

‘Islam Is Dominated By Radicals’

At a public debate here, the audience dramatically sided with the proposition.

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Editor and Publisher
04/23/2008

By the end of a spirited and high-level debate held here last week, many in the audience of about 400 dramatically shifted their opinions and agreed with the proposition that “Islam is dominated by radicals.”

At the outset of the 90-minute program, sponsored by Intelligence Squared, a popular Oxford-style debate series held at the Asia Society, 46 percent of the audience members agreed with the statement put forward, 32 percent disagreed, and 22 percent were undecided.

By evening’s end, 73 percent agreed, 23 percent disagreed and four percent were undecided, prompting Robert Rosenkranz, whose foundation sponsors the series, to note “it’s rare to see such a large shift in the voting numbers, especially on such a contentious issue.”

What accounted for the major vote change was the aggressive and persuasive style of Daveed Gartenstein-Ross, vice president of research at the Foundation for Defense in Washington, D.C., and the more personal approach of Asra Nomani, a journalist and professor currently at Georgetown University, who spoke of prejudice within Islam she has experienced as a woman. They were joined on the “For” team by Paul Marshall, senior fellow at the Hudson Institute’s Center for Religious Freedom.

They asserted from the outset that they were not arguing that Islam itself is radical or that most of the world’s 1.5 billion Muslims are radical, but rather that it is the radicals who “have their hands on the levers of power,” in Marshall’s words, and are the driving force in Islam today.

The team also noted the success of repressive countries like Saudi Arabia and Iran in exporting a radical form of Islam through Wahabiism to once more moderate Muslim countries around the world, including Pakistan and Indonesia.

The “Against” team, whose most vocal member was Reza Aslan, an author and fellow at the University of Southern California’s Center on Public Diplomacy, included Richard Bulliet, a professor of history at Columbia University, and Edina Lekovic, director of public affairs for the Muslim Public Affairs Council.

They acknowledged that Saudi Arabia is a repressive country but insisted that its policies are based more on politics than religion, and that Islam should be judged by the behavior of the majority of its adherents, who are moderate.

Aslan said Americans get the impression that Islam is dominated by radicals because the media focuses on violence and conflict rather than on what Muslims themselves have to say.

Both sides cited numerous statistics and polls to prove their points, and offered anecdotes and examples to bolster their arguments. But Nomani’s firsthand account of how she experienced bias in her Morgantown, W. Va., mosque seemed to resonate with the audience, and she emphasized that moderates tolerate the bias because “they don’t want to lose their status, they don’t want to lose their place in the community.”

Lekovic, opposing the proposition, said that “radicals are failing in their attempt to dominate,” and that moderates are working “to re-emerge as the dominant force within their faith.”

Nomani pounced on the latter statement, saying that when Lekovic spoke of moderates seeking “to re-emerge,” she was conceding that it is the radicals who now dominate within Islam.

Gartenstein-Ross, who clearly has the most eclectic religious background of the debaters, pointed out that while the other side discussed violence, his For team defined radicalism as opposing basic human freedoms of equality, gender and religion. He said it was clear that countries in the Muslim world violated these freedoms.

“I’ve seen Saudi propaganda from the inside,” he said, asserting that the large sums of Saudi money spent in moderate Muslim countries have had a dramatic and radicalizing effect.

(Born Jewish, Gartenstein-Ross converted to Islam while in college, worked for a year for a group promoting Saudi Wahabiism, and later wrote a book about the experience. He subsequently converted to Christianity.)

Bulliet of Columbia argued that most Muslim countries are led by dictators, not Muslim governments, and citizens fall back on their faith in the face of totalitarianism. But the audience clearly accepted the For argument that whatever the rationales or numbers, it is radical Islam that is on the rise.

Robert Siegel of NPR moderated the debate, which can be heard on NPR stations and viewed at <http://youtube.com/user/IntelligenceSquared>.
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