

The “Ask A Muslim” Girl

Last week, outside the Public Library in Cambridge, Massachusetts, a personable, presentable, sweet-faced young Muslimah, one Mona Haydar, stood for several hours with her husband Sebastian (a convert to Islam), offering donuts and coffee to passersby under two big signs that read “Ask A Muslim” and “Talk To A Muslim.”

Some of those passersby did indeed stop and took part, she reported, in “a meaningful series of conversations about religion, politics, history, and sports.” We have her word for it that these conversations were “meaningful,” for she does not provide any details as to what that word “meaningful” might mean. And we don’t know how much of that series of conversations was devoted to “religion.” Her aim was to “just talk to people...[to show them] that we [Muslims] are just normal people.”

Nothing detailed, either, about what being “normal people” might mean, given that normal Muslims are taught by their scriptures – Qur’an and Hadith – to behave quite aggressively, even murderously, toward other normal, but non-Muslim people, precisely because many of those normal but non-Muslim people made the terrible and unforgivable mistake of not accepting the Qur’an in its true version, but only in a distorted and perverted version (that goes by the name “the Bible”) that rightly earned them Muslim aggression and hatred.

What impelled Mona Haydar to this act of comical outreach, one which showed her that, after all, “the [non-Muslim] community is loving” because she and those non-Muslim passersby all had that meaningful series of conversations about religion, politics, etc.? It was apparently her perception that there is all this “misplaced and misguided” fear in America of Muslims, on the part of non-Muslims, that made her bring out the coffee and donuts, and stand around hoping to engage in a meaningful

series of conversations with those non-Muslims whose fears are entirely “misplaced and misguided.”

“Misplaced and misguided.” There have been nearly 30,000 terrorist acts by Muslims against non-Muslims all over the world since 9/11/2001, including a number in America, and one of them – you will remember even if Mona Haydar cannot – was a spectacular one in Boston just a few years ago, with the Tsarnaev brothers strutting their murderous stuff at the Marathon’s finish line.

Yet in Mona Haydar’s worldview, it is the non-Muslims whose attitudes and behavior are on trial. Happy to discover that the “community [of non-Muslims] is loving” and can be made more so if only these non-Muslims can have a chance to meet a real, smiling, friendly, coffee-and-donuts Muslim, and talk about politics, history, sports and, just possibly, religion, Mona Haydar knows that it is not the non-Muslims who need to be reassured. No, they ought rather be made to feel embarrassed about their “misplaced and misguided” and quite unnecessary fear. The only justified fear is that which Muslims feel: fear at the terrible thoughts some non-Muslims may have of them, so baselessly, so cruelly. To them, those fearful Muslims, Mona Haydar sent a reassuring message online that “the world is a good and beautiful place with small pockets of hatred here and there...and so remember this post when you are faced with bigotry and hatred towards you or your faith.” That’s right – when Muslims are faced with that irrational, misguided “bigotry and hatred,” they should remember that they are “as American as apple pie.”

Of course there were many questions that might have been asked and that, in her attempting answering, would have met something beyond the feelgood farce that was the order of the day. What would an honest conversation about Islam, making any kind of sense at all, have to be like? It would require paying attention to the canonical texts, the all-important Qur’an (a text revealed to Muhammad over 23 years) and the Hadith (the

written record of what Muhammad, the Perfect Man, *al-insan al-kamil*, said and did).

What kind of questions might you have asked, if you had been there, and had been invited to "Ask A Muslim"? I think I'd have started with the Qur'an and the duty of Jihad. I'd ask Ms. Haydar if she recognized such a duty in the Qur'an, and then just to prod her memory, I'd begin to read aloud the 164 jihad verses in the Qur'an. I might have asked Mona Haydar, for example, to expatiate upon the meaning Sura 9:5, the Verse of the Sword: "When the sacred months are over slay the idolaters wherever you find them. Arrest them, besiege them, and lie in ambush everywhere for them. If they repent and take to prayer and render the alms levy, allow them to go their way. Allah is forgiving and merciful."

Who are those "idolaters"? What does it mean to "arrest" and "besiege" and "lie in ambush" for them? And what does it mean to "render the alms levy" which would allow those "idolaters" to "go their way"? This is what we should begin to ask when we "Ask A Muslim."

Or take Sura 2:191-193: "And kill them wherever you find them, and turn them out from where they have turned you out. And Al-Fitnah [disbelief or unrest] is worse than killing...but if they desist, then lo! Allah is forgiving and merciful. And fight them until there is no more Fitnah [disbelief and worshipping of others along with Allah] and worship is for Allah alone. But if they cease, let there be no transgression except against Az-Zalimun (the polytheists, and wrong-doers, etc.)"

Could Mona Haydar explain this verse, explain who is to kill whom, and why, and what Al-Fitnah is, and what it means to fight certain people until there is no more Fitnah?

