

“Dinner and Dialogue” with Muslims In Columbia, South Carolina

by Hugh Fitzgerald



“[Blogging the Qur’an](#),” manages just then to ask Omar Shaheed: “We may have a humanity” as you said, but what I’d like to know is what you make of Qur’an 98:6, that describes Infidels as ‘the vilest of creatures.’”

Shaheed, though startled – like all Muslim clerics, he hates it when Infidels actually know something – will have to offer an answer for the sake of the Infidels in his audience, but what? The Lie Direct? “Did you actually read it in the Arabic version, which is the only version that counts?” The questioner likely won’t have, and Shaheed has introduced a note of doubt about the accuracy of the English version. And then he might follow that up with an offer to continue this discussion at a later time: “I’d love to discuss this further, so why don’t you come to see me and we’ll go over the Arabic

original together and how to properly contextualize it?" (implying that there's less to it than meets the eye). " And I'd be more than happy to show you what, though not stated directly, is clearly understood by Muslims, which is that the verse is directed at everyone who is exposed to the truth but rejects it. They can be Muslims or non-Muslims."

Shaheed is showing goodwill, he's showing that he has no intention of hiding anything, he just wants to make sure you, the Infidels, aren't misunderstanding a verse or two which, he admits, "can sometimes happen if you can't read the text in Arabic, or don't know the context." On the imam's face there's a look of sincere sympathy, expressive of an earnest desire to make sure that no non-Muslim gets the wrong impression about Islam. And Imam Omar Shaheed now patiently explains to the non-Muslims present that the Qur'an could not possibly mean to call all Infidels "the worst of creatures." "In Arabic it is absolutely clear that what is meant is that only those people who are guilty not only of refusing the truth once they have been exposed to it" (he never says "refusing the message of Muhammad") "but also of sowing 'corruption in the land.' Those are the people – it doesn't have to be stated, it's so strongly implied – who are 'vile creatures.' They could be Muslim or non-Muslim, it doesn't matter. And all Muslims understand that," Omar Shaheed will insist. None of his fellow Muslims on the panel will contradict him; they know what he's trying to do.

Shaheed continues: "And how could we, who revere Jesus and Moses as prophets, think those who believe in them are 'vile'? How could we, fellow monotheists, think that people who believe as we do in one God, and believe, just as we do, that God revealed himself to Abraham, are 'vile creatures'? And just look at us. Why would we Muslims move to countries, in Europe, in North America, in Australia, that are full of people who if we were to believe your interpretation, are 'vile creatures'? Would we want to live among 'vile

creatures'? To send our children to go to school with 'vile creatures'? To learn from 'vile creatures'? Of course not. It makes no sense. We love America, the American way of life, and Americans. They are most certainly not 'vile creatures' to us." (Murmurs of proud agreement.)

"But I sympathize – I know that not everything is crystal clear in the Qur'an, not even to us, the Believers. It is sometimes hard to understand parts of the Qur'an. You may have to read between the lines to get the full meaning. After all, there are Islamic scholars who have spent their lives reading, studying, memorizing the Qur'an and its complexities. That's why Muslims read a tafsir, or commentary, on the Qur'an. It's that complicated. So don't be shy about asking about parts of the Qur'an that don't make sense to you. That's one of the reasons I'm here tonight with other Muslims. We want to help. We don't want Islam to be a mystery."

"I'll take one more question before we return to our planned discussion."

At this point, someone who, Omar Shaheed will discover, is even more disturbingly well-prepared than the first questioner, raises his hand. Such people are starting to show up, on their own, at local Meet-Your-Muslim neighbor events, or reasonable facsimiles thereof, held at a mosque, a school, an auditorium, where they deliberately raise uncomfortable questions, and inject a note of well-founded skepticism.

