a result, many Muslims in the United States have become the undeserving targets of violence, threats, scathing remarks, dirty looks and even spitting.

It hasn't helped, either, that bin Laden has repeatedly declared a "jihad," or – very roughly translated, a holy war -- against the United States in the name of Islam because of its foreign-policy practices in the Middle East.

In early 1998, bin Laden allegedly signed and issued a manifesto in which he stated that, "By God's leave, we call on every Muslim who believes in God and hopes for reward to obey God's command and kill the Americans and plunder their possessions wherever he finds them and whenever he can."

All of these events have deeply troubled Sabri, who said bin Laden's interpretation of Islam bears little resemblance to his and most other Muslims'. In fact, Sabri and an estimated 8 million other Muslims live peacefully in the United States, mingling with people of other religions and contributing vastly to the nation's culture and economy. At the same time, they honor their belief in Allah (the Arabic word for "the God") and harbor no thoughts, desires or intentions to kill Americans.

"I am American," said Sabri. "My loyalty when it comes to religion is to my religion, there is no doubt about that. But also, I understand that I am an American and I share the pains and the joys and fears of this nation.

"I appreciate what this country has provided for me – the freedom to worship, the freedom to achieve my goals and to raise my kids the way I want to and to provide for them," he continued. "And all of these things are great things that where I came from could not provide for me."

Now, there is yet another opportunity that this nation is providing to Sabri – an opportunity to educate other Americans about his seemingly "mysterious" religion. While it is sad that such lessons come in the wake of death, pain and terror, perhaps it can ultimately bring about better understanding, peace and compassion.

That is Sabri's hope, anyway.

Giving Islam a bad name

While bin Laden apparently caused, either directly or indirectly, the deaths of an estimated 6,500 people in the United States that sunny September morning, he also caused a blow to Islam's reputation, said Sabri.

When asked what he would say to bin Laden if he could sit down with the Islamic extremist, Sabri said that first he would ask why bin Laden caused the death of so many innocent people. Islam, he asserted, does not allow such transgressions.

"The Qur'an says 'And let not your hatred of certain people cause you to do injustice to them'," said Sabri. "We might not like certain people and we might not like certain countries and their policies, but that does not mean that we shouldn't be doing justice to them."

The Qur'an also states in Chapter 5, verse 32 that if one kills an innocent being, it is as if one killed all of humanity. And if one saves one life, it is as if one saved all of humanity.

"God tells us to propagate what is good and to support it and to prevent evil. To me, that means preventing exactly what has happened because that is an evil," said Sabri. "But to those who did this, they will tell you they are supporting good and they are trying to prevent evil because the United States has been doing evil to the world.

"But there are no specific instructions in the Qur'an that say, clearly, 'Go and blow yourself up, or go and kill.' Actually, there are verses to the opposite that teach us that the preservation of human life is the ideal," said Sabri.

Sabri's second question to bin Laden would be: "Why do this harm to Islam itself? Because what has happened has hurt us as Muslims and the perception of Islam in the eyes of many people."

And correcting those distorted perceptions won't be easy, he said.

What is Islam?

Dr. Stephen Sapp is chair of the department of religious studies at the University of Miami and teaches introductory courses on Islam. He said Islam is currently the fastest-growing religion in the world and the second largest religion overall. Also, Muslims have been in the United States for more than 120 years, starting with the slaves transported from Africa who were – for the most part -- initially Muslim and forced to convert to Christianity.

In 1980, there were about 600 million Muslims in the world. "Today, there are probably 1.2 billion, so it roughly doubled in the last 20 years," said Sapp.

Sapp, who is Christian, said the possible reasons for the religion's growth are two-fold. First, the religion has a clarity and simplicity that makes it easier to "sell," so to speak. "I don't want to convey the notion that it's a simplistic religion or that it's any less complex theologically than, for example, Christianity, but in terms of its presentation (it is easier to grasp)," said Sapp. "If I want to convert you to Christianity, then I have to explain to you how Jesus of Nazareth could be both God and Man at the same time.

