Questions and RESPONSES about Islam from ECU Undergraduates
“Africa and Islam,” “World Civ to 1500,” and “US History since 1877”
Following Skype Session with Jaamia Galant and Imam Rashied Omar
Facilitated by Shelly Wilburn
24 MuHarram 1436/17 November 2014
Claremont Main Road Mosque
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(Apologies in advance for such a lengthy and complex list of questions, but know that your knowledge will help free us all. Thanks so much.)

1. Given the characterization of Islam in the US, why do you embrace your progressive way of thinking when other Muslims seem to condemn it? Is this due to the influence of modernization? Your cultural history?

There are Muslims in the US who embrace the same ethos and positions that we espouse. Muslim scholars based in the US have for example published a path breaking volume entitled Progressive Muslims: On Justice, Gender, and Pluralism edited by Omid Safi (UK: Oneworld Publications, 2003). A major difference between Muslims in SA and the US is that Muslims have been in South Africa for over three centuries whereas Muslims in the US have only been able to institutionalize Islam in the US over the past three decades. In addition, at CMRM, our strong tradition of struggle against racism and apartheid in South Africa has also provided a context within which we have been able to develop a more progressive interpretation of Islam.

2. Our professor maintains that those who bombed the World Trade Center on 9/11 may have thought of themselves as Muslims, but they instead were heretics. He argues that neither the Quran nor hadith sanction the killing of innocents. Is this your view? Also, if you were to generalize this among all Muslims, would the vast majority of them agree with our professor?

Yes, we agree that neither the Qur’an nor hadith sanction the killing of innocent people. The Qur’an is replete with references concerning the sanctity of human life (Q6:151; Q17:33; Q25:68). The most striking of these Qur’anic proclamations that underscores the supreme sacredness of human life is verse 32 of surah al-Ma’idah, chapter 5, in which God, the Giver and Taker of Life (al-Muhyi al-Mumit), equates the unjust and wanton killing of one human being to that of the killing of all humankind:

*If anyone kills a single human being without just cause it shall be as though he had killed all of humankind; Whereas if anyone saves a life, it shall be as though he had saved the lives of all humankind* (Q5:32).

We believe the vast majority of Muslims would agree with this position. Extremists who kill wantonly, acknowledge the above Qur’anic verses for normal circumstances but justify their killings as counter-violence in contexts where they feel oppressed or under threat.

3. Please tell us more about the Sufi sect and the Cape Muslim leader whose tomb is buried on Signal Hill. Is it pointing toward the Ka’bah? If we are able to travel to South Africa on an ECU
summer study abroad trip to Cape Town between 18 July and 1 August 2015 (2 - 16 SHawwal 1436), may we visit your mosque and the Sufi tomb?

All Muslim graves point towards the Ka’bah in Mecca. The person buried in the tomb on Signal Hill is Sheikh Mohamed Hassen Ghaibie Shah al Qadri. According to oral tradition, he was a follower of Sheikh Yusuf of Macassar. These men were learned teachers of Islam. They belonged to the Qadiriyyya sufi order, which is still very popular in Cape Town.

You are all most welcome to visit our mosque when you are in Cape Town and we can arrange for a visit to the shrine (kramat) on Signal Hill.

4. Jaamia and Imam Rashied, what are your favorite hadiths?

A. Imam Rashied’s choice:

_The believer with the most complete faith is the one with the best character and the one with the best character is he who treats women with dignity and honour”_ (reported by Abu Hurayra and recorded in the hadith collection of Tirmidhi). A similar hadith is reported by the Prophet’s wife, Aisha.

On the basis of this _hadith_ we conclude that in Islam the level of the believer’s faith is evaluated by his/her ethical conduct and the highest form of virtuosity is affirming the full dignity and honour of women.

B. Jaamia’s choice:

_Hadith_ reported by the Prophet Muhammad’s companion, Hanzalah al-Usaydi, and recorded in the _hadith_ collection of Imam Muslim.

