

WHAT DO YOU REALLY KNOW ABOUT ISLAM?

The National Islam Awareness Week (IAW) commenced with a lecture by a very proficient and educated speaker from Australia. The Auckland University of Technology Muslim Students Association (AUTMSA) and the Auckland University Islamic Society (AUIS) organised a lecture in the library lecture theatre at the Auckland University. Muslims as well as non-Muslims turned up to listen to a frank discussion on “What do you really know about Islam?”

Br. Yahya Ibrahim who is a Hafez, Geo Chemist and an International speaker on Islam indicated that he would speak for about 20 minutes. Hopefully this would evolve into short discussions and dialogue, prompting questions and comments on the topic.

“What do you Really Know about Islam? Not what you have heard. Not what you have witnessed by the actions of certain Muslims abroad. Not what may have been relayed to you. But what has been verified as part of true knowledge of Islam. What are the factual, religious and faith value bases of this glorious religion of Islam?”, were the opening comments made by Br. Yahya.

He went on to stress the fact that in this present era Islam has been misunderstood. Many individuals in both the Muslim and the Non-Muslim community have misconstrued the facts. One of the misconceptions is that Islam is “Arab”, as the language of the Glorious Qur’an is in Arabic. Today Indonesia is the largest Muslim country in the Muslim world. “Islam is a faith that has transcended race, people, ethnicity, culture and languages. Islam is a faith that has no physical dimensions. We note that here today in this lecture room. Muslims are from all ethnic groups, colours, and languages and there is only one thing that unites all and that is the one common faith”.

He directed the following remarks to the Muslims present who are living in this beautiful Aotearoa – the land of the long white cloud. “You need to be proud of what you have here in New Zealand. The environment, the people, the Maori culture is indeed a blessing and you need to contribute as much as you take from it. The blessings, freedom and justice that you have enjoyed here, must be given back. You need to contribute as members of society.” He indicated that he is fully aware that whenever meetings are held by the greater community, the Muslims were too few in number to contribute to the proceedings. The first question that is always asked is, “Where is your community? Where are the others?” “This is the wrong thing to do. We must not only indulge in matters relating to Islam and the Muslims but get involved in all facets of community life. We need to change some of the social ills that are in our community,” were Br. Yahya’s words of advice to the Muslims of Auckland.

THREE LESSONS TO THE AUDIENCE

Before he entertained question from the floor he emphasised 3 important lessons that all have to take note of:

First Lesson – Do not take the actions of a limited few or those few who have gone to the extremes or those who are outcast or negligent, as a representation of the belief and actions of the many. It is part of justice, part of equity and part of any legal system to judge people for what they are and what they do. You hold those individuals who are in error accountable and responsible for their errors and actions.

Second Lesson – Muslims in general have been labelled as ‘Muslim Terrorist’, ‘extremist,’ ‘fundamentalist’ or ‘Islamist’ as the result of the actions of a few. Similarly, Muslims should also be careful not to generalise and tar everyone with the same brush. We should not regard all Americans as bad people for the actions a few have taken, in the invasion of Iraq or Afghanistan. As Muslims we must change the culture of blaming others. We need to be proud and stand up for what is the truth even if it is against us.

Third Lesson – If over a period of two years the very same hurdles, obstacles, problems and difficulties are still facing us then we have not made any progress or brought about a change. Then there is something seriously wrong with us. It is the duty of every individual, group, organisation or association to make amends and bring about a change. We need to have a serious introspection of – Where is our life today? Where has it been going? Which way are we led? Have we overcome the hurdles of the past? The concluding remarks made by the speaker encouraged the audience to ask questions, to enquire and to seek the answers.

SOME INTERESTING QUESTIONS FROM THE FLOOR

Question 1. Is there a conflict between Islam and the democratic right to vote?

Yahya’s Answer 1: Let us first set a correct perspective. Islam has flourished under every titled ‘ism’ imaginable. In China, under communism, there were 140 million Chinese Muslims living there. Islam has also flourished under capitalism, under socialism and even in tyrannical regimes where people who spoke out of turn were imprisoned and even killed.

Islam has always been part of society. Has Islam opposed the democratic process? NO! Does it agree with everything in democracy? NO! Islam has an in-between view. There are certain things as Muslims that we accept and take as full values that we find in Islam but there are other things that do not infringe upon our teachings, which we abstain from. So part of the democratic process is that everyone has the right to vote. Muslims do not have the right to infringe upon the right of others in the democratic system.

The key point here is that as Muslims we believe that there are two laws. The Divine law or Sharia and the law of Custom. The custom of the law that the person lives in is equal to the law of GOD, if it does not conflict with the laws of GOD. For example, when I come to a red traffic light it is part of my obedience to GOD to remain at full stop at that

red light until it changes to green. Not that GOD says so, but it is the custom and law of the land. There is no law of the land that infringes upon the laws of Islam that orders me to do something that opposes the law of GOD. There is no law that forces certain things that I am opposed to as part of my faith. So that is where the separation between the democratic process and conflict with Islam arises. There is no intrinsic opposition. There are things we accept and there are things we abstain from while allowing others to practice them because it is their process and their land that we are living in amongst them.

Q2: Do I consider the Taliban as an extremist group and is there a threat that it may have taken root in other countries?

A2: The Taliban in their laws and construction of a society has gone to extremes on numerous accounts. It has been attested by Muslim Scholars that neither man nor legal authority in Islamic history has ever struck another man's wife, sister or daughter for not following the law of GOD. That was something that was unheard of until it emerged. It is not part of the Muslim culture, practice or etiquette.