Called on, he asks; "Imam Shaheed, what do you think the effect is on Muslims, as they say their five daily prayers, of cursing the Kuffar seventeen times a day?" Shaheed, startled, masks his fury, for he knows exactly the passage to which reference is being made, but simply says 'I'm afraid you've misunderstood the verses I think you are referring to, that is the last two verses of the first sura of the Qur'an, the Fatihah. You should read it more carefully. There is no mention, none, of the 'Kuffar' which is what you called them,

but I must say I find that word impolite and prefer 'non-Muslims.' I have those verses right here, so let me read them to all of you: 'Guide us to the straight path, the path of those upon whom You have bestowed favor, not of those who have evoked [Your] anger or of those who are astray.' Now there is no mention of Jews or Christians in those verses. None. People who are looking for trouble, seeking to divide us, are just reading into it what isn't there. There's a famous commentator, Nisaburi, who says that 'those who have incurred Allah's wrath are the people of negligence, and those who have gone astray are the people of immoderation.' What's wrong with that? People of negligence, who do too little, or immoderation, who do too much – they could be from any faith – incur Allah's wrath. Nothing at all there about 'cursing the Kuffar.' Islamophobes like to insist that Christians and Jews are being referred to, but there's no evidence for this.

"And now let's have the main discussion. We're here to answer questions about 'the tenets of Islam, the most common misconceptions about the religion and the similarities between Islam, Christianity and Judaism.' Yes?"

Someone asks: "Are Muslims monotheists?"

The imam is ready for that. "Yes. Islam is one of the three great monotheisms. And you know something – we must be doing something right, because Islam is the world's fastest-growing monotheism – in fact, it's the world's fastest-growing religion." (Laughter from the audience.)

"Why is Islam considered an Abrahamic religion?"

"Oh, that's because we hold that God revealed himself to Abraham. Muslims, Christians, Jews, we all look back to Abraham. And we've got so much more in common."

"Who was Muhammad?"

"Muhammad was the last of the Prophets, the Seal of the

Prophets. Allah's message was delivered to him over 23 years, and that message can be found in the Holy Qur'an. He is the most important figure in Islam. He brought what we Muslims believe is the Truth. He was, we feel, a Model of Conduct and the Perfect Man. But he was not divine. And he was not the only prophet – we revere Jesus, and Moses too. And many other prophets who came before Muhammad. We have collections of stories about the words and deeds of Muhammad, called the Hadith. There are many collections of these stories but some are more trustworthy than others. Six collections are known as 'Sahih' – that is, authentic – and among those the two most trustworthy are by Al-Bukhari and Muslim, that is 'Sahih Bukhari' and 'Sahih Muslim.' There is also the sira, the biography of Muhammad. You cannot understand Islam without understanding Muhammad."

At this point the questioning stopped, and Omar Shaheed continued:

Shaheed drew similarities to the ways, he said, the Christian religion was hijacked by the American Christian Knights, a chapter of the Ku Klux Klan. He added that suicide goes against the beliefs of Islam.

"So where's the suicide bomber coming from?" he asked the audience. "You think Islam would preach that? If you do, then you've got to believe that what the Klansmen said about Christianity was correct."

But there was no "hijacking" of the Christian religion by the Ku Klux Klan, and its most recent avatars. They did not base their beliefs on Christian doctrine, though many of their members claimed to be Christians. As for suicide, it does go against the beliefs of Islam as Shaheed says, but Islam also teaches that even if you will almost certainly die in an attack on Infidels, as when you set off an explosive belt you are wearing, this is still not considered suicide because the

intent was not to kill yourself, but to kill Infidels. And though the chance of surviving is infinitesimal, it is not zero. If you kill Infidels, while dying yourself, not only are you not considered to have committed suicide, but are praised as a martyr, or shahid, the surest way to the Islamic heaven. When Shahid asks “so where’s the suicide bomber coming from,” he knows from exactly where – Islamic doctrine, that considers him not a suicide but a martyr. What we Infidels call suicide bombing are not regarded as “suicide” by Muslims. Nor are they described as such, either by those who send the bombers out, or by those who immolate themselves.