_Hanzalah and Abu Bakr went to the Prophet and confessed to having become hypocrites because they could not sustain their high levels of spirituality which they attained when they were in the company of the Prophet. They told the Prophet:

‘O Messenger of Allah, when we are with you, you talk about the Fire and the Paradise until it is as if we can see them. Then we go out and play with our wives and children and deal with our properties, and we forget much.

_The Messenger of Allah then said: ‘By Him in Whose hand is my soul, if you were to continue at the same level at which you were when with me and in remembering Allah, the angels would shake hands with you when you are resting and when you walk about. But, O Hanzalah, there is a time (for this) and a time (for that).’ He repeated this phrase three times.

This _hadith_ teaches Muslims to live a life balanced between devotion to his/her Lord and fulfilling his/her natural human need for recreation, leisure time and enjoyment. In other words, there is a time for devotion and a time for relaxation. There is a time for hard work and a time for rest. There is a time for contemplation and dedication and a time for entertainment.
5. Is Bilal more significant than other Companions of the Prophet in the minds of Muslims in South Africa?

Not really. Bilal is an illustrious Companion of the Prophet just as Abu Bakr was, who freed Bilal from slavery.

6. Imam Rashied, would you talk more about incrementalism? This suggests the possibility of human agency in Allah’s revelations through Gabriel to Mohammad (PBUH).

We would like to answer this question by referring to an Islamic theory of social change based on the well-known verse of the Qur’an, in Surah al-Ra’ad, Chapter13, verse 11 that posits the view that the Islamic theory of change is not deterministic. Meaning, there is a symbiotic relationship between the Will of God and human agency. In this verse God declares

**God will not change the condition of a people as long as they do not change themselves** [Q13:11]

Transformation and social change according to the Islamic worldview is not merely the outcome of objective conditions (God’s Will), but is also the result of the moral choices and ethical responsibilities that human beings assume. Furthermore, social change and transformation according to Islam takes place gradually and progressively, technically known as *tadrij* or *tadarruj*. Two important Qur’anic verses in support of this view is verse 106 of Surah Bani Isra’il, chapter 17 in which God proclaims:

*And (it is) a Qur’an which We have gradually unfolded, in order that you might read it out to humankind by stages. And We have revealed it step by step.* [Q17:106]

The second Qur’anic reference is verse 32 of Surah al-Furqan, chapter 25, in which God proclaims:

*And those who are bent on denying the truth say: "Why has the Qur’an not been revealed all at once?" (It has been sent down in stages), so that We may strengthen your heart thereby. And We have revealed it to you gradually* [Q25:32]

Both of the above verses concur that the Qur’an was not revealed all at once but was revealed gradually and in stages over a period of twenty-three years. The key Arabic term *tartil*, employed in the above verses translated here as “gradual revelation”, indicates successive steps which sought to balance the contextual condition and the readiness of the early Muslims to receive this Divine guidance. The Qur’anic revelation progressed, one passage or *surah* after another, as suited the different stages along the road of the social transformation that the community traveled. This is how we understand the notion of incrementalism and human agency in social change.

7. Is there anything about the film, The Message, that you would especially like us to know? We have watched and discussed the film in both our “Africa and Islam” and “World Civ” classes.

It is an excellent film in the way that it portrays the persecution of Muhammad and his perseverance in the face of great adversity. In this film, we see that permission from God for the early Muslims to engage in armed resistance comes at the end of a long period of persecution during which the Muslims persevered through non-violent resistance.
8. In accordance with Islam what is your interpretation of the treatment of homosexuals in both non-Islamic and Islamic countries?

Treatment of homosexuals within Muslim majority countries and Muslim minority communities vary across the globe. In some countries they face active persecution, while in other countries they may still be marginalized but are not persecuted. However, by far the most common way of dealing with homosexuals amongst Muslim communities in both majority and minority Muslim contexts, is through ‘don’t ask, don’t tell’ attitudes. However, more recently in Muslim minority contexts especially, homosexual Muslims are beginning to form support groups and finding a voice to challenge hegemonic interpretations of Islam towards homosexuals. We at CMRM have therefore felt compelled to begin to educate and inform ourselves of the theological and jurisprudential arguments around this issue. We attach for your information the course outline of a reading group on this topic that is currently underway at the mosque. (We have had an average attendance of 20 participants per session).