This is due to many factors. Let us look at some of the psychological factors and trauma of war. You have a country, Afghanistan, that was destroyed. A country where the communist went in with their carpet-bombs and destroyed everything. They went in and slit the throats of people, slit the bellies of pregnant women. These were some of the most atrocious acts that we in the western world saw. We also saw the rise of the freedom fighters. We supported them with weaponry, tools, finance, technology and training to defend themselves.

After the communist fell we did not give them an infra structure, sanitation, water, wells and an education. We did not give them anything that they could rebuild their society on. With the result they reverted to the tribal type of culture where everyone wanted to control a particular district, a piece of land or even a street. As a result it got into feudal issues and many different problems. This was a unique environment. They went into extremes in law, in doctrine and in practices.

The answer to the second part of your question: If we look at what is happening in North Korea. If we look at what is presently happening in Iraq. If we look at what is taking place in Sudan, there are greater problems than what is happening in Afghanistan. As a result of us not playing our role as ethical citizens of the world and turning a blind eye to the injustices what we find, that is starting to touch us in our homelands and in our faces. Where is all that 26 Billion Dollars that was promised to Afghanistan? What have they been spent it on and who was it given to? Who is bringing a reformation in the country?

Q3: What are the condition for a man to take 4 wives?

A3: Islam is the only monotheistic faith that has limited man to a certain number of wives. Islam in the divine word of the Lord says, "One is better if you are unable to bear the burden."

What are some of the reasons why this law was revealed? We find in different times in the history of Islam a great deal of deaths, pestilence, the decline of the male population especially during the time of war which resulted in having a number of unwed girls, or expecting mothers without a husband who were part of a family. There was a situation where a cousin or a brother's wife needed looking after. So there was a social need that had to be met and marriage was an option.

Secondly, if for some medical reasons a wife could not bear any children there was consultation between the husband and the wife on the husband taking a second wife. There is an example in the bible with Prophet Abraham (alayhis salaam- peace and blessing be on him) went into consultation with his wife Sarah who allowed him to take Hajar as a second wife, who gave birth to his first son, Ismail.

Thirdly, based on the culture of the people. In some countries it was a natural part of that culture to allow husbands to marry a second wife. In these cultures we find children raised in a home that has a mother and a surrogate mother who has shared equally in their upbringing. It is a way of that society that you and I cannot understand and appreciate. It has its beauties and intricacies.

Fourthly, A Muslim woman has the right before her marriage to include a clause in her marriage contract that she is against her husband taking a second wife. If he marries a second wife she has the right to the country's court to exercise her right, or exercise her right to a divorce and free herself. There are lots of issues here that will come to the defence of the woman. This topic needs a lecture of its own. In conclusion the statistics reveal that there is less than 1% of the male Muslims population who have more than one wife in the Muslim world.

Q4: What is Jihad?

A4: Lets first look at this word from a linguistic concept. Jihad comes from the root word in Arabic meaning 'to strive' or 'to struggle' or 'to do something that others do not want to do'. It has been misconstrued by the media to mean a military engagement. No one wants to go to war, so when the war comes some say lets go to Jihad – lets do something that no one wants to do. The word Jihad in the Glorious Qur'an is never used to mean a military battle. The actual word used is 'kitaal' – 'a fighting'.

According to the great scholar, Imaam ibn al-Qayyim who states that there are 14 levels of Jihad and only the last one refers to a military struggle.

Some of the levels are:

- 1 Struggle to do the right thing within yourself.
- 2 Struggle against the whisperings of others. If someone suggest a trip to the pub or bar it takes fortitude and strength

to say no. To say 'no' is a Jihad or a struggle within oneself.

- 3 Struggle against people calling you to evil or the personal desires that people might have. The root of all sin according to Islamic philosophy lies in lustful desire and doubt. We do not know what we really should be doing so we fall into error or we know what is right but we just want to do it because it feels good. These are the 2 roots of all error. This struggle is also a Jihad.
- 4 A woman who dies giving birth is in Jihad and dies a martyr.
- 5 A man walking in the street and a building falls on him is a martyr.
- 6 One who is struggling with cancer or illness and dies in his struggles is engaged in Jihad and is a martyr.
- 7 A person who dies trying to save another is a martyr.
- 8 The final level of Jihad is to struggle on a physical plane in a militaristic capacity. Here we have 2 branches. The first is the Jihad of defending ones land, ones home or ones person. If one is accosted in the street for his wallet and in his resistance he loses his life then he is a martyr as he struggled to defend what was his. The second level is go out in pursuit of the enemy. As an aggressor you have limited and strict rules of engagement. Just like all legal systems you have strict rules of engagements. Some of the rules of engagement are; not to destroy trees; not to engage elders, women or children and any non-combatants. All these are legal principles of this type of Jihad. What is happening in the world today such as 9/11 we as Muslims say that this is not Jihad as our scholars have made it very clear time and again. Thus Muslims are limited to the defensive Jihad.

Lack of Space in Al Mujaddid has prevented us from printing the rest of the valuable questions posed by the audience to the speaker. However if readers are interested Br. Yahya's entire lecture is available on video which is obtainable from the Voice of Islam (VOI). Their contact details appear on the back page.

This dialogue closed with a short dua - emphasising the greater understanding of the way of life with each other.