"Then I have to explain that God is still right here with us as the Holy Spirit," he continued. "And so you have to get your mind around this notion of the Trinity – that God exists in three persons, but it's really only the one God. And then there are all of the miracles (to explain) and a lot of other things that people today simply have trouble accepting."

Islam, on the other hand, only requires a person to recite, believe and adhere to one basic creed, said Sapp.

"If you say out loud, thoughtfully and with full understanding, 'There is no god but Allah and Muhammad is God's messenger,' then you're a Muslim," Sapp explained. If a person then follows the five pillars – or instructions – of

Islam, then he or she knows that Allah will be pleased.

The five pillars of Islam are: 1) confession to the faith by stating aloud the aforementioned phrase; 2) prayer five times per day; 3) the giving of one's time or money to charity; 4) fasting from sunrise to sunset every day for the full month of Ramadan; and 5) completing at least once in one's lifetime a pilgrimage to Mecca, Saudi Arabia, the birthplace of the Prophet Muhammad.

Muhammad, who lived from 570 to 632, is the man who received Allah's revelations, which were later documented in the Islamic scripture known as the Qur'an, or the Koran. He emigrated to Medina, located about 250 miles north of Mecca, in 622, when he started to experience hostility and persecution in his hometown. Muhammad then died in Medina, where he is buried.

"I probably should have started with the name of 'Islam' itself," Sapp interjected. "The name comes from the Arabic word 'salam,' which is the cognate of the Hebrew word 'shalom,' which means 'peace'."

People often read that Islam means "submission," Sapp conceded. While that translation isn't wrong, it isn't entirely accurate. "Islam is essentially that perfect peace that one finds in submission to God," he said.

The second likely reason that Islam is enjoying such a large growth spurt is that it is completely colorblind.

"It appeals to people of color," said Sapp. "Christianity, the other dominant religion size-wise, is especially associated with colonialism in the minds of people of color, from Africa to India to China and other regions.

"One of Muhammad's last statements was, 'Know this: All ye are members of one brotherhood' – the point being that Muslims don't really care what color you are or what shape your eyes are, as long as you acknowledge Allah as your one God," he said. "Christians, however, have to fight their colonial legacy."

Editor's note: Please check back tomorrow for Part II of Christine Lyall's look inside the world of Islam. [TOP ↑](#)

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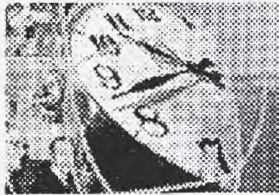
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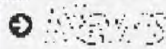
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Peace be upon us: The truth about Islam, Part II

By Christine Lyall
Terra Staff Writer

Editor's note: Click [here](#) to read Part 1 of Christine Lyall's look inside the world of Islam

Believe it or not

Many people don't realize that Islam, Christianity and Judaism – the religions that make up the terrorists' triangle of contention -- have a number of beliefs in common, said Sapp. Muslims believe in Jesus Christ, for example, and that He was born of the Virgin Mary – just as Christians believe. They also believe He will return on Judgment Day, although in their opinion he won't return as the resurrected God Incarnate, as Christians believe. Muslims also believe in Abraham, Jacob, Moses and Noah, all of whom were leaders in the Judaic and Christian faiths.



Sabri bows in prayer
(Terra Photo)

Added Hasan Sabri, "We believe also that all of the prophets that were sent from God advocated the same thing, basically that God is one and that you should not associate with any other gods or deities other than Him and that Man has to submit to His will, to the divine guidance that comes from God."

But, there are also some key differences that have – throughout history – lead to bloody altercations, said Sapp.