9. What qualifications does one have to have in order to make a fatwa?

A fatwā is an Islamic legal pronouncement, issued by an expert in religious law (mufti), pertaining to a specific issue, usually at the request of an individual or judge to resolve an issue where Islamic jurisprudence (fiqh), is unclear. We might compare a fatwā to the legal ruling of a high court or the Supreme Court, depending on the authority of the mufti behind it. However, a fatwā is not binding as is the verdict of the secular courts; while correct and applicable to all members of the Muslim faith, the fatwā is optional for the individual to respect or not. Moreover, unlike legal pronouncements in Western law, a fatwa does not only have to conclude that the matter under consideration is permissible (halal) or prohibited (haram), it may classify the proposed action as obligatory (fard), recommended (mandub), neutral (mubah), disliked (makruh) or prohibited (haram). This is an indication that a fatwa is more than a legal pronouncement – it also seeks to provide ethical guidance.

The qualification for someone who may issue a fatwa varies from stringent requirements to more lenient requirements. In our view the minimum requirements, however, is for someone to have at least completed a PhD in the broad field of Islamic Studies, know the Qur’an (the most primary source of Islamic guidance) and the Arabic language, be able to distinguish authentic and spurious hadith reports as well as having a good understanding of his/her context. A fatwa usually ends with the phrase: “And God Knows Best”.

For more information on the stringent qualifications for issuing of fatwas see “Open Letter to Baghdadi” published by over 120 Muslim scholars and leaders at http://lettertobaghdadi.com/index.php.

10. Is slavery permissible in Islam? If so, please elaborate.

According to the majority opinion amongst Muslim scholars slavery is prohibited in Islam (haram). It is however noteworthy that by the end of the life of Muhammad slavery had not yet been completely abolished. The economy and culture of the society at that time was still very dependent on the institution of slavery. However, subsequent generations of Muslims interpreted the Qur’anic message and trajectory of Muhammad’s law and ethics as moving towards the goal of abolishing slavery. A useful example of this in the Qur’an is Chapter 90, verse 13, where freeing a slave is defined as one way to follow the righteous path of Islam. The Companions of the Prophet understood this message and so for example there are many stories of Companions freeing slaves, including the famous story of Abu Bakr freeing Bilal from slavery.
11. What are some of the effects of formal and informal apartheid that remain today in the New South Africa, especially with regard to how they affect Muslims?

The effects of forced removals and separate development under apartheid is still very apparent in the huge gaps that exist between the rich and poor and between former white areas and the impoverished slum areas created by the apartheid government. Forced removals broke up communities and created the conditions for gangsterism and endemic violence that continues to plague impoverished communities today. In addition, Muslims, like other South Africans, are still struggling to heal and rid themselves of the scourge of racism as a result of the decades of Apartheid socialisation. All of this does not affect Muslims exclusively or especially. Muslims are integrated into all communities in SA.

12. Is a Muslim nullifying his or her tawhid by participating in other forms of law and government outside of Sharia?

No, we do not believe so. See response below as well.

13. In a question related to #12, our “Africa and Islam” class studied early Muslim societies that adapted to non-Muslim rule. In Kumasi, Ghana, for example, a Muslim merchant class adapted to Asante rule through the “Suwarian Tradition.” Is the “Suwarian Tradition” considered important among Muslims in South Africa today, given the secular components of the Freedom Charter, some of which may be contradictory to the teachings of Islam, are imbedded in South Africa’s constitution?

Very few Muslims know about the “Suwarian Tradition”. West African Islam is culturally very different from Islam in South Africa. Muslims in South Africa generally embrace the country’s constitution and adhere to the secular laws of the country. There are also currently efforts to incorporate aspects of Muslim personal law into the laws of the country.

14. Some world citizens look to South Africa, warts and all, with great marvel, hoping its recent history continues to thrust it forward as a role model for the world. One major problem that both South Africa and the United States face is the abusive and immoral nature of structural capitalism that permits a small number of people to oppress the vast majority of not only their own citizens, but often effectively those outside their national boundaries. What is Islam’s place in promoting reform in societies in which the worst characteristics of capitalism seem so evident?

