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On Faith: What Does it Mean to be Muslim in America?

Sally Quinn and Hadia Mubarak
 On Faith Co-Moderator/senior researcher, Georgetown's Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding
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On Faith Live explores [What Does it Mean to be Muslim in America](#) during a 90-minute symposium Thursday at Georgetown University. On Faith's first live event inaugurates Georgetown/On Faith -- "a new partnership aimed at providing On Faith readers a deeper and more scholarly exploration of religion in the news."

Quinn and Mubarak were online **Tuesday, April 18 at 11 a.m.**

Editor's Note: **Ingrid Mattson**, president of the Islamic Society of North America and professor at Hartford Seminary in Connecticut joins the discussion about halfway through.

A transcript follows.

[Submit your questions or comments](#) before or during the discussion.

Sally Quinn: Hi everyone. Thanks for joining us today. We have two extraordinary Muslim women with us to talk about what it means to be Muslim in America today. **Ingrid Mattson** is the first woman president of the Islamic Society of North America and Professor of Islamic Studies and Christian-Muslim Relations and Director of the Islamic Chaplaincy Program at Hartford Seminary in Connecticut.

Hadia Mubarak is a senior researcher at Georgetown's Center for Muslim Christian Understanding and the first woman and first native born American to be elected to lead the National Muslim Student Association.

Both of them will be on a panel we are having tomorrow co-sponsored by the Washington Post and Newsweek's "On Faith" site and Georgetown University. It will be from 4-5:30 at Georgetown University's Copley Hall. It's going to be fabulous, so get there early if you want a seat. We have the most popular South Asian rock star (think Bono) in that area named Salman Ahmad, who will be performing as well as speaking to our topic. I hope you enjoy the conversation.

Washington, D.C.: As a feminist, mother of a teenage daughter, and spiritual woman, I cringe whenever I see Muslim women donning a chador (my objection is significantly amplified when I see women wearing an abaya). While I recognize that women in the U.S. can wear whatever they choose, I strenuously object to the message it conveys; mainly, that there is something inherently "immodest" about a woman's uncovered hair or appearance. I'm not sure why so many Muslim women in the U.S. feel like it is a symbol of empowerment, when in fact it is exactly the opposite.

Sally Quinn: This is Sally: I'm going to answer the questions first and then let Hadia and Ingrid weigh in afterward unless I feel I'm over my head and then I'll let them take over.

I actually used to feel the way you did. Then I started doing this Web site "On Faith" on the Washington Post. Not being a religion scholar, I decided I had better learn something about the faiths of the world. I have done a lot of reading and studying in the last year and a half and have just returned from a three week trip around the world to study the Great Faiths. One of the most important things that I have learned to understand and respect other people's religions. The more you read and the more you learn, the more you will understand and be sympathetic to others and the way they express their faiths. I now look at a woman wearing a head scarf and I see someone who simply expressing herself in a way that makes her feel good about herself and her God. I don't see it as an expression of shame or modesty. (Of course it is different in some countries where women are forced to wear the hijab. But here it is another way of simply saying I believe, like wearing a cross or a yarmulke. I think it only makes us look more open as a society and ore accepting and more diverse. I love seeing women now either the head scarf. It makes me feel proud of our inclusive and accepting society.

New York City: Is Muslim-Christian understanding a two-way street? For instance, whereas we can all critique the Church during the dark ages, can we not critique the Muslim clerics of today who call for the death of the West? Can we critique the way most Muslim cultures treat women, or is that being "insensitive?"

Sally Quinn: My feeling is that nobody is perfect. If we see inequities, real inequities in any religion we would call attention to them. It should be a two way street. A lot of evil has been done in the name of all religions. It is our responsibility to call attention to that. The important this is the way it is done. When you call attention to atrocities, it should be done using the basic tenets of those religions as your reasoning. Since Islam, like most world religions, believes in peace and understanding and treating other people the way you would like to be treated, it is important to cite those teachings as a way to criticize people who defy them.

Laurel: Is Islam compatible with democratic-republican (small letters) government?

Islam has a codified legal system that, among other things, counts women as half of men.

Only one Islamic country (Turkey) is a true democracy.

Other nominally democratic Islamic countries have some kind of religious-oversight group to certify that elections conform to religious law.

Islam itself, while acknowledging other religions, makes it clear that conversion is the ultimate aim of all Muslims.

Granted, Christianity has its parallels, but most Christians today are too knowledgeable to take the superstitions of the past seriously. Is Islam there yet, or even getting closer?