"Basically, Islam denies what is considered the 'fundamental Christian belief' – namely, the Incarnation...that in the man Jesus we are dealing with God and that Jesus was God Incarnate, or in the flesh," said Sapp. "For Muslims, Jesus was just a man, a true prophet sent by God like Abraham, Moses and Muhammad, but still only and completely human.

"From the other direction, Christians (and Jews) deny completely any authenticity to Muhammad as a prophet and reject his revelation, the Qur'an, as having anything to add to God's revealed will for humankind," Sapp explained.

Islamic Fundamentalists

Although Americans have heard the term "Islamic Fundamentalists" before, never was it so clearly linked to death, destruction and terror until Sept. 11. But that, too, is a misleading label, said Sapp and Sabri.



The term 'fundamentalist' was first coined by a group of Christian Protestants in the United States who, between 1910 and 1915, published a series of pamphlets called *The Fundamentals: A Testimony of The Truth*. The purpose of the pamphlets was to remind Christians of the "truths" contained in the Bible and to stop what the authors saw as a decline in the moral and spiritual values of American society.

"So, we've simply adopted that specific term and applied it generally," said Sapp. "Basically, the fundamentalist version of any religion is that which says there are certain fundamentals or beliefs that really constitute that religion. And if you are to be faithful, then you must adhere to those fundamentals, completely and without question.

"Now are we to understand that the terrorists are followers of Fundamental Islam?" Sapp posed the question. "Again, to use the analogy of Christianity, there are a number of sects in the United States, such as the Survivalists or the white supremacy groups, that claim to be the last defenders of Christianity. Well, as a Christian, I utterly and completely disavow any aspect of their claim to my faith. The Fundamental Islamics say they're not only good, faithful Muslims but they are among the very few good and faithful Muslims. But the rest of Islam says, 'Hey, wait a minute. You've completely misconstrued what our religion is about.'"

Sabri and another Muslim, Dr. Liyakat Takim of Denver, fervently agreed.

"We do not have in Islam such a thing as a fundamentalist and a non-fundamentalist," said Sabri. "We have people who are observant of Islam and people who are not observant of Islam. I would think that a more proper name to call these (terrorists) is 'militant,' rather than fundamentalist, because that's exactly what these people are – they are people trying to accomplish certain results or to seek revenge through militant actions."

Takim, a Muslim from Tanzania and a professor of Islam at the University of Denver, drew an even more distinct line.

"Just because a person claims to be a Muslim doesn't make him a good Muslim," said Takim. "Just like the members of the Ku Klux Klan claimed to be good Christians, certainly what they practiced was not Christianity.

"I know that some people think that what bin Laden is doing has religious backing," Takim continued. "But Osama bin Laden is not a religious scholar. Religiously, he has no authority or status at all. He's just your average Muslim, if you like, who can read the Qur'an and misinterpret it."

Words of war

And that's precisely what has happened, said Takim, as often happens with all holy texts. Different groups of people have extracted and interpreted different portions of the Qur'an to justify their own agendas, just as Christians do with the Bible.

Examine, for instance, one of the Muslim terrorists' favorite passages in the Qur'an – Chapter 2, verse 190:

*Fight in the cause of Allah those who fight you, but do not transgress limits; for Allah loves not transgressors.
And slay them where you catch them and turn them out from where they have turned you out; for tumult and oppression are worse than slaughter. But fight them not at the Sacred Mosque, unless they first fight you there. But if they fight you, slay them such as the reward of those who suppress faith.
But if they cease, Allah is oft forgiving most merciful.
And fight them on until there is no more tumult or oppression and there prevail justice and faith in Allah.
But if they cease, let there be no hostility except to those who practice oppression.*

"In other words, you only fight when you are being fought against. Otherwise, God says do not transgress," said Takim. "So if someone doesn't fight you, you have no right to fight.

"Part of the problem is, we understand and believe the text, but we don't look at the context," noted Takim. "Muhammad was not only chased out of Mecca and turned out of his own home, but he was also fought against. And the Qur'an clearly states that you are allowed to fight if you are being fought against."

