

A Representative of Peace

I spent an hour and a half speaking with Sh. Mohammed-Umer Esmail. He is the leader of the North Austin Muslim Community Center, which is a mosque. On the NAMCC website it says:

Islam, is an Arabic word comes from the root verb of (SLM) which means peace and submission. Hence Islam really means for one to achieve peace through the submission to God. Islam is not a new religion. It is the same truth that God revealed to all His prophets throughout history. Islam is both a religion and a complete way of life. A way of life symbolized and encompassed by peace.

Peace with God, peace within one self, and peace with all the creation of God.

I found that Mohammed-Umer embodied this peace very well. Everything about him seemed peaceful: his soft voice, his serene demeanor, his placid face, and even his soft handshake. Mohammed-Umer feels that he is particularly called as a Western born Muslim to teach and lead in the West. His special ministry is to help Western born Muslims connect to their faith heritage, particularly youth.

Mohammed-Umer's parents emigrated from India to a suburb of Toronto, Canada in 1971. He was born in 1974. At that time there was only one Mosque in the whole Toronto area so his father opened up their home for the local community to pray. Before this his father was not particularly religious, but became so thanks to the meetings in his house. He became very concerned for the future of his children's Islamic faith, but he was not strict about it.

Mohammed became very involved in Islam and wished to be further educated in it. His parents sent him to an Islamic school in England at the age of

14. He studied there for 8 years, and then he went to Pakistan for another 3 years. He learned much about the difference in perspective and culture between Western Muslims and Eastern Muslims. When he finished his education he came back to Canada and was faced with the decision of whether or not to become an Imam or do work in the secular world. He was “called” to Austin to serve as a teacher for youth for NAMCC in November 2001 and is now both the educational director and the Imam for them.

Parents particularly like Mohammed-Umer because he can communicate with their children. One of the great challenges for Muslim emigrants is dealing with their Western born and cultured children. Since Mohammed-Umer was born in the West, but has also spent in the East, he is able to serve as a mediator between parents and children. They come to him when they don't know how to deal with their children.

Muslim youth in America deal with a number of issues. Many of the issues are centered on their relationship with their parents. Their parents come from a culture that they cannot fully understand. American culture is part of who they are. While their parents lived in a society where there are strict rules about how men and women relate, in America men and women relate freely. Also, sex before marriage is quite prevalent in America, while in the Islam tradition it is strictly forbidden. Family honor is taken to great extreme in some parts of the Muslim world to the point of death of the female involved. However, Islam strictly forbids this cultural practice of “honorary killing”.

Mohammed-Umer feels that his role is to help to communicate Islamic tradition in a way that a Western raised Muslim can relate to. He does not view Islam as only Middle-Eastern. It is adaptable to every culture, but it takes someone within that culture to help. He says that while a few years ago Mosques in the West preferred to being in an Imam from the East, today they prefer a Western Imam. More and more there is concern, like Mohammed-Umer's father, for the future of Islam in America. If they cannot reach their children then their faith will be lost.

However, there is also a limit to this Western adaptation of Islam. It cannot compromise the teaching of the Qur'an. I think that Mohammed-Umer's traditional clerical garment, a white robe and embroidered hat, represents his commitment to the tradition. While he said he is considered by many to be "liberal" in his interpretation of the Qur'an, he believes he holds firm to its intent. One of the challenges in any religion is separating out what is cultural and what is truly part of the religion. Mohammed-Umer faces this very challenge. Many of the Muslims in the Mosque that he serves in come from the East. He feels this cultural tension. One time he told an older woman that he was Canadian, and she was very upset. She said, "No you are not. You are a Muslim." Mohammed-Umer accepts that he is both a Muslim and a Canadian. He can be both, and he encourages American Muslims to do the same.

I asked him what one of the biggest misunderstandings is about Islam. He said that both Muslims and non-Muslims alike misunderstood the meaning of jihad. Jihad comes from the root JHD, which means effort. Jihad is any effort

that a Muslim makes for the cause of God and is consistent with the Qur'an. He said that this very interview was for him jihad. His effort as an Imam is jihad. His effort in raising his two children is jihad. Also, jihad can mean that a Muslim must defend himself, his family, and his property. He mentioned that this differs from Jesus' command to turn the other cheek. He says that the Qur'an instructs that they are to defend themselves when necessary. However, on a corporate level defense or preemptive defense can only be authorized by a truly Islamic government. He does not believe that there is such a government. No individual, like bin Laden, can authorize such action.

He compared Islam to Christianity 500-600 years ago. Islam is about 600 years younger than Christianity. He compared the actions of extremist Christians during the Crusades to what is happening with extremist Muslim groups today. They believe that there is a war to be fought. It occurred to me that something very important happened in Christianity 500 years ago: the Reformation. I wonder if Muslims like Mohammed-Umer are part of a reformation that is occurring in Islam. As Islam is spreading throughout cultures all over the world there must be changes. There has to be some kind of separation between politics and religion Islam to adapt to its globalization. This is what happened to Christianity. The religion could not be controlled centrally any more.

I asked Mohammed-Umer if there was a hierarchy that he was subject to. He told me that while it is considered wise to consult with more experienced jurists from the East before making his own judgment; he ultimately has his own

authority to make rulings. He knows his community better than anyone else. He is better equipped to rule for his community.

I believe there are many similarities to Islam in America and the Protestant Christians in America. As American Protestants look to the Bible alone, American Muslims look to the Qur'an alone as their authority. While, Imams are called to lead, all Muslims are called to have a direct relationship with the Qur'an. They are taught in the Mosque to read it and to understand it. It is the task of all believers. It is not dictated to them. Muslims in America just like Christians wrestle with how to live as God is calling them to live in a society that rejects much of this style of living. It is a great challenge. Leaders of both Islam and Christianity must understand both the culture they live in, and at the same time lead their congregations in the ways of God.

Mohammed-Umer seems to do this very well. He is a representative of the peace of God. He reminds me of my own calling to be a representative of God's peace in a world that desperately needs it. Islam is not the enemy of Christianity. It is not a competitor that we must fight for God's victory. Islam is a partner of peace to Christianity.

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