Hadia Mubarak: Islam has always recognized a demarcation between religion and politics. Although an Islamic state would be governed by the principles of Islamic law, the state has no religious authority in and of itself. The institutions of government and religion have always been independent. This autonomy has been integral to preserving the integrity of Islamic scholarship throughout history. In contrast to common misconceptions out there, Islam does not support a theocracy. To answer your question, yes, Islam advocates democratic rule. The Quran specifically orders leaders to "conduct their affairs by mutual consultation." Thus, dictatorships run by Muslims are completely antithetical to the teachings of the Quran.

Islam regards men and women to be equal. In fact, Islam created a system of social justice that abolished any sense of social hierarchy based on superficial factors like race, ethnicity, gender, economic status, etc. The Quran, chapter 49, verse 13 says, "...the most noble of you in the eyes of God is he/she who is most God-conscious."

Furthermore, Chapter 9, verse 71 best encapsulates the gender paradigm of Islam. God says in this verse, "The believers, men and women, are partners (awliya') of one another, they enjoin what is good and forbid what is evil. They observe regular prayers, give in charity, obey God and His messenger. God will pour His mercy over them, for He is exalted in power, Wise."

The word "awliya" denotes far more than just "partners." Awliya' are people that you can trust to act in your behalf when you're not there; you would trust their competence and

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judgment. Therefore, men have no moral authority over women in Islam. God tells men and women that they both have an obligation to keep each other in check.

Islam's goal is not to convert everyone to Islam. This would be contrary to the teachings of the Quran itself, where God says that He would have made humanity as one religion if He willed it. Rather we are asked to respect other religions; in an Islamic state, religious minorities are to be governed by their own laws and not Islam.

Sally Quinn: I think Hadia has done a great job of answering that question. I also think that there are many Americans, in fact a majority, who believe that we live in a Christian nation. Sam Harris, an atheist and one of the panelists of "On Faith" has written a best seller called "Letter to a Christian Nation" in which he talks about how so many people in this country actually believe their way is the only way, that nobody can be saved unless it is through Christ, who believe that this should be a Christian nation and that those who don't believe the same things we do are somehow unAmerican or "other."

Washington, D.C.: I have seen numerous new reports, etc., heralding the election of Ingrid Mattson to the presidency of the ISNA as a major development in the role of women in Islam. I was hoping that Ms. Mattson could give her perspective on what her election means to the role of women in Islam.

Sally Quinn: Stay tuned. Ingrid Mattson will be joining us at around 11:30.

Washington, D.C.: The Muslim religion in my opinion is very divisive, and frankly speaking, the religion is stuck in the 18th century. If Christians were backwards enough to follow the Bible strictly as the Muslims follow the Koran, we would be still burning sinners on the stake. How can any person who believes in personal freedom condone a religion that treats women in that manner?

Sally Quinn: I think that there is backwardness in many religions, particularly among those who are in depressed and uneducated societies. But there are also many Christians and Jews whose fundamentalist attitudes are very backward as well. I know many Muslims and I don't know a single one who condones burning women at the stake or stoning women to death. These are moderate and well-educated people who follow the teachings of their religion with compassion. What these backward views in all societies show is the need for education.

Hadia Mubarak: It is incredibly important to distinguish between the teachings of Islam and the actions of Muslims. It would be unfair to judge Christian beliefs and teachings by the actions of Christians worldwide, or by the actions of a minority of Christians, like the KKK. Similarly, if we want to explore Islam's treatment of women, we can only do so by examining the primary sources of Islam, which are the Quran and Prophetic tradition. We do Islam a great disservice by judging it by the actions of individuals, political regimes, or various tribes that implement their own cultural customs. Honor killings, female circumcision, and forced marriages are all AGAINST Islamic law. In fact, they clearly violate the injunctions of the Quran and the Prophet's teachings. Muslims need to go back to the authentic texts and re-read them. Once they do, they would realize that much of the grotesque abuses currently being perpetuated against women in parts of the Muslim world are an aberration and complete violation of Islam's teachings.

Unfortunately, I don't have much time here to go into detail about Islam's teachings, but I would recommend reading "The Rights of Women in Islam: an authentic approach," by Haifaa Jawad.

Anonymous: Americans generally know little or nothing about Islam. We tend to think all Muslims are alike, such as all being from the Middle East, and that many are fanatical and that the religion shares little with Christianity and has been spread entirely by violence (unlike Christianity, many believe). I worked in the Ivory Coast and have traveled in Muslim countries and saw much more of a live-and-let-live attitude than most Americans would ever imagine. What hope is there for Americans to really want to know more about Islam and Muslims?