And if one is provoked, there are boundaries within which to fight back, said Takim. "Even in war there are moral and ethical boundaries, so it's not open for you to go and fight anyone who disagrees with you," he said.

That all sounds simple enough. But many Americans are now wondering if bin Laden and his ilk might not have justification for their anger with the United States, considering its consistent support of Israel, which pushes Muslims out of Palestine; its bombing of innocent civilians in Baghdad when it retaliated against Saddam Hussein in the Gulf War; or its support of Middle Eastern dictatorships, such as Saudi Arabia's, where the governments have tried to institute Western-style, secular governments and to shun Muslim traditions.

Furthermore, some people might clearly see words of war in that favorite Qur'anic passage.

"Well, (bin Laden) can say that, but then he can fight against the American military," said Takim. "Even in just wars, civilians are to be left untouched. This is very, very clear in the Qur'an. Even plants, crops and trees are not to be touched because they are part of God's creation. So there is no justice in what (bin Laden) has done."

What is jihad?

"Jihad" is yet another term that has surfaced a great deal more since the attacks on Sept. 11. And again, it is a term that has been used loosely – and some would argue incorrectly – by extremist Muslims like bin Laden.

Bin Laden has declared that he is waging a holy war, or "jihad," against Americans and Jews in the name of Islam and Allah.

"There is no such thing as a 'holy war' in Islam. The words 'holy war' don't

even exist in Arabic," Takim asserted. "Again, 'holy war' is a Christian concept that is not applicable to Islam. One can talk of a just war or an unjust war, but not of a holy war.

"The 'jihad' literally means to strive and exert oneself to be a good and pious person," said Takim. Most Muslims use the term to refer to their inner 'jihad,' or their personal struggle against their less-than-desirable characteristics or desires.

The final challenge

Will it ever be possible to find peace in the Middle East? That is the clincher in this long and complex tale, say our sources, and there is no easy answer.

"Islam encourages people to sit down and engage in dialogue," said Takim. "There is such a thing as diversity but in unity. It is interesting that one of the verses of the Qur'an says that we were created as different tribes and diverse nations so that we might know and understand each other rather than fight each other."

While it might be difficult, at this point, to sit down and talk to bin Laden, perhaps – at the very least – the United States and its allies can try to understand his motives, beyond the notion that he is just "evil."

"We have to find out how we have transgressed," said Takim. "I see a lot of people asking, 'What should we do now? How did they do it? Who did it?' But very few people are really asking why."

Hasan Sabri suggested that peace might even need to start within the United States itself.

"This is a very violent society," he said, noting Americans' adoration and glorification of violent movies, for example, or their often-staunch defense of the right to bear arms. "This society needs to stop adoring violence and the people who commit violence. When something like (the terrorist attacks) happen, we need to stop and look within our souls and try to think about how we can become better people, not bitter people."

Drawing upon the very words and images that Hollywood and American society have created, Sabri said he would encourage President Bush to think long and hard before taking military action against bin Laden."

"As Muslims, we believe that the right way to do that is to bring these people before a court of law and to sentence them according to the law," said Sabri. "We cannot go out like Rambo and start throwing Tomahawk missiles here and there, killing innocent people and calling them 'collateral damage' and doing the same things that these people are doing. They want us to be like that because they want to say, 'See? The United States is no different.'"

Dr. Sapp summed up the issue this way: "To throw in another religion, the Buddha taught about cause and effect. He made it very clear that you cannot treat, eliminate or deal with the effect unless you know the cause. So, if we really are serious about dealing with (the terrorists), instead of just thinking that we can root out their cells and execute or bomb them, I hope

that somebody -- somewhere down the road -- will have the moral courage to step forward and say, 'We need to look at what this is stemming from, what we're doing that is causing this absolute hatred of the United States.'

"That's the task, I think, of the 21st century," said Sapp.

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