



Belief Blog

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My Take: Islam is a religion of peace, or it isn't

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By **Khalid Latif**, Special to CNN

Last week, New York University hosted the Intelligence Squared Debates at its Skirball Center for the Performing Arts. Four panelists, two for and two against, presented arguments on the motion of "Islam Is a Religion of Peace." About 800 showed up to learn the answer.

Problem is, there is no one answer.

The Muslim community is by no means monolithic and viewing us as one is problematic. We are diverse.

Yet we find ourselves in a moment in which we are very narrowly understood. That normative understanding is equated to something radical, despite the fact that 93 percent of Muslims are found to be far from radical according to recent Gallup surveys.

What becomes more problematic is that typically when one of us from that 93 percent steps up to speak, we are vehemently told that we either do not represent Islam or even more absurdly that we are not truly practicing Islam's teachings.

Zeba Khan, a panelist for the "Islam Is a Religion of Peace" last week, was met with such a response. She started off the debate by sharing her personal story about growing up in Ohio, attending a Hebrew Day School, and being raised by Indian parents in a Muslim household. "Just because you may not hear us," said Khan, "doesn't mean we are not speaking."

Ayaan Hirsi Ali, speaking against the motion, followed Zeba and immediately said, "The problem with Islam is who speaks for Islam." She went on to say, "I concede (the radical voice) is a minority," and expressed her desire that someone like Zeba Khan actually would speak for Islam, but, in her opinion, could not and does not.

And so Zeba's voice, her interpretation, and all of her efforts were collectively dismissed since she did not fit into what Hirsi Ali believed Islam to be.

Maajid Nawaz, Zeba Khan's co-panelist for the motion, was dismissed just as easily. "This debate is not about making excuses for terrorism," he said. "This debate acknowledges that Muslims bear a responsibility in reclaiming their faith from a minority."

If anyone understands the issues of that minority voice it is Nawaz. Having been a member of the political party Hizb ut-Tahrir for 14 years, Nawaz was a founding member in Denmark and Pakistan. In his own words, he eventually served a sentence for four years in an Egyptian prison as an Amnesty International prisoner of conscience, and during them that time broke away from Hizb ut-Tahrir's ideology.

He has since dedicated his life to counter-radicalism initiatives and seeks to uphold the responsibility that he spoke of through his work. He even uniquely acknowledges the presence of a radical element in Islam

and how its misinterpretation is still in fact an interpretation that needs to be dealt with.

Despite this, those opposed to the motion told him that it is his peaceful understanding of Islam that is rooted in misinterpretation, since it does not match up with the interpretation put forth by the radical minority, and thus somehow ignores the fundamentals of Islam since those groups somehow are the end-all be-all of what Islam actually means.

That a peaceful interpretation of the religion, or even one that is non-radical, can only exist by ignoring fundamental texts is flawed in its logic.

Characteristic of any text - whether religious or not - is its ability to be interpreted through the lens of its reader. Interpretations of the Quran that espouse ideas of tolerance, compassion and mercy have existed and continue to exist in the majority of Muslim communities since the advent of Islam 1400 years ago.

As much as Muslims need to acknowledge the existence of a minority voice that is radicalized, so too does a broader society need to acknowledge the existence of a majority voice that is not radicalized and more importantly condemns radical thought. There are those who make Islam to be something restrictive and radical, but there are many, many more who do not.

Moderating the panel last week, ABC News correspondent John Donovan said speaking to those against the motion, "You are making it sound like Islam is what you make it to be. Why then can it not be the peaceful Islam that we see being practiced by so many around the world?"

The answer, Mr. Donovan, is that it can be, and for the majority of us, it is.

The opinions expressed in this commentary are solely those of Khalid Latif