Sally Quinn: I just came back from a trip around the world and visited several Muslim countries. I felt the same way you did. There was a live-and-let-live attitude. What we are doing on this live online chat, the symposium we are having on "What it Means to be Muslim in America" tomorrow at Georgetown University (Copley Hall 4-5:30) and the Web site we are doing at The Washington Post and Newsweek "On Faith" are all attempts to help people learn and understand more about Islam. Just like there are good and bad Christians, Hindus, Jews, Buddhists, etc., there are good and bad Muslims. It's crazy to judge one religion by a few fanatics. All Muslims aren't alike any more than all Christians. I think the longer the problems in the Middle East continue, which will not end in my lifetime, Americans are going to be forced to learn more about Islam. One of our panelists on "On Faith," Steven Prothero has written a book called "Religious Literacy" which proposes that studying about religion be required in the schools. Religion today touches every subject you can think of whether it is domestic politics, foreign policy, social issues and cultural issues. We simply can't have a society which is not educated in these matters.

Hadia Mubarak: I think the best way to deal with the pervasive ignorance on both sides is to come out of our comfort zone and actually interact with one another, Muslims with Christians, Jews, Hindus, Buddhists, and people of other faiths, and vice versa. We would fine the vast majorities of people of all faiths believe in co-existence and want the same thing as everyone else: to live in peace and security; to practice one's religion without fear of persecution; to provide for one's family; to be successful. The goals of all human beings are the same everywhere. We need to stop "de-humanizing" the other and really begin to see the other as human, not collateral damage. I think this is essential on both ends.

Ingrid Mattson: Good morning!

This is Ingrid Mattson, President of the Islamic Society of North America and Professor at Hartford Seminary in Connecticut. I would be delighted to answer any questions.

Reston, Va.: Hello. I just wanted to say that I appreciate many of the traditional teachings of Islam, especially concerning personal virtue and responsibility. As an Orthodox Christian, my people have historically gotten on pretty well with Islam, and as a woman living in the 21st century, it means a lot to me to see other women treating themselves with respect and modesty!

Orthodox in Reston

Sally Quinn: You've hit on the perfect word. Respect. Muslim women, like all women, want to be treated with respect. And we all have our own ways of demanding it. If Muslim women want to wear a hijab and that makes them feel better about themselves (which is exactly the opposite of what our perceptions here in this country are), then they should wear it.

Hadia Mubarak: I completely agree with you. When we look at Islamic history, we also find that Muslims, Christian, Jews and people of other faiths lived together in peace, respect and harmony. There was tolerance and respect for each other's religious differences. Unlike what some people have claimed, Islam's aim has never been to convert people to Islam, but rather to give all people the opportunity to live in a free, just society, regardless of their religious, ethnic or racial make-up.

The problem right now is that people are viewing current political crises in the world through the lens of religion when they have nothing to do with religion. They are purely political, in that people have real or perceived grievances around the world that need to be addressed.

Arlington, Va.: I'm sure you're well aware of the depth and breadth of anti-Muslim bigotry in this country. I'm Jewish, but I don't have the stereotypical physical features of a Jew, so I often hear antisemitic remarks among coworkers and people who don't know me. Americans like to believe they're tolerant, but in reality the bigotry is still there, it's just not as outspoken. Whether the national conversation is about bigotry toward Muslims, Jews, blacks, etc, it doesn't seem to last very long before people and the media lose interest. Why is that?

Ingrid Mattson: Thanks for your comment. One disturbing thing I have noticed is that some people, noticing that I am visibly Muslim, go out of their way to say anti-Jewish comments to me, assuming that I must share their prejudice! This just shows to me the mutability of racism and intolerance.

I think the only way to address the issue is to not only defend "ourselves" but to counter intolerance wherever it occurs.

Boston: I'll just say that when I read about Muslim taxi drivers in Minnesota refusing to drive passengers with alcohol I felt myself becoming intolerant.

Maybe there should be separate Muslim taxi stands and special lights on the cars so the public can decide which taxis to take, rather than the drivers deciding which passengers to drive?

Hadia Mubarak: The problem is that the media is quick to identify the religion of the individual when the news is negative. However, how many people knew that the Bengali cab driver in NY, who returned a bag of diamonds worth \$500,000, was also Muslim? Read: http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/6345901.stm

As for the cab drivers who refuse to drive passengers with alcohol, from what I've understood, these cab drivers only refuse passengers who are openly drinking alcohol, not if it is in their luggage. The US Constitution protects individuals' right to religious freedom. They believe that they would be violating their religious beliefs to drive with passengers who are openly drinking alcohol. Legally speaking, they have the right to practice their religion as they see it.

Let's not forget that alcohol was once considered illegal even here in the U.S.

