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A Muslim view: Bin Laden is the McVeigh of Islam

By Ken Burrows

Since September 11th, millions of citizens across the country have tried to sort fiction from fact regarding the Islam religion and Middle East culture. To gain additional insight into this topic, Citizens Project interviewed Arshad Yousufi, past president of the Islamic Society of Colorado Springs. Yousufi was born in India, grew up in Pakistan, and is a naturalized U.S. citizen. He has lived in Colorado Springs for 16 years.

CP: The Islamic Society of Colorado Springs has held open houses since September 11th. How would you describe the results of these gatherings?
AY: At the first one, a few weeks after the attack, we were expecting perhaps fifteen to twenty-five people to show. Were we surprised! By our estimates, over three hundred people came for each of the open houses, and they seem to have found the information about Islam to be new to them, interesting and somewhat reassuring.

CP: Do you think local Muslims experienced much discrimination here before September 11th? If so, what kind? Do you think this has changed since September 11th?
AY: While the majority of Americans tend to be tolerant, there has been a longstanding undercurrent of discrimination in the U.S. directed at other minorities, and at times in the past Muslims too have been discriminated against. Women who dress modestly according to Islamic rules tend to be accosted or harassed in public places, and face rejection by employers who simply refuse to give them jobs on some pretext.
After the attack, there was a sharp rise in threats and harassment, especially of the women. Some people encountered harassment at work, with fellow workers taunting and insulting them and blaming them and all Muslims by association with the terrorists. That harassment has since declined.

CP: Non-Islamic observers have sometimes asked: "Why don't Islamic leaders come forth more to condemn the terror attacks?" Is this a misconception?
AY: While Islam does not have a clergy in the Christian or Jewish sense, it does have scholars and community leaders who have spoken up condemning the terror attacks. For example, the top cleric in Egypt, a "Mufti," held a press conference to explain that such attacks are contrary to Islam. However, the media … tend not to report such non-sensationalistic news, or give it just a few seconds ….

CP: Some observers have also suggested that Islam tends to have much closer ties to the state in predominantly Islamic nations, and that this enhances the chances for what is known as a "holy war" mentality. Do you agree? Why or why not?
AY: Historically, the tendency to declare "holy war" or crusade has been more of a Christian thing. The word jihad is misrepresented as "holy war"; it actually means "to strive," especially for the sake of God, and can include helping a needy person, seeking religious knowledge, or fighting evil and injustice. Thus the U.S.'s war on terrorism would qualify as "jihad," if the United States were an Islamic country.
Unlike Judaism and Christianity, Islam has as part of the religion the obligation to consult the people in their affairs, which include government and politics. Thus it is only in Islam that a type of democratic representative government is part of the religion; whereas, in Judaism and

Christianity, it is something imported from outside of the religion. It should be noted that this principle is ignored by current Muslim governments, including the Taliban, even though they claim to be Islamic.
While [Islam] is not a pacifist religion, it is not a violent religion either. A war could be declared by an Islamic state only for legitimate purposes such as self-defense, or stopping evil, injustice, and oppression-not for seizing other people's land or oil. An Islamic state to attacking another country or invading and occupying other countries' land … would not be approved of by the religion.

CP: What would you say, based on your own beliefs, is the true Islamic reaction to the terror attacks that took place on September 11th? And what is the true Islamic view of someone like Osama bin Laden, who argues that it is the duty of all Muslims to kill Americans?
AY: [The September 11th attack] was a crime against humanity, against civilization, and against Islam. Killing innocent persons, even in the heat of battle, is forbidden in Islam.
The terrorists and Osama bin Laden are the Timothy McVeighs of Islam. Even as the average American would not give any credibility to the definition of patriotism as professed by Timothy McVeigh, … the majority of the Muslims do not give any credibility to the ranting of Osama bin Laden.

CP: In your opinion, what is it that makes it possible for terrorists to be recruited to violence in the name of Islam?
AY: There are political situations in the Muslim world where Islam becomes something to use for political ends. Terrorism is contrary to Islam, but there are enough ignorant, gullible, and impressionable people who can be persuaded to do wrong things. We see this phenomenon of people being willing to follow misguided ideas. Even the American militia movements … actually made statements praising the September 11th attack. What is driving the higher visibility of terrorists in Muslim countries are the changing political situations, which have gotten worse, resulting in people … exploiting Islam to counter the situation, but not really being true to Islam.

Patriotism blurs church- state separation

By Richard Van Scotter

In the aftermath of September 11th, religion is acquiring a rejuvenated association with patriotism and appears to be knocking at the schoolhouse door again. High school football, with its gladiator-like atmosphere, creates a particularly conducive environment for praying. There may be but a small step from the frightened parent praying in the stands that her son won't be maimed on the field to sanctioned prayer over the stadium loudspeaker.

School Prayer Revisited
Prayer at school events has taken place regularly this fall. As one parent remarked, "If we want to pray at the game, we ought to be able to pray. And we sure need to." Citizens who might otherwise object to blatant displays of religiosity are backing down.

