

posted October 04, 2001 - <http://www.csmonitor.com/2001/1004/p25s1-wosc.html>

Q&A: Islamic fundamentalism

A world-renowned scholar explains key points of Islam.

By Josh Burek and James Norton | *csmonitor.com* staff writers

Islam is one of the world's largest – and fastest-growing – religions. Yet its most basic tenets remain mysterious to many non-Muslims. To shed light on a religion that has become the source of intense discussion following the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks, *csmonitor.com* interviewed Professor Charles A. Kimball, chair of the Department of Religion at Wake Forest University in Winston-Salem, NC. He is the author of three books, including "Striving Together: A Way Forward in Christian-Muslim Relations and Religion," "Politics and Oil: The Volatile Mix in the Middle East," and "Angle of Vision: Christians and the Middle East."

1. What is the Islamic concept of "jihad," and how has it been variously interpreted?

Jihad means "striving or struggling in the way of God." It is a central concept in Islam. Muslims should strive to know and do the will of God. Historically, the "greater" jihad refers to the struggle each person has within him or herself to do what is right. Because of human pride, selfishness and sinfulness, people of faith must constantly wrestle with themselves and strive to do what is right and good. The "lesser" jihad involves the outward defense of Islam. Muslims should be prepared to defend Islam, including military defense, when the community of faith is under attack. While the vast majority of Muslims clearly reject the violent extremism manifest on Sept. 11, some religiously inspired and politically motivated individuals and groups attempt to justify their behavior in the context of a holy war or struggle in defense of Islam.

2. What sect of Islam does the Taliban adhere to, and do its tenets differ from more mainline denominations of Sunni Islam?

The Taliban advocate a strict and extreme version of Sunni Islam. Policies about education, restrictions on women, and the destruction of the large Buddha figures have received a good deal of attention in the past few years. Prior to September 11, only three nations had diplomatic relations with the Taliban: Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Pakistan. Today, only Pakistan recognizes the Taliban officially. Clearly, most predominantly Muslim countries view the Taliban with suspicion. Like all religious traditions, Islamic history includes various schools of thought and legal structures. It is very difficult to quantify particular groups and movements or sharply define adherents within particular traditions among Muslims worldwide. To the extent the leaders of the Taliban embrace the teaching and worldview of the network connected with Osama bin Laden, they should be viewed as very much on the fringe of what the large majority of the world's 1.2 billion Muslims (2nd largest, growing rapidly) understand to be central tenets of their faith.

3. Can you give us an explanation of the differences between the tenets of "fundamentalist" Islam and "extremist" (or violent) Islam?

Religious studies scholars approach the term "fundamentalist" in different ways. Some argue the term is so rooted in a particular form of Protestant Christianity that it cannot easily be used in relation to Islam, Judaism, Hinduism, etc. Martin Marty, a renowned scholar who co-edited a five-volume study on fundamentalism, argues that fundamentalisms are certainly very different. However, there are also striking similarities. Fundamentalists in various traditions teach that there was a perfect moment and they endeavor to recover that moment. This often involves reacting to that which is seen as a threat to realizing the ideal—even if the ideal never actually existed. In the case of selected Islamist groups (e.g. Hizbollah, Hamas, and Islamic Jihad), the realization of their vision of an Islamic state is being thwarted by corrupt leaders in predominantly Muslim countries. The pervasive dominance of external powers, most notably the US, is also seen as both polluting Islamic culture and as a mechanism for exploitation. In recent decades, some groups have sought to work within particular political systems; some have resorted to violent extremism. To understand particular groups, it is important to do careful contextual analysis.

4. What is the Qur'an's stance on suicide? Are suicide bombers who cite a heavenly afterlife as a reward for their deeds following a misinterpretation of the scripture?

There is only one verse in the Qur'an that contains a phrase related to suicide: "O you who believe! Do not consume your wealth in the wrong way—rather through trade mutually agreed to, and do not kill yourselves. Surely God is Merciful toward you." (4:29) Some commentators believe that this phrase is better translated "do not kill each other." The prophetic tradition, however, clearly prohibits suicide. The hadith materials, which are the authoritative sayings and actions of the prophet, Muhammad, includes many unambiguous statements about suicide: one who "throws himself off a mountain" or "drinks poison" or "kills himself with a sharp instrument" will be in the fire of Hell. Suicide is not allowed even to those in extreme conditions such as painful illness or a serious wound. Ultimately, it is God, not humans, who has authority over the span of every person's life. There are some Muslims, most notably during the last several decades, who have engaged in suicidal military missions such as the truck bombing of the US Marine barracks in Beirut in 1983 and the September 11 attacks in New York and Washington. The extremists cite passages in the Qur'an that promise paradise to those who die "struggling in the way of God." (2:154) They see what they are doing as active armed struggle in defense of Islam. Their death is thus viewed as martyrdom not as suicide. The overwhelming majority of Muslims view this as a misinterpretation of the Qur'an and Islamic tradition. Many also point out that the taking of innocent life – even in war – is strictly forbidden in Islam. This, too, makes the actions of Sept. 11 incompatible with Islamic teachings.

5. What are the various clerical positions within Islam, and is there one who has ultimate authority over the others? Is there a clergy member with influence over Osama bin Laden?

There is no central, authoritative religious structure for Muslims. There are a variety of recognized religious leaders and legal authorities in particular settings. A mufti, for instance, is a recognized Muslim jurist who is able to give an opinion (known as a fatwa) on a point of Islamic law. There is a mufti of Jerusalem, a Grand Mufti of Syria and so on. Throughout Islamic history, the collective wisdom of the scholars (ulama') has been a primary source of authority for religious matters. A reflection of the diffuse patterns of leadership and decision-making among Sunni Muslims was seen in the days after the attacks on New York and Washington. Muslim leaders from various parts of Afghanistan were assembled ostensibly to render a decision on the request to turn over Osama bin Laden. At a personal level, there is no religious authority with definitive influence over Osama bin Laden. There is nothing parallel to the papacy in the Catholic tradition. There is no parallel to excommunication even if one grievously departs from widely held, orthodox views. There are all kinds of laws and punishments pertaining to one's behavior in a given setting. There is a more clearly defined hierarchical structure within the Shi'ite tradition. The highest authority among Shi'ites is an Ayatollah. This is an honorific title bestowed by popular usage on recognized religious scholars within Shi'ite Islam.

6. What should non-Muslims know about key similarities and differences between Islamic and Judeo-Christian traditions?

It is, of course, difficult to summarize the main teachings of the religious traditions embraced by nearly one-half the world's population. Muslims understand Islam to be the same religion that God revealed to Abraham, Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad. They believe that those who came after various prophets confused or distorted portions of the revelation God had given. Central teachings in the Bible are also central in the Qur'an. There is only one God (Allah in Arabic). Humans are created and imbued with freedom and responsibility. There are similar passages about moral and ethical imperatives, the existence of angels and demons, the immortality of the soul, the coming day of judgment, the abodes of heaven and hell, etc. The Qur'an addresses Jews and Christians as "People of the Book" who may also share a heavenly home: "those who have faith, those who are Jews and Christians...shall have their reward." (2:62 and 5:69) At the same time, the Qur'an clearly rejects the divinity of Jesus and warns of the dangers of a trinitarian theology. Christians are in danger of the most heinous sin, shirk, which is "associating something human with God." The best answer to this question is for non-Muslims to engage in a thoughtful study of Islam. Study programs, books, and personal engagement with Muslim neighbors are helpful ways to explore the similarities and differences among the descendants of Abraham.