Sally Quinn: That's an interesting legal question. I think if I were going to a party with a bottle of wine for my hostess and it was freezing rain and a cab driver refused to take me I'd be pretty steamed. Does the law allow a driver to refuse a passenger? Does the law allow drivers to act on their religious beliefs even if they go against the laws? I can't answer that. What if two passengers were making love in the back seat? What does the law say about that. You can't throw them out even if you're embarrassed?

Princeton, N.J.: Sally, I don't think your answer to the first question was good enough. Basically you say we have to respect the religion of others. Does that include the Aztec religion, which ripped the living hearts from virgins? Obviously not. Each of us has to apply his own sense of values, not blindly follow the idea that if it is religious, it is fine.

Sally Quinn: I'm not aware of any religion ripping the living hearts of virgins lately. Of course I don't believe that anyone who says their religion demands violence has any credibility. But the basic tenets of the world's religions are based on the golden rule. To treat others as you would like to be treated yourself. Those who do violence (I'm not talking about self defense) are merely perverting their own religion's teachings. But we can't know what they are unless we learn about them and study them. I've spent the last year studying religions and what an eye opener that has been. I had some of the same views you did. I'm so thankful I've had a chance to learn and to understand other religions and to see how basically they all have the same message.

Hadia Mubarak: I agree that everyone has to live according to his/her own principles and apply them consistently. So if a culture or religion is violating basic human rights or principles which you hold to be true, then it is your right to condemn such practices.

However, as Sally mentioned, we owe every religion the right to at least examine it according to its own sources, not according to the actions of a few individuals who are distorting the religion's teachings. When it comes to Islam, we cannot hold 1.3 billion Muslims in the world accountable for the barbaric actions of 19 or more individuals.

Logan Circle: What branch of Islam does the Nation of Islam fall under? Are they Muslims in the traditional sense?

Ingrid Mattson: The Nation of Islam holds some beliefs in common with mainstream Islam but its fundamental beliefs clash with some basic Islamic principles. Most notably, to the extent that the Nation holds Elijah Muhammad to have been divine, this absolutely conflicts with Islamic monotheism. In addition, the belief that the "white man is the Devil" has no basis in Islam. Malcolm X, in his moving autobiography, speaks about his journey from the Nation of Islam to mainstream Islam.

Washington, D.C.: Can you explain in a short answer, why two groups (shia and sunni) hate each other to the point of killing?

Ingrid Mattson: The reality is that the divisions between Sunnis and Shi'ites have sometimes been a source of conflict, but at many other times they were fully tolerable differences. It is not inevitable that the small theological and ritualistic differences between the two groups must lead to conflict. The two groups have often intermarried and lived together peacefully in Iraq and elsewhere. Unfortunately, as in the case of Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland, the differences can be exploited for political and economic reasons.

Muslims in the US are working hard to make sure that we do not allow these differences to divide us. Sunnis and Shi'ites are working together to show our respect for each other.

Washington, D.C.: I think it's great you all are progressive Muslim women. But to be realistic, you are the minority. The vast majority of Muslims live in poverty, lack education and live under dictatorships. I have read the Quran and I agree it does support many peaceful initiatives, so why isn't there an Islamic reformation to bring it into the new millennium? Why aren't oppressed Muslims fighting to overthrow their own governments if they are all so progressive, peaceful and open minded?

Ingrid Mattson: You raise a good question -- what is needed to bring about democratic change? Unfortunately, Muslims are not always in control of their own future. The first democratic government elected in the Middle East -- the government of Musaddeq -- was overthrown by a military coup with the support of Western powers. These powers supported the installation of the Shah of Iran, an autocratic, authoritarian, non-democratic leader.

There are grassroots movements for democracy and human rights all over the Muslim world -- what is required of Americans is the will to support those principles about our own economic interests.

Rockville, Md.: I have grown up Muslim in a time when people didn't even know who Muslims were. We weren't on the radar. Now that we are, the identity we have is tarnished by the insane few. I am just as proud to be American as Muslim. How can I contribute to my country and show that I am just as American as I am Muslim?

Sally Quinn: For one thing, you are writing in here, which is a start. You should try to join organizations, and there are many, for religious understanding. I think it's great to want people to know that you are as American as anyone else. But it's even more important for you to learn and educate yourself about other religions as well. If everyone took the time to learn about the other's religions we would see the similarities and not the differences. You may or may not have prejudices toward those in other religions. Learn about them, join groups with them. If every body did that they would see they were dealing with real people and not labels or religions.

Southern Maryland: I attended Catholic schools when nuns wore floor length habits and no hair was visible. Different religion but similar modest dress.