The Freethinkers Group in Fargo, N.D., for example, has postponed a campaign to remove a Ten Commandments marker from City Hall plaza. As group secretary Davis Cope pointed out, a significant number of people equate the pursuit of monumental issues as anti-Christian and, in turn, un-American.

As with personal struggles, the test of a nation's values and principles comes during times of stress, not "when the road is smooth and the wind is behind our backs." These days we are

hearing more about the FBI detaining suspicious immigrant groups, ethnic profiling of Middle Eastern-looking truck drivers, and calls to expel Arabs and Muslims from our country. "This nation of immigrants," writes columnist Leonard Pitts "usually rushes to put its own highest ideals to the torch whenever some immigrant group is perceived as a threat."

Some lawmakers, those chosen to lead as well as to represent us, are following the parade these days. Increasingly we hear calls from national as well state and local politicians urging Americans to pray, and some students are doing so openly in class. As related in the October 4, 2001 issue of The Gazette ("Line Between Church and State Blurs After Attacks"), many schools are having clergy-led assemblies.

Congress Reintroduces Amendment to U.S. Constitution

Last month, Rep. Ernest Istook (R-Oklahoma) announced that he would reintroduce a constitutional amendment to allow government-sponsored religion in public schools and other buildings. This is Istook's third try to change the Constitution. His earlier attempts in 1998 and 1999 fell far short of the two-thirds vote necessary for a constitutional amendment, or never received a floor vote.

Now the September attack is breathing new life into Istook's quest to protect the people's right to pray, as he claims. Of course, Americans have always had the right to pray, or not to pray, according to their conscience. This they can do in either public or private places. As the Rev. Barry Lynn, executive director of Americans United, reminds us, the Constitution allows citizens to make up their own minds about religion, and we need to keep government out of it.

Congress is facing sustained pressure both from within and outside their ranks. In turn, the goal of Righteous Right groups, such as the Christian Coalition, is to take control of government, from local schools all the way up to the White House. Given the "faith-based" atmosphere in Washington, Christian Reconstructionists have been making forays to the U.S. Capitol and White House in recent months.

Christian Reconstructionism

Reconstructionism is an extreme expression of conservative Christian philosophy, but it does provide the intellectual basis for much of the Righteous Right's thinking and political activism, according Rob Boston, writing in the October 2001 issue of Church and State magazine. "Reconstructionists-also called 'theonomists' or advocates of 'dominion theology'-want to impose 'biblical law' on the United States," writes Boston. They would scrap democracy and replace it with a theocratic state based on a literal reading of the Old Testament's legal code.

"In a 'reconstructed society'," Boston continues, "government would be dramatically scaled back." Public schools and social-service agencies would be abolished and replaced with church-run efforts. And political leaders would look to the Bible, not the Constitution, as a governing document, he adds.

Operation Potomac

Christian Reconstructionism is advanced notably by an organization called the National Reform Association (NRA). Through their "Operation Potomac" project, NRA officials have met on several occasions over the past 16 months with members of Congress and their staffs. With help from House Majority Whip Tom Delay (R-Texas), Boston reports, the plan is to host a "biblical worldview" conference for congressional staff on Capitol Hill.

The goal of NRA, explains 41-year-old president Jeffrey Ziegler, is to reenergize the organization's political arm. "We go there to disciple not to lobby," he remarked in an interview with Church & State. The NRA's aim is to promote political candidacies and run those campaigns.

And the NRA is receiving a warm reception from many congressional representatives in Washington. Since the November 2000 election changed the landscape, NRA officials are

approaching national leaders with buoyed confidence. During the last visit, Boston writes, the Christian Reconstructionist delegation also stopped at the White House, where it was warmly received in the Office of Public Policy and Liaison.

Given the extreme views taken by some Recontructionists, this access and influence is remarkable. Some advocates, for example, assert that the Bible mandates the death penalty for homosexuals, and for doctors who provide abortions. The mainstream NRA does not go this far, but Ziegler supports a political libertarianism in which local control would prevail. As such, states could legally apply the death penalty for certain "offenses," such as homosexuality or providing abortions.
The national political climate in the wake of September 11th could provide fertile soil for a variety of religious mandates to take root in our public places.

Dissent: patriotism at its best

A word from board chair, Richard Conway

The recent terrorist attacks on the United States have generated myriad discussions about government, economics, religion, and patriotism. For the first time in decades, millions of Americans are taking an active interest in their country by examining the core concepts and key issues that combine to create our complex society. Hopefully, these conversations will continue and provide those who participate in them with a better understanding of how our nation operates at home and within the global community.

Aside from providing insight into our country's current national and international circumstances, these public discussions also have the potential to engage the full spectrum of American voices as our nation determines how to proceed in the aftermath of September 11th. If properly facilitated, these conversations can provide our country with a refined vision and unmistakable goals for the 21st Century.

To create a truly inclusive national vision, however, those leading the discussions must acknowledge all voices, including those that may differ from the mainstream. Although the final product of a facilitated process is usually utilitarian in nature-i.e., something that serves the needs of the greatest number of people-our leaders should not discount the opinions of those who are outside the majority. Our country was founded by individuals who questioned and disagreed with their leaders. To dismiss those who dissent would be nothing less than un-American.

