

October 4, 2011—Living Room Dialogue with Imam Yusuf Hasan “Understanding Islam: Faith and Culture”

Imam Yusuf Hasan presented information about Islam from an African-American perspective to a group that met at Marymount Manhattan College.

Yusuf (the name he asked the group to call him) said that it is important to distinguish faith in Islam from the many cultures in places where it is practiced. He believes that the version of Islam understood by African-Americans in the United States is clearer than the interpretations elsewhere because it is free of the cultural influences that have been attached to it in other countries.

“A lot of immigrants mix religion with their culture,” he said. For example, the veil is not a part of the religion. People in the desert were covered up for protection from the sun and heat. Another example: in the U.S. men don’t expect women to walk behind them.

Some immigrants are dismissive of African-American Muslims, but that is a big mistake in his view; respect is due ‘indigenous’ Muslims. He told the group that of the 7-8 million Muslims in this country African-Americans constitute 43% of the total Muslim population in the U.S. They also can provide useful guidance to Muslim newcomers to the U.S. about how to negotiate with public officials, etc.

Yusuf told his personal story of conversion to Islam. He said he started out as a Christian, but was turned off by the way it was practiced in the churches he knew. The services seemed too noisy. When he visited a temple as a teenager, he was captivated by the quiet and peace he found there. When he was told that for a Muslim “you want for your brother what you want for yourself,” he recognized the similarity to the Christian injunction to do unto others that you would have them do unto you.

Islam should really be called “Al-Islam, THE Religion,” he said. To emphasize that peacefulness is a central tenet of Islam, he taught the group to say the greeting “As-Salaamu Alaikum”- “Peace be unto you”- and the response “Wa-Alaikum As-Salaam”- and unto you be peace.”

The major authority in Islam is what the Holy Qur’an says, which is the literal word of GOD, sent down through Prophet Muhammad. The sayings of Prophet Muhammad and Islamic scholars are the other sources. He stressed that in his view Islam is a religion of individuality and that all people should read the Holy Qur’an and interpret it for themselves. Although in America and other parts of the world some people might defer to a Sheik for interpretation, it is really up to each individual to study it.

He gave a little background about the introduction of Islam to African-Americans. He said that the Honorable Elijah Muhammad learned it in the 1930’s from Fard Muhammad, who came to this country from East India. Elijah Muhammad was first and foremost a social reformer who wanted African-Americans men, especially, to stop drinking and smoking and to take care of

their families and communities. Although women are fully respected in the religion, “The message is really for all but especially for the men.” Yusuf said.

When Elijah Muhammad died in 1975, he was succeeded by his son, Wallace D. Muhammad. Wallace D. Muhammad determined that any racist attitudes should be eliminated from Islam. He also gave us the Holy Qur’an and insisted that every human being can get to Paradise.

There are five essential principals that are observed in order to be a Muslim.

1. Belief in One G-D and Muhammad is his last Prophet; this declaration should be made in front of two or more witnesses.
2. Believers must pray five times a day. This is obligatory and designed to ‘keep us from evil and indecency.’ There is a special Prayer on Fridays called Jum’ah Prayer (Congregational Prayer), where Muslims gather in the Masjid (Mosque)
3. Believers must contribute to charity. The meaning of charity is also ‘to grow.’
4. Believers must fast during the month of Ramadan from sun-up until sun-down. There are exceptions for the sick the elderly, the young, women nursing, women during menstruation, and the pregnant, mental unstable and those on a long journey from home. At the end of Ramadan, there is a feast, where people go out into the community to celebrate, making sure everyone is included, and it is called Eid-ul-Fitr (Feast of the fast breaking).
5. Believers must make the Hajj, the journey to Mecca, to follow in the footsteps of Prophet Abraham and Prophet Muhammad. This is not easy because you can have three or four million people doing the same thing at the same time. At the end of the Hajj, there is a three-day celebration, Eid-ul Adha (feast of the sacrifice). This commemorates the biblical story in which Prophet Abraham intends to slaughter his son Ismail as G-D had demanded, but then is allowed by God to slaughter an animal instead. In today’s celebration, animals are slaughtered and most of the meat distributed to the community at large.

After his presentation, participants in the conversation said that they had come for information and wanted to ask questions of Yusuf. Some of these were:

- The difference between Sunni and Shiite Muslims? The majority of Muslim is Sunni. Shiites are found mostly in Iran and Iraq. Both agree on the fundamental principles of Islam. The difference is based on divisions in historical political and spiritual leadership.
- What about intermarrying here in the U.S.? You can have a dual family system here. In Yusuf’s view, those who love each should be able to marry.
- A comment, not a question- Islam is larger than just the American sect we are discussing tonight. We should keep in mind the other aspects of Islam.
- As a Jew, I am ashamed of violent Jews. What do you think about violent Muslims? Answer from Yusuf: We have to deal with radicals within our own community.

- Do you have a position on the Jewish state in Israel? Answer: I believe Israel has a right to exist and the Palestinians have a right to a home land. I think God put that in position; God let it happen. There are extremists on both sides and most governments cause the majority of the problems. Referring to the controversy about whether the son Abraham was stopped from slaughtering was Isaac or Ismail, he said that the two were brothers and their descendents should live peacefully side by side.
- Is Suicide OK within Islam? Yusuf: It is not acceptable to commit suicide and some Islamic leaders will not permit a person who has committed suicide to have a religious ceremony and burial. However, sometimes a person may commit suicide because of mental illness and in that case Yusuf would permit religious ceremonies.
- Do you call yourself a Black Muslim? No
- What about Shariah law? Answer: Shariah is the law. There are some people who create mischief in the land which must be settled. The Qur'an says that if you take a life for no just reason, it is as if you have taken the life of the whole world. Under Shariah law, the family of a victim has the option of settling for a reparations payment, or ransom.
- How visible is Islam in New York? Do immigrant Muslims attend mosques in Harlem? Answer: The Malcolm Shabazz Masjid (Mosque) on 116th Street in Harlem is one of the oldest and the most historical Mosques in America. You can find immigrants from Yemen, parts of Africa, Saudi Arabia and other parts of the Islamic world.
- A professor of religion in the group said that classical Shariah was never enforced. It was seen merely as a system for moral debate. When the Muslim world was colonized by the West, Muslims were pushed to declare a system of law and those demands changed the understanding of Shariah. We are now seeing punishments that were never intended, for example stoning for adultery. Under Shariah law you must have four witnesses to an offence. Obviously, you are never going to have four witnesses to adultery.
- In your introduction to Islam, you said it should be referred to as "Al-Islam," or THE Religion. Do you seek conversions and see Islam expanding to be a global religion? Answer: There is no compulsion in Islam.

At the conclusion of the session all agreed that they had learned a great deal from Imam Yusuf Hasan.