Sally Quinn: That's a good point. There are still nuns who wear long habits. And of course priests wear the collar. Nobody thinks they are crazy or un-American or foreign. So much

has to do with our on perceptions of our country as a Christian nation. They keep forgetting that we are the melting pot and that we are a nation composed of all nationalities and ethnicities. Native Americans are the only true Americans and they probably came from Asia thousands of years ago. So we're all different. How great. Have you ever been to a restricted country club? The most boring place in the world.

But even the priests are not immune. One of our "On Faith " panelists, Bill Tully, who is the rector of St. Bartholomew's church in New York, was here at St. Columbia's for years. He got so tired of people not talking to him at parties when he was wearing his collar. One night he went to a party without his collar and when somebody asked him what he did, he responded that he was "a private detective." He was surrounded for the rest of the evening.

Southern Maryland: Let us not forget that the U.S. Christian democracy approved and enforced discrimination laws and the enslavement of its citizens.

Sally Quinn: Many Muslims bring up that subject as a way of saying, you Americans had a few problems in your past. We are new and developing countries with many backward and uneducated people. You overcame slavery and we will one day make that kind of progress as well. It took the United States several hundred years to see the evil in slavery. It will take many developing countries a while too to get their democracies right as well.

Islam, Inshallah: Here's what I don't get: al Qaeda is a group of a few thousand fanatics who, over the last twenty years, have killed a few thousand Americans. The U.S. military, by comparison, numbers in the hundreds of thousands and, over the same time period, has killed hundreds of thousands of Muslims. Why are all Muslims blamed for bin Laden (who doesn't represent any country), while Americans get to take a pass on the much greater brutality of their own military?

Sally Quinn: You make a very good point, a point that I heard many times when I was traveling around the world recently. I think part of the reason is that the violent acts of a few Muslims are done in the name of religion. American's are doing it in the name of Democracy. But Americans' are not being celebrated as heroes and martyrs for killing innocent women and children and civilians. They are being prosecuted. You can call it terrorism but one man's terrorism is another's war of independence. It's all very complicated and it is something you simply can't simplify by saying that all Muslims are killers or all American military are killers.

Alexandria, Va.: I noticed yesterday's Post showed a large group of students on the Virginia Tech campus. What struck me was that I saw several women Muslim students, wearing the hijab, in the picture demonstrating their concerns about what happened there.

Sally Quinn: I saw the picture too and I found it very touching. Many students on campus were wearing the school colors and many were holding candles. Everyone has his or her own way of grieving and showing respect. I would think that was the case here.

Rolla, Mo.: As an atheist, I am amused at the majority Christian views/perceptions of Islam, such as "Is it really a peaceful religion?" and "Why do the women cover themselves?" etc. If you step outside of religion, you see the differences between them are minimal. I would be interested in the opinions of non-Christians on Islam to see if they are consistent with those of Christians.

Sally Quinn: You are so right. The differences of most religions are minimal. I've only just come back from a trip to study religions and everyone one of us on the trip was overwhelmed with the similarities in beliefs if not in practices. I think many atheists are very patronizing about religions and they have a right to be about the intolerance of various religions and religious toward each other. But many of those atheists are as intolerant of religions and the religious people they criticize are. The important thing is to try to understand and respect the beliefs and NON-beliefs of others.

Princeton, N.J.: Look you can quote the Quran until you are blue in the face. It doesn't matter what people should believe; it matters what they do believe. When the government of entire country votes to kill a man who converted from Islam, that is not the actions of a few fanatics. When millions support "Honor Killings" it is immaterial what the Quran says. When you say "all religions do it" you are not defending Islam, you are rightly condemning religion itself.

Ingrid Mattson: I do not know of any country that "voted" to make apostacy a capital offense. In fact, many of the state misuses of Islam come from their undemocratic and authoritarian approach to Islam. As for crimes like "honor killing," Islamic law has rejected this practice since its founding and many Muslims are working to eliminate it where it occurs. It is certainly not found in the majority of Muslim countries, and where it does happen, as in Jordan and Pakistan, there are active human rights organizations working to educate about it and eradicate it. Unfortunately, as we know from our experience in America with trying to eliminate domestic violence, it is not a simple matter to solve.

Sally Quinn: Thank you all so much for joining our conversation. I'm so glad that Ingrid Mattson and Hadia Mubarak could join me as well. I hope all of you will try to come to Georgetown University tomorrow afternoon at 4-5:30 p.m. for our symposium on "What it Means to be Muslim in America." I think it will be really interesting and fun and don't forget we've got the hottest Muslim rock star in the world on the panel and he's going to sing. So we'll see you tomorrow.

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