While this may seem obvious to most of us, there are some-including local businessman Ed Bircham-who believe that only traitors would question or disagree with the actions of their leaders (see Newsbriefs). Dissent is one of the most important components of the democratic process. Personally, I would question the patriotism of those who would silence the voices of dissenters, not the dissenters themselves.

But please know, Mr. Bircham, that-even though I vehemently disagree with you-I respect your opinion. That's the great thing about America: we're all entitled to our own opinions and have the right to voice them. Also, please add me to your list of "traitors," because I question why our leaders are avoiding discussing the main issue relating to the terrorist strikes, i.e., how American foreign policy provoked the September 11th attacks. Certainly, the current conversations regarding retribution and the economy are important, but they only relate to the after-effects of the attacks. Let's talk about the cause of the attacks and the need for long-term, mutually beneficial solutions to keep them from happening again.

While the events of 9/11were executed by a small group of extremists, extremists are just one step further to the right or left of a much larger group that shares the same concerns. The difference, of course, is that the larger group does not necessarily resort to verbal abuse or violent action. That being the case, there are no doubt millions of people around the world who are angry about US foreign policy. As we move toward becoming a better nation and global resident, wouldn't it be nice if our leaders (national, regional, and local) helped us understand how America might be perceived differently by those who aren't Americans; i.e., not just how "they" are different from "us", but how "we" are different from "them"… and how we all might work together to achieve the greatest good for the greatest number of people? Isn't that the real meaning of leadership?

Ed Bircham lashes out against "traitors"
Ed Bircham, of Bircham's Office Products, placed an ad in The Gazette that has sparked controversy in the Colorado Springs community. In the ad, titled "A Different Type of Terrorist," Bircham says, "The following groups are just as dangerous as terrorists, in my opinion. May I call them traitors!" The list that follows includes the IRS, Planned Parenthood, ACLU, NEA, NOW, the Berkeley City Council, news anchors, college professors, and "Peaceniks and Tree Huggers." Rounding off his list with specific names, such as Jane Fonda, Rosie O'Donnell, Phil Donahue, Bill Clinton, and Richard Gere, Bircham ends by saying, "Come on America, wake up, we can do better than this."

Redistricting update
Every ten years the state politicians gear up for the reapportionment of Colorado's Congressional Districts, which is the allocation of seven of the 435 Congressional seats determined by census results. The responsibility of redrawing these seven Congressional Districts is given to the State Legislature; however, this year the task has been given to the Colorado Supreme Court, due to the Legislature's inability to decide on the matter.

Separate from the reapportionment of Congressional Districts is the process of redrawing Colorado's 65 House of Representatives Districts and its 35 State Senate Districts. This process is overseen by an eleven-member commission consisting of four legislative leaders, three appointees of the Governor, and four appointees of the Chief Justice of the Colorado Supreme Court. The state constitution includes a series of planning meetings (public hearings that set deadlines for the commission, the final one being 55 days prior to precinct caucuses). The Commission will finalize a plan and submit it to the Colorado Supreme Court for review on December 7, 2001.

In both processes the Legislature and the Commission must follow federal law and state constitutional criteria for redistricting. Federal criteria include a mathematical equality in population and that minority groups have equal opportunity to elect representatives of their choice, as outlined by the Voting Rights Act. Federal law as well as Colorado Constitutional criteria include: districts must be as compact as possible; they must be composed of contiguous election precincts; counties and cities should not be split unless necessary to achieve equal population; and communities of interest (ethnic, economic, cultural, demographic, trade area, and geographic commonalities) are to be preserved within a single district whenever possible. However, only federal law includes absence of racial discrimination as a specific criterion.

Affirmative action goes before the Supreme Court
Randy Pech and his highway contracting company Adarand Constructors Inc. have come before the Supreme Court for the third time. The case, which is 12 years old, originally brought the charges that Pech and his company were being discriminated against and could not compete for

government contracts because of racial preferences. In 1995, Pech won a landmark 6-3 decision, and the Clinton administration was forced to quickly revise the federal rules to eliminate provisions for affirmative action. Pech has pursued the case further, claiming that he is "still unable to compete on an equal footing." However, there is a good deal of disagreement between Pech and Solicitor General Theodore Olson over the facts of the case, and the Supreme Court may once again send it down to the lower courts to resolve the facts.

Salvation Army rescinds domestic partner benefits; Focus on the Family rejoices
In a recent Issues Alert from Focus on the Family's Citizen they called on their constituents to thank the Salvation Army for rescinding the Western Territory's policy on offering domestic partner benefits and for establishing a national policy to extend benefits only to an employee's spouse and dependent children.

Dr. Dobson of Focus on the Family praised the Salvation Army for reversing its decision to offer benefits to domestic partners, saying that, "They have done what's right, it was not easy, and I just thank God that they had the courage to do it." If you would like to voice your concerns, contact the Salvation Army's national office by writing or calling:

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