

“You Don’t Have To Shy Away From Asking Sensitive Questions... And Their Food Is Awesome”

by Hugh Fitzgerald



One more study in fatuity, in a recent story from Bill White, a journalist at *The Morning Call*, a paper in Allentown, Pennsylvania. [“Islam and Chili”](#):

OK, I confess I was trying to intrigue at least a few potential readers with that strange headline.

But it really does reflect what I’m writing about, which is two terrific events Saturday.

They are the Muslim Association of Lehigh Valley’s Spring Open House and the annual Spring on the South Side chili-tasting event in Bethlehem.

I try to put something up here every time the Muslim Association holds one of these events, because it's such a great opportunity to gain a better understanding of their faith.

From 11-3 Saturday [April 28] at 1988 Schadt Ave., Whitehall, you can learn about Islam, including a Question-Answer session; visit cultural stations; sample Middle Eastern food; take tours of the Islamic Center; and participate in other activities designed to enhance cultural understanding.

As someone who has attended events designed to forge connections between Muslims and Christians, I can tell you that you don't have to shy away from asking sensitive questions. They'll be ready and willing to address them. And their food is awesome.

Yes, of course "the food is awesome." There is hardly a Muslim event put on for the Kuffar – an Open Mosque Day, an Islam Awareness Week, an Ask-A-Muslim Anything booth – that does not have food at its center. Food of various Muslim cuisines, from Moroccan tajines to curries from the subcontinent, to traditional rijstaffel dishes from Indonesia, are all being set out and offered, and they are not only deliciously exotic – all the stops are pulled out for the Infidel visitors – but the varied cuisines silently make the point that "Islam is not a monolith" and that Islam, far from being limited to the Middle East, doth bestride the world like a colossus. Small-talk between hosts and guests at the buffet table: "And did you know that there are 40 million of us in Europe?" "You know, now there are (choose a number from 4 to 7) million Muslims in America." "Did you know that Islam is the world's fastest growing religion?" Words to that effect. Outwardly friendly, yet menacing withal. That underhum of "we are here, here to stay, and there are more of us, every day."

Bill White was certainly impressed. He strongly urges you –

perhaps even more strongly than he suggests that you visit the Chili Festival – to visit the Muslim Association of Lehigh Valley’s Open House. You will be able to eat those wonderful foods. You can even take a tour of the Islamic Center – “and here is the mihrab, which is the niche in the wall of a mosque, at the point nearest to Mecca, toward which we Muslims face to pray.” If you are lucky, you may even see Muslims saying one of their five daily prayers – “yes, we pray from before sunrise to after sunset, bowing down, prostrate toward Mecca, then rising up, then bowing down again, over and over, as we chant our prayers. Just look at those men– you can see the depth of their devotion.” My, how impressive is that sight of serried ranks of the devout turned Mecca-wards, up and down, up and down. “What they are saying? These are prayers, so I suppose it must be something about peace or love or hope or charity, that’s what all religions are about, aren’t they?” “Yes, that’s exactly what they are talking about. Peace. Tolerance. Love for one another. The very word ‘Islam,’ you know, means ‘peace.’” “No, I didn’t know that. But I’m not surprised. It’s so peaceful here, in this place of prayer. I only wish some of the islamophobes in town could see what I am now seeing.”

Bill White says the Open House at the Muslim Association is the perfect place “where you can learn about Islam, including a Question-Answer session; visit cultural stations; sample Middle Eastern food; take tours of the Islamic Center; and participate in other activities designed to enhance cultural understanding.”

So you’ve visited those “cultural stations” where, so often, free hijabs are given out, to the female visitors, and to men, too, if they ask, for their wives, sisters, daughters, girlfriends at home. And what’s more, you are taught how to tie them correctly. “Go ahead, put it on, now you’ve tied it perfectly,” and with that encouragement, you can imagine the girls and women who will want to wear those hijabs. What fun!

It's playing at make-believe – “I could be in Cairo! I could be in Baghdad!” – and what the wearer does not know is that the hijab that she is putting on so eagerly is in many Muslim countries forced on women and girls, which is why this spring in Iran, women tore off their hijabs in a public demonstration of defiance of the mullahs. You might also be given a demonstration, and women visitors a free application, of henna tattoos right on the back of their hands. “How beautiful!” It has nothing to do with Islam, of course, but no one will think to ask about that.

So you've had the tour of the Islamic Center, seen the prayer room and, if you are lucky, may have seen Muslims at prayer, an inspiring sight as long as you don't know what they are saying, you have not just “sampled” but consumed large amounts of food, and “participated in other activities designed to enhance cultural understanding,” aside from the henna and hijabs, samples of Qur'anic calligraphy, perhaps a video of village women weaving oriental rugs, or dervishes whirling, or a man playing on an oud. All part of enhancing “cultural understanding.”