Sunday’s event was put on to address misconceptions about the Islamic religion, according to Glenna Barlow, manager of engagement for the museum. A dinner after the discussion included cuisine from around the Islamic world.

“We thought it was important to differentiate between radical Islam and the majority of peaceful, devout Muslims around the world,” she said

What does this mean? What is “radical Islam” but the Islam of those who are ready and willing to take up the duty of violent Jihad, as set out in the Qur’an? The obligation is ordinarily a communal one, *fard kifayah*, and if enough “radicalized” Muslims fulfill the duty, other Muslims, the so-called “peaceful” ones, are relieved of the obligation. But many of those “peaceful” Muslims Glenna Barlow mentions – Imam Shaheed insists almost all Muslims are “peaceful” – tell pollsters that they support the imposition of Sharia in the West, or even that they support the terrorist attacks by other Muslims. For example, 31% of young Muslims in Britain have expressed approval of the 7/7/2005 bombings in London. BBC Radio in its own poll in 2015 found that 45% of British Muslims agree that clerics preaching violence against the West represent “mainstream Islam.” Only 57% of Muslims worldwide disapprove of Al-Qaeda. 25% of Muslim-Americans say that terrorist

attacks on Americas are justified as part of a global jihad. 48% of British Muslims would not report anyone “linked to terror.”

There is much more in this worrisome vein, and none of it supports the claim that almost all Muslims are “peaceful.” What is needed is for someone to print out [this information about these disturbing opinion polls](#), and bring it to these meet-your-Muslim-neighbor events, and either quote from them – as I have just done – or offer to hand them out. Omar Shaheed will find it impossible to deny the significance of these polls.

Omar Shaheed knows perfectly well that the people who come to these events know very little about Islam (save for the well-prepared questioners who sometimes show up, clearly to make trouble, and who are then put off with force-fed taqiyya), but are eager to hear whatever soothing version is offered to them to relieve their anxiety, and he’s ready to give them exactly that. Will some of them have read the Qur’an, or even just a little bit of the Qur’an? Not likely. The hadith, the sira? They won’t even have heard of these. If they try the Qur’an on their own, much of it will be impossible to comprehend. To have a real Muslim offer to explain Islam, to answer all our questions – what could be better?

And Imam Omar has invited them to ask whatever they want.

“Anybody heard of the Five Pillars of Islam? (“Yes’” several people shout in unison). “Can anyone name them?” Someone volunteers: “the Hajj?” “Yes, that’s right. The Hajj is the pilgrimage to Mecca a Muslim should make, if he can afford it, at least once in his lifetime.”

“Anyone else?” “Prayer?” says someone in the third row. “Yes, we Muslims are big on prayer, in fact we prostrate ourselves in prayer, always facing Mecca, five times a day. It’s called

salat. Any others?" Silence. "Well, there's giving to charity, what we call zakat. Charity is very much at the center of Islamic life. We have a duty to the neediest among us. Okay, you're doing fine. And there's Sawm, or the fasting during the holy month of Ramadan. And then at night, during Ramadan, you have the Iftar Dinner, when you break the fast with family and friends. You may not know it, but President Thomas Jefferson held the first Iftar Dinner in the White House. Islam's been in this country a lot longer than any of you may realize. It goes all the way back to Columbus – his navigator knew Arabic, practiced Islam in secrecy. And many of the slaves were Muslims. We're just learning about all this now. That's why President Obama said rightly that 'Islam has always been part of America's history.'

"But I'm getting away from the Five Pillars. There's one left, the most important of all: the Shehada, or Profession of Faith. We acknowledge that there is no God but Allah and Muhammad is his messenger. That's basically it. Now do you notice anything?" Someone says "Well, Islam seems a lot like Christianity." "Exactly" says Imam Shaheed. "We pray, and so do you. We give – it's a Muslim duty – to charity, and so do you. We observe a period of fasting, and so do Christians. We go on pilgrimages, and so do Christians. The only difference is that we have a short Profession of Faith, and Christians have a Credo, which is longer, but they are essentially the same thing.