Youth wants to know, and youth wants to know a whole lot more from Mona Haydar. Take Qur'an 8:60: "Strike terror into the hearts of the enemies of Allah." This phrase comes up quite

often in the Qur'an, and has even been found on the Facebook pages of Muslim killers. Could that phrase possibly mean something like "strike terror into the hearts of the enemies of Allah"? Surely if we Ask A Muslim about anything, we will want to Ask A Muslim about that.

And what does "fight in the path of Allah" mean? That's another phrase that one would like to "Ask a Muslim." It's all over the Qur'an. When Mona Haydar stood under that sign, and waited, and chatted about this and that, you can bet that not one of her ill-prepared or simply simple-minded interlocutors asked her about striking terror, or fighting in the path of Allah, or anything at all that had to do with the actual Qur'an, or the real Hadith.

Perhaps Infidels ought to come armed for mental combat, and when they stop by the mona-haydars of this world, they will have notecards on which a few excerpts from the Qur'an – 9:5, 9:29, 8:12, 4:76, 4:78 come immediately to mind, but so do many others – have been written down. You can make your own list. And come prepared, too, to ask a Muslim about what 2:256 ("There is no compulsion in religion") means to Muslims in practice, something so very different from what an innocent non-Muslim would naturally take it to mean.

And then there is the Muslim apologist's favorite verse – 5:32. George Bush and Barack Obama also liked to quote it. As Obama put it, "The Holy Koran teaches that whoever kills an innocent, it is as if he has killed all mankind; and whoever saves a person, it is as if he has saved all mankind." The passage actually says this: "Because of that, We decreed upon the Children of Israel that whoever kills a soul unless for a soul or for corruption in the land – it is as if he had slain mankind entirely. And whoever saves one – it is as if he had saved mankind entirely. And our messengers had certainly come to them with clear proofs. Then indeed many of them, after that, throughout the land, were transgressors."

That may be the one verse every apologist for Islam knows, and there is one verse that every non-Muslim interlocutor ought to have at the ready. To wit, the critical modifier of 5:32, which is 5:33: “The only reward of those who make war upon Allah and His messenger and strive after corruption in the land will be that they will be killed or crucified, or have their hands and feet on alternate sides cut off, or will be expelled out of the land.”

So ask away: who are “those who make war upon Allah and His messenger” and what is meant by “corruption in the land,” the key exception made in 5:32 for killing? Surely these are questions Mona Haydar and all her tribe should be expected to answer.

And you might want to ask a Muslim a few questions about Muhammad himself. Why is he called “the Perfect Man” (*al-insan al-kamil*) and the Model of Conduct (*uswa hasana*) and what are the consequences of this for Muslims today? And what about all those battles he took part in, listed and described in the *Kitab al-Waghazi* – what was all that war-making about, so very different from how Jesus spent his days? Yes, and when did Muhammad marry little Aisha, and why does that matter to Muslims today? And why did he take such pleasure in the assassination of the poetess Asma bint Marwan and of Abu Afak, the 100-year-old Jewish man in Medina who just wasn’t sufficiently enthusiastic about Muhammad and therefore deserved death? Or what about the Battle of the Trench, where Muhammad’s men, to his evident pleasure, and apparently Muhammad himself also, decapitated between 600 and 900 bound members of the Banu Qurayza? Or why exactly did Muhammad and his men attack the inoffensive Jewish farmers of the Khaybar Oasis, and how did they divvy up the spoils of war?

It should be fun preparing the notecards for these encounters. I urge everyone to go to these Outreach Nights at local mosques (I’ve done it myself, causing great consternation with only an innocent question or two), or these sidewalk

encounters with smiling mona-haydars. But now, instead of a jejune farce, you will have a real discussion, one based on adducing what Muslims learn from their reading of Qur'an and Hadith. It will be now not a nonsensical but a salutary encounter, because you – the inquiring non-Muslim – will be cooking with gas when you dare to... Ask A Muslim.

But in the actual event, no one brought up any of these unpleasant details, possibly because they were simply ignorant, possibly because they were recognized only to dismiss the idea that there are "small pockets of hatred here and there." Mona Haydar does not identify these pockets or find their origins, in any particular faith, but immediately suggests that the victims of such "hatred" must be Muslims because many, though not all, instead of "asking a Muslim," made comments that were more or less statements of regret over how badly Muslims were treated in this country, and emphasized how important it was for non-Muslims to understand the true, the good, the inoffensive Islam that was embodied in the smiling face of the outreaching Ms. Haydar.

There are variations on this theme being played out all over the country. Smiles and wiles, and just possibly, coffee and donuts too, for non-Muslims passing by on the street. And all those members of the local mosque perform an evening's outreach, where the one thing never to be discussed is Islamic theology, and bromides about brotherhood are the interfaith healing racket's order of the day, but the chicken and pita are delicious. What more could one ask for?

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