There might be a short talk on the Five Pillars, always a crowd pleaser: Shahada (the Profession of Faith), Salat (the Five Daily Prayers), Zakat (the obligatory charitable giving), Ramadan (the month of daytime fasting), and Hajj (the pilgrimage to Mecca which all Muslims who can afford it should make at least once in their lifetime). No, you don't have to write it all down. Your hosts have thoughtfully prepared a pamphlet describing the Five Pillars. “Yes, it's part of the material we have prepared for all our visitors. Please help yourself to as many as you want, we're delighted you want to help us inform others.” Nothing in that pamphlet will explain that Zakat is meant only for fellow Muslims, or those who are on their way to converting to Islam. Nothing, either, about the contents of one part of the five daily prayers, that is, the last two verses of the Fatihah, the first sura, which are

said 17 times a day and in which the Christians and Jews are cursed.

But then comes what is going to be the most important part of the visit: the Question-and-Answer. Ask Away! says Bill White: "As someone who has attended events designed to forge connections between Muslims and Christians, I can tell you that you don't have to shy away from asking sensitive questions. They'll be ready and willing to address them."

So what do you think you should ask about? What "sensitive questions" will Muslims "be ready and willing to address"? How about these?:

1. While it is true that the Qur'an says "there is no compulsion in religion," isn't it true that those who leave Islam may be killed? Doesn't Muhammed say that "he who leaves his [Islamic] religion, kill him?" And isn't it true that even today, apostates have been killed in several Muslim countries, not always by the government, but by private individuals enforcing the Sharia?

2. Why is it that under the Sharia daughters inherit half that of men? And why is the testimony of a woman worth half that of a man? What did Muhammad mean when he said that women's testimony was worth half that of a man because of "a deficiency in their intelligence"?

3. In a famous hadith, Muhammad says "I have been made victorious through terror." What do you think he meant by that?

4. Muhammad was 54 when he consummated his marriage to nine-year-old Aisha. Muhammad is regarded in Islam as the "Model of Conduct" and the "Perfect Man." Does that include his betrothal to Aisha when she was six, and the consummation of the marriage when she was nine? Is that the reason that when Ayatollah Khomeini came to power, he reduced the marriageable age of girls to nine years?

5. Why do you think there have been so many monarchies, and despotisms, in Muslim lands? And why so few democracies? Is there something in the political theory of Islam that makes Muslims regard democracies with distrust?

6. What is taqiyya? Why did Muhammad say that "war is deceit"?

7. What was Muhammad's reaction when he heard of the murders, by three different followers, of Asma bint Marwan, Abu 'Afak, and Ka'b bin al-Ashraf?

8. Why does Qur'an (5:51) command Muslims not to take Christians and Jews as friends, "for they are friends only with each other"?

9. What is the meaning of "Jihad"? Of "jizyah"? Of "dhimmi"?

10. Why was slavery abolished as late as 1962 in Saudi Arabia and Oman? As late as 1981 in Mauritania? Why in recent years have there been black slaves of Muslim Arabs in the northern Sudan? Why are there still a large number of black slaves and Arab masters in Mali? And in Mauritania, SOS Slavery says that there are up to 600,000 slaves. These are all Muslim countries. Has slavery been regarded as legitimate because Muhammad himself owned slaves?

11. Why can a Muslim man have up to four wives? Why can he divorce a wife simply by repeating the word "talaq" three times? Why is it so much more difficult for a Muslim wife to obtain a divorce than for a husband? Qur'an 4:34 allows a Muslim husband to "beat" a disobedient wife. Some interpret that to mean "beat (lightly)." How do you interpret that verse?

12. Muslims who conquered non-Muslims gave them a choice: to convert to Islam, to be killed, or to live permanently as dhimmis, subject to a host of onerous conditions, of which the best known is the required payment of the Jizyah, a capitation tax which, if other conditions were met, would allow a

Christian or Jew to continue to practice his or her own religion. Do you think the dhimmi status was a fair one? Why did Muslim states stop the practice?

13. Do you agree that all people deserve the right to choose their own religion without being subject to any punishment? Shouldn't Muslims have the same rights as Christians and Jews to leave their original faith for another one, or for none at all? Shouldn't the choice of a faith be an entirely personal matter?

This is a Baker's Dozen of questions, each consisting of several parts, the kind of "sensitive questions" that Bill White says Muslims are eager to answer. Did some of them turn out to be just a little too "sensitive," so that you were not given a straight answer, or perhaps any answer at all? Let Bill White at The Morning Call know how your questions were answered – or not answered – by your Muslim interlocutors. He might find your report enlightening.

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