"So if someone asks you some of the ways Christianity and Islam are alike, just answer: Both are monotheisms, both are Abrahamic faiths. And both ask their adherents to profess their faith, to pray, to fast, to give to charity, to go on pilgrimages.

"Now, any other questions?'"

"Do Muslims believe in an afterlife?"

“Most certainly we do, and you go to Heaven for the same reason that Christians do, for leading a virtuous life.”

“I hear so much about Jihad, can you please explain exactly what it is?”

“I was hoping I’d get a question on that. There’s so much confusion out there and, I’m sad to say, a lot of misinformation that is being spread by hate groups. And that’s having a terrible effect. Did you know that there’s been a 68% increase this year in hate crimes against Muslims? Reported from almost every state in the union. Bacon strips left outside mosques. Several ladies in hijabs being told by people on the street to ‘go back where you came from.’ Muslim families who report being started at suspiciously in airports. And the list goes on.” From the audience, clucks of sympathy and dismay.

“And I think we all know why. It’s always the same few groups, that have whipped people up about Jihad this and Jihad that. Just look at what you see on TV, what you read on the Internet. Well, let me tell you what Jihad is. It’s literally a ‘struggle.’ A spiritual struggle. It’s making sure you master your own behavior, to lead a life the way a good Muslim should. Some of you may have heard the famous story about Muhammad coming home from battle? He and his men had been attacked and he had been fighting, but when he got home, he announced that he was returning from the Lesser Jihad to the Greater Jihad. In other words, the Greater Jihad was the one he conducted at home, the internal Jihad for self-mastery. And fighting was for him the Lesser Jihad. Of course Muhammad sometimes had to fight for his beliefs, the way we all do, but it wasn’t something that gave him any pleasure, though to hear some of the islamophobes you would hardly be aware of that.”

“Is there freedom of religion in Muslim countries?”

“Well, I’m glad you asked that. There’s been so much nonsense

in the news about that. There are Christians in practically every Muslim country, even in Saudi Arabia – I’m not sure the Saudis could run their hospitals or universities or oilfields without Christians.” (Laughter from the audience.) “If there weren’t freedom of religion, wouldn’t you think after 1400 years of Islam, there would be no Christians left? My goodness, I was in Egypt recently, visiting some relatives, and I saw Copts everywhere. They seemed to own half the shops in Cairo. There’s at least eighteen million of them in Egypt. Of course, a few fanatics have attacked Coptic churches. But they still go to church, no one in the government tries to prevent them. They are free to practice Christianity. I’m not denying there are Muslim crazies who twist and distort Islam, and have attacked Christians. Every country has its crazies. Columbine, Timothy McVeigh. But definitely there is freedom of religion. And look not just at Egypt, but at all the churches in Iraq and Syria and Lebanon – they wouldn’t be there if there hadn’t been freedom of religion over the last 1400 years. And of course it’s not just Christians who have freedom of religion. Look at Pakistan, where there are not only Christians but two million Hindus, perfectly free to practice Hinduism.”

“But what about all these stories we hear about Christians being killed in Muslim countries?”

“Oh yes, it’s terrible. There’s no doubt that there’s been some of that. But remember it’s a recent phenomenon. It’s ISIS. And ISIS is on the run. I think the problem is that a small group of Muslims have simply gone – I don’t know how else to say this – crazy. I’ve tried to figure out what’s pushed them over the edge. I think what’s happened is that they are punishing the Christians in the Middle East, their neighbors and friends, with whom they have lived for generations, for the foreign policies of some Christian countries. It’s the sight of what Christian armies have done, invading Muslim countries, killing civilians – you know, Iraq,

Afghanistan, Syria, Libya – that has just been too much. I'm not excusing it – I'm just trying to explain it. Of course it's terrible. And the silent majority of Muslims need to do more to speak out against it.