While Islam and most other faiths inspire their adherents to promote an egalitarian society through acts of justice and compassion, we don’t think Islam or any other religion has played a major role in reforming capitalist societies. These have been left to social activists of all faiths or none, who recognize the inherent inequalities perpetuated through capitalist systems. Muslim majority countries have not been immune to the lure of global capitalism, even if their societies are organized a little differently to Western societies. CMRM’s mission statement on Jihad Against Poverty attempts to make a modest contribution to raise awareness and address the destructive effects of global capitalism that you allude to.

15. Dr. Wilburn makes a big deal about your mosque being so special in Dar al-Islam. As most of us are only beginning to learn about Islam, from your perspective why does he hold your mosque in such high regard?

We can’t speak for Dr. Wilburn, you will have to ask him! But perhaps in a context where Islam is constantly portrayed as a monolithic extremist religion, it is perhaps novel or refreshing to encounter
Muslim voices that espouse a compassionate and inclusive vision of Islam that ultimately strives towards social justice for all.

16. Imam Rashied, would you please discuss your experiences more fully as an anti-apartheid activist, especially with regard to contact you may have had with the ANC, Black Consciousness, and PAC organizations?

I belonged to a tendency within the broad Muslim anti-apartheid movement which advocated the policy that Muslims should support all the legitimate tendencies within what we called the National Liberation Movement. We thus supported the liberatory efforts of a range of ideological tendencies including the ANC, PAC, AZAPO AND UNITY MOVEMENT.

17. We often see Muslims using prayer beads, somewhat similar to Catholics who recite the prayers of their rosaries. What prayers are Muslims reciting with their beads?

Muslims may recite many different prayers and invocations but often Muslims invoke God’s 99 names by repeating it several times thereby aspiring to embody these sublime characteristics (e.g. Ya Raghman – O Compassion One). Supplications also include seeking spiritual solace by repeating specific phrases through which the worshipper invokes God’s mercy and compassion. One example of such a supplication is when one feels remorseful for a misdeed, you would often repeat the phrase Astaghfiru - Allah – I seek God’s forgiveness and pardon.

18. Allegedly, some imams attribute the justification for female genital mutilation to a hadith. What hadith is that?

The overwhelming majority of Muslim scholars hold that circumcision is obligatory for men and not for women. Those minority scholars who hold that circumcision is recommended for women base their view on the following purported hadith attributed to Muhammad according to which he said: "Circumcision is a Sunnah for men, and an honour for women." This hadith has however been declared weak by most hadith scholars. It is interesting to note, in cultures where female circumcision is practiced, it is not exclusive to Muslim women.

19. In our recent field trip to our local mosque, the imam stated that the Vedas is sacred literature, similar to the Torah and New Testament. If so, does this also include the Upanishads?

This is possible, because Muslims believe that God sent a messenger to guide every community during various epochs in human history (Q10:48 & Q16:37). Some of these messengers and prophets are known, but most are not known to us. In a hadith, Muhammad is reported to have said that God sent no less than 124,000 prophets to humankind (Ibn Hanbal, Musnad, 5, 169) of which only 28 are mentioned in the Qur’an. None of those 28 prophets are mentioned as being sent either to the Indian subcontinent or to Africa or the Americas for that matter. Thus, it is perfectly reasonable that the Vedas and Upanishads could be remnants of the Divine guidance sent through messengers of God not mentioned in the Qur’an.

Thanks from all of us in Dr. Wilburn’s classes at East Carolina University!
REFERENCES

The following is a list of references which your students might find useful for further reading related to some of the very interesting questions raised above.


Khutbahs by Imam Rashied Omar on www.cmrm.co.za:

1. *Jihad Against Poverty* – ‘Id al-Fitr, 10 September 2010
3. *Mitigating the Toxic Political Theology of ISIS* – ‘Id al-Adha, 4 October 2014

ADDITIONAL ATTACHMENT: CMRM Reading group course outline.