



Muslims feel at home in Marion County

By RICK CUNDIFF / STAR-BANNER

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OCALA - For Asad and Humeraa Qamar and their three children, the day begins with prayers at their Southeast Ocala home.

They're not much different from other local families. Asad and Humeraa, both physicians, go to work each day, and the children go to school.

They work, they play, they're active in the community. But in one respect they are different from the vast majority of their Marion County neighbors.

The Qamars are Muslims, followers of Islam.

For most Marion County residents, the church and the synagogue are familiar houses of worship. Fewer are aware of the two local mosques in which the county's Muslim population worship. Local Muslims maintain a fairly low-key presence.

Some say it's due to prejudice triggered by the fear of Islamic fundamentalist terrorism such as the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001. Others say it's because Muslims really are not that different from their Christian and Jewish brethren in the faith community.

"Islam is just like any other religion," said Zafer Sabawi, the imam (spiritual leader) of the Islamic Center of Ocala. "It's a faith. It's a relationship with God that, as an individual, you nourish, you grow and you hope that you will die in that state of faith."

And it's not necessary to be a Muslim to see value in the faith, said Rabbi Samuel Berman of Ocala's Temple Beth Shalom.

"Islam is a religion that has a huge, wonderful sense of values," he said.

The number of Muslims in the United States is uncertain. The U.S. Census specifically prohibits questions about religious affiliations.

"Only God knows," said Dr. Zahid Bukhari, American Muslim studies director of Georgetown University's Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding. "There are different estimates. They go from maybe three million to 10 million. Six million is a reasonable number."

The ReligionFacts.com Web site indicates a total of 1.3 billion Muslims

worldwide, making Islam the second-largest faith behind Christianity. Numbers for Florida, and for Marion County are hard to come by, but there is a consensus that the area's Muslim population is increasing.

"It's definitely a growing population," said Dr. Gwendolyn Zoharah Simmons, assistant professor of religion at the University of Florida.

Contrary to popular belief, the majority of Muslims are non-Arab, Bukhari said. Only about 18 to 20 percent of Muslims worldwide are Arab, he said.

In the United States, about a third of American Muslims who responded to surveys by Bukhari's organization were from southeast Asia, a quarter were from Arab nations, and another quarter were African-American, Bukhari said. The remaining survey participants were from other countries all over the world.

Islam is one of the three major faiths that trace their lineage to the Old Testament patriarch Abraham, and shares common roots with both Judaism and Christianity.

"There is ample which is common, and there is very little which is different," Asad Qamar said.

While Jews are still waiting for the messiah's arrival, Christians await the second coming of Jesus. Muslims recognize Jesus as a prophet, but don't consider him the divine son of God.

"Nobody can be a Muslim unless he or she believes in Moses and Jesus as prophets of God," Bukhari said.

How similar the faiths are depends upon who you ask.

"Do we have the same God? I believe fundamentally there are beliefs that we all share," Rabbi Berman said. "And I believe that there are some fundamental differences where we will never agree. The trick is to agree to disagree."

ORIGINS AND THE 'FIVE PILLARS' Muhammad, the founder of Islam, was a Middle Eastern merchant, born around 570 A.D. in Mecca in what is now Saudi Arabia.

"He was a person known to be very honest, to be trustworthy," Simmons said. After Muhammad saw an apparition that told him he had been called by God to be a prophet, the verses of the Quran were revealed to him over a period of 23 years, Simmons said.

Muhammad began speaking of one God in what was otherwise a polytheistic region, attracting a small band of followers over a 12-year period, Simmons noted. He also drew resistance from ruling leaders. Persecution eventually forced him to flee the city of Mecca for nearby Medina, Simmons said.

In 630, Muhammad and his followers won the battle to take control of Mecca and returned there. Muhammad died in 632.

Muslims rely on “five pillars” of Islam, the basic tenets of the faith.

The first is to recognize only one supreme being. Believers must declare faith in only one God, and recognize Muhammad as the messenger of God.

“That’s all it takes to become a Muslim,” said Simmons, who is a Muslim. “You affirm that you believe in the one God and Muhammad was the messenger.”

Another pillar, charity, plays a major role in Islam. Believers are expected to give at least 2.5 percent of all that they have each year.

“It’s sort of a conscience tax, meaning you have to calculate it, and if your conscience is bothering you, then obviously you have made a mistake in calculating, so recalculate it,” said Asad Qamar. “Only your conscience knows how much you owe.”

A third pillar is ritual prayer. Adult Muslims are called to pray five times each day, beginning before sunrise and ending late in the evening.

The fourth pillar requires fasting during the holy month of Ramadan each year. Healthy adult Muslims are expected to refrain from eating, drinking, smoking and sexual activity from sunrise to sunset each day for 30 days.

Because the Muslim calendar is based on a lunar year, not a more traditional solar one, Ramadan falls at a different time each year.

When the fasting period falls in the dog days of summer with more hours of light between sunrise and sunset, it’s “very, very tough,” said Humeraa Qamar.

The fifth pillar is a hajj, or pilgrimage. Adult Muslims who are physically able and can afford to do so are expected to travel to the holy city of Mecca in Saudi Arabia at least once in their lifetime.