"I almost forgot the most important thing. It's a verse in the Qur'an, a direct command to all Believers. Qur'an 2:256: 'There is no compulsion in religion.' I don't think you can be much clearer than that. No ifs, ands, or buts about it. The next time someone tell you about 'religious persecution' in Muslim countries, just recite Qur'an 2:256 to them. And tell them that nearly 20 million Copts live in Egypt – and they are certainly not trying to leave. And about how the Egyptian government bombed ISIS camps in Libya in retaliation for the bombing of Coptic churches. The twisted interpretations of Islam by a handful of lunatics should not be used to provoke hatred of the vast majority of peaceful Muslims.

"Any other questions?"

"What can we do to help create more understanding of Islam in our own faith communities?"

"You know," says Imam Omar Shaheed, "I'm very glad you asked that question. I'd like to think that when those who try to divide us with their so-called anti-Sharia rallies, or try to peddle their poison on campuses or elsewhere, that you good people who've come here tonight will show up to defend peaceful Muslims. Show Up, and Shout Down. And I think if you tell others what you've learned tonight, maybe just starting with all the things Islam and Christianity share – the monotheism, and both being abrahamic faiths, and of course the Five Pillars, that are duties practically identical to what Christians observe, that would help a lot. And if you feel like writing letters to your congressman, or letters to the editor of your newspaper in support of your local Muslim community, or put up signs outside your houses, as some people do, the ones that say 'No matter where you are from, we're

glad you're our neighbor' in English, Arabic, and Spanish, all that can help. It would be great to see those signs everywhere as a way of saying no to bigotry. And you can also request, as parents, that the local schools have units on Islam that at least go over the things discussed here tonight, so that early on, children will be exposed to the truth about our faith, and not be scared of Muslims because of some story on Fox News, or some rant by our president. These study units on Islam are already happening in many school systems, but we need to do much more. The faith of 1.6 billion people, the fastest-growing religion on earth, shouldn't be ignored by our schools. And when some people start describing Jihad as involving violence, tell them what Muhammad himself said about the Lesser and the Greater Jihad. And about the verse that says 'there is no compulsion in religion.' And one more thing: please don't hesitate to make an appointment and come to visit me, to continue the conversation we began tonight. And feel free to refer people to me if you think they are open to being educated, and not hopeless bigots. My door is always open to anyone who genuinely wants to find out more about Islam, and is not just trying to play a game of gotcha.

"Now let us continue the dialogue in the next room, where we can get better acquainted over dinner. I've just been signaled that everything is ready: the curried chicken, the lamb kebab, the hummus, the baba ghanoush, the naan and pita bread, and all the rest, that Mrs. Bazzaz and her staff of volunteers have prepared. Honestly, you are in for a real treat. We have dishes from Morocco, Lebanon, Pakistan, Bangladesh. After a dinner like this, I don't think that anyone can say that Islam is monolithic. Sorry I couldn't have Thomas Jefferson join us, but you can consider this not just a dinner but an Iftar dinner, as this is the holy month of Ramadan, and I hope that as new friends we will have many more such dinners together. So please – in the next room, the buffet is ready, and once you've helped yourself, just sit down at any of the tables. We'll be sure to have at least one member of our Muslim

community at each table to answer questions about Ramadan.. And don't forget to go back for the baklava, basbousa, and kunafeh. Enjoy!"

The evening was certainly a great success. People learned so much. Everyone agreed.

Here are what two of them had to say:

Melissa Chappell and Kristi Meetze came from Newberry County to the event Sunday. Meetze, 44, was surprised by the similarities between Christianity and Islam, and said events like "Dinner and Dialogue" are important for education.

"To let everybody know that what you see on the news is not the whole story," she said.

Chappell, 47, said she's developed an interest in Islam but doesn't know a lot about it.

"A lot of bad things people say about Islam, it's not really Islam, but cultural projections that people put on Islam," she said, specifically noting the perceived prohibition of women driving cars. "That's not a tenet of Islam. That's a cultural thing."

And a good time was had by all.

First published in