Mohamed Fareeduddin, an Ocala Muslim, made the trip in 1976.

“It’s a very good feeling. You see all the people coming from all over the world,” he said. “They all wear the same dress. A milliner, a king, a beggar, it doesn’t matter.”

Marion County Muslims interviewed say terrorism has no place in the Islamic faith, any more than it is a part of mainstream Judaism or Christianity.

“Islam is not a violent religion at all,” said Humeraa Qamar. “There’s a lot of misperception based on the beliefs of a few who are not representative at all.”

But the question is one that comes up often, she added.

“We hear a lot, a lot, a lot about this from our friends. Our Jewish friends will ask us. Our Christian friends will ask us,” she said. “For some reason, they

perceive Islam as a violent religion.”

Added her husband, “The problem is, the minority is a vocal minority. These are basically criminal acts and nothing else . . . The idea that this is supported by Islam or encouraged by Islam is wrong.”

Lesia Sutphin, Zafer Sabawi’s wife, says she’s angered by those who use the Quran to justify murder and terrorism.

“I would like to know what Osama bin Laden’s evidence is that allows him to murder innocent people, because it is not there,” she said. “I don’t believe that the people who blew up the Trade Center had an inkling of Islam in them. I just don’t believe that.”

The Quran forbids attacks on innocent civilians, Humeraa Qamar said.

“Whoever kills another one, without justifiable cause, is killing all of humanity,” she said.

The Quran allows Muslims to kill in self-defense, Simmons said. Beyond that, the Quran limits killing to circumstances such as “invasion in your land, forcing you out, putting you in slavery,” she said. “You have the right to fight against that.”

But the Quran extols peace more strongly than war, Simmons added.

“It actually says to try to make peace,” she said. “While you have the right to defend yourself . . . to forgive is always better.”

And the Quran predicts a more dire fate for the 9/11 suicide attackers than the visions of paradise they reportedly expected.

“It clearly states that whoever commits suicide is going to hell,” Humeraa Qamar said.

Part of the question of violence could be a matter of interpretation. Words written hundreds of years ago might not fit a modern world, Simmons said.

“When you look at religions, you can often find in their texts or scriptures words that can be used to support things that in today’s world we find unacceptable,” she said

“There are verses that say to the believers that they should fight the infidels. It is there,” Simmons said. “If one takes that out of its historical contexts . . . we could say, yes, that’s there, but don’t we need to look at the context in which it’s there?” Historically, Bible verses also have been used to advocate violence, said Ervin Bullock, a local Presbyterian.

“There have actually been a lot of hurts on all sides,” she said. “None of us have clean hands.”

Translation also can be a problem, said Zafer Sabawi. He's frustrated by those who translate the word jihad from Arabic to mean "holy war."

"What it means is a struggle," he said. "Jihad is a struggle advocated by Islam because the Prophet and God want us to struggle against the bad soul, the bad ego, against Satan."

That doesn't necessarily entail fighting or killing, Sabawi said.

"When you refer to jihad as the Westerners misname it, that you go and kill, it's a different word in Arabic, called kital or killing. And that's also used in the Quran, and would resonate more with wars and fighting versus the word jihad," he said.

The Qamars, both Pakistani, believe the leaders of fundamentalist Islamic attacks prey upon young Muslims in the Middle East to turn them into fanatics.

"The people who train these innocent youngsters are always in the background," Humeraa Qamar said.

The people behind the suicide attacks take advantage of Middle Eastern political situations that leave many in poverty and unable to see a way out, Asad Qamar said.

"They basically pick . . . a young person, impressionable person, who either is depressed or is made to feel depressed because of their surroundings or their circumstances, and seeing no future or no hope," he said. "They sort of brainwash them that there is basically no future for them in society.

"On the other hand," he continued, "they are promised eternal life where God knows what they will get . . . what rewards they will get."

But not everyone is convinced Islam is peaceful. Steven Masood is a native of Pakistan and a former Muslim who converted to Christianity. Now based at the Summerfield headquarters of Evangelical Bible Mission International, he believes a critical part of the "war on terror" is converting Muslims to Christianity.

"We are in war, and this is a different kind of war than Muhammad's time," he said. "We are at war against, whether America or the West, it is a war between Islam and other faiths, to bring Islamization. It is Islam [which] is taking and is trying to go against Christianity or any other faith."

While the Quran contains passages supporting both peace and holy war, Masood, who converted to Christianity at age 23, believes Islam is bent on world domination.

"That is their goal, and there is no doubt about it," he said. "The church should be

educated, and should not be given this idea that Islam is all-peaceful. The dilemma with Islam is that it talks with both sides of its mouth.”

ROLE OF WOMEN Another controversy swirling around Islam is the role of women in the faith.

Relationships between Islamic men and women can be somewhat more restrictive than in Judaism or Christianity.

Friday worship services at both local mosques, for example, segregate men and women into separate rooms, although both hear the same message from the imams. That’s a common practice, Simmons said.

“It’s generally practiced,” she said. “It certainly doesn’t say that you have to do that in the Quran. It does say modesty and chastity and that men and women who are unmarried should not be alone together.”

Some mosques are breaking with tradition, Simmons added.

“For some very progressive Muslims, men and women pray together, totally mixed,” she said.

Some Muslim men will not shake hands with a woman, in the belief that men and women who are not married to each other should not touch.

“The human being is weak,” Fareeduddin said. “The dignity of the woman should not be sacrificed.”

Believers and scholars differ on whether Islam oppresses women.

Lesia Sutphin chooses to wear conservative clothing and the traditional head covering known as a hijab.

“There are men in the Islamic world who oppress women, but it has nothing to do with religion,” she said.

Sutphin, born in Texas and raised in Orlando, finds more oppression in Western society than in Islam.

“Women are oppressed here too,” she said. “Women have to wear short miniskirts with their suits. The women have to put on all this makeup. What for?”

“I see women in this society as being oppressed because they have to dress so poorly,” she continued. “Look on the TV. The women are half-naked. The men are all dressed. Why?”

The Quran instructs Muslims, male and female, only to dress modestly, said Humeraa Qamar, who doesn’t wear the hijab.

“Other than that, that’s it,” Qamar said. “Islam, as a religion, is not anti-woman.”

Sutphin says people treat her with more respect when she is in public, in part

because she is wearing the hijab.

Sutphin's stepdaughter, 20-year-old Sufeyh Sabawi, also wears the hijab and dresses conservatively, and says it helps men treat her as an equal.

"They treat me as an educated Muslim woman," she said. "When they're talking to me, they're talking to my brain. They're talking to my face, not my body."

For Muslim girls, the donning of the hijab can mark a coming of age, celebrated at a "hijab party."

"It's a scarf around your head that protects you from all the bad things around the world," said Layla Aysheh, 14, at an Ocala hijab party in May. "It covers our beauty from people that we don't know . . . You're really supposed to start it around 14, when you go in middle school, around 12 or 14."

When a girl first wears the hijab to school, it can initially have the opposite of its intended effect, said Layla's 12-year-old sister Yesmean.

"I got, like, more attention and more people were my friends," she said. "They didn't say anything, they were just normal with it."

Humeraa Qamar, a pediatrician, believes that Islam treats women respectfully.

"Islam does not, does not oppress women," she said. "Muhammad gave a lot of freedom to women."

Those freedoms included the right of inheritance and the ability to divorce their husbands, Qamar said. Both were a sharp break with tradition in the Middle East at the time Islam began, she said.

For Qamar, the question of women's role in Islam is a matter of interpretation.

"Not only has it been distorted by people of other faiths, but it also has been distorted by the people of Muslim faith," Qamar said. "I have read the Quran. I have not seen anywhere where women have to wear veils."

The woman held in highest regard in Islam is Mary, mother of Jesus. Muslims consider Jesus a prophet, and like Christians, believe in the Biblical rendition of a virgin birth.

"She is the most beloved woman, beloved by God," Sufeyh Sabawi said. "To have a great prophet and messenger of God, you must first have a great and pious woman."

But Islamic scholar Simmons sees Islam as more restrictive of women than some other faiths.

"In reality, if we look at the Sharia [Islamic] law, that there is discrimination against women," she said. "If you're trying to still hold onto ninth- and 10th-century perspective in the 20th and 21st centuries, that is a real problem."

Simmons is quick to point out that there are multiple divisions of Sharia law, and that not all believe the same things. But some do oppress women, she said. For example, in some Muslim countries, divorce laws heavily favor men, she noted. In some areas, a man can divorce a woman simply by saying "I divorce you" three times, she said. Women who want to divorce their husbands face a much more arduous process.

"The woman has to go through a very lengthy process to get a divorce," Simmons said. "It's not unusual for a woman to take seven or eight years to get a divorce."

Some Islamic laws permit Muslim men to marry outside their faith, while expecting women to marry only Muslim men, Simmons noted. In some Islamic countries, Muslim men are allowed to be polygamous, she added.

Like Sutphin, Simmons sees the issue as one of interpretation.

"There are a few verses in the Quran that have been used for a thousand years to oppress women," she said. "There are also verses that affirm the equality of women."

LIVING UP TO IDEALS For the Qamars, there is one nation in the world that lives up to the ideals of Islam.

"We laugh all the time, because if there is any truly Islamic country in the world, it's the United States," Asad Qamar said.

"I just love this country," his wife added. "We have traveled widely all over the world . . . We have never been to a country where the common man, the people . . . are so friendly and forgiving."

Both see the United States as the example of how Islam instructs them to treat other people.

"It never fails to impress me how your next-door neighbor, people you meet on the street, everyone is so kind," Humeraa Qamar said. "There's so many different nationalities and people of faith, and everybody integrates here and everybody's welcome here."

In the end, Islam shares its most important aspects with both Christianity and Judaism, Zafer Sabawi said.

"It all boils down to the same source," he said. "The same God."

Bullock, the wife of a Presbyterian minister, and someone who has long been active in interfaith organizations, agrees. In her view, faith is a "magnificent building" with each faith representing different windows.

"God is the light," she said. "It's important to remember you worship the light."

You don't worship the windows."

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