

Religious leaders offer R.I. insights into Islam

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Muslim leaders, from left, Imam Abdul Hameed, Imam Farid Ansari and Mufti Ikram Ul Haq discuss matters of faith with members of Leadership Rhode Island at the forum at a mosque in North Smithfield Wednesday.

The Providence Journal / Andrew Dickerman

NORTH SMITHFIELD — Hoping to dispel what they see as false impressions about Islam that have led to fear and suspicion in many quarters, several of the top leaders of Rhode Island’s Muslim community said Wednesday that most of the world’s 1.5 billion Muslims have little in common with the extremists who have been at war with America even before the 9/11 attacks.

Speaking at the Masjid Al-Islam, the first Islamic mosque built as such in Rhode Island, the leaders stressed that the Islam they know is a religion of peace. They also said that they see Islam as a religion that upholds women, despite what detractors say.

The forum, which drew roughly 40 participants, was sponsored by Leadership Rhode Island, an organization that brings leaders from the worlds of business, education and politics together to develop solutions to problems around the state.

Monday’s forum was planned long before the controversy erupted over the proposed building of an Islamic community center 2 ½ blocks from ground zero in New York City. Mufti Ikram Ul Haq, the imam for a North Smithfield congregation, has gone on record saying that while the owners of the property had a right to build there, he wished that the Muslims had paid more heed to the sensitivities of Americans unsettled by the proposal and selected another location.

None of the religious leaders disagreed with that assessment. Guy Abelson, who works in the development office of medical-care conglomerate Lifespan, blamed the controversy on “fear-

mongers” who have been able to rile people because of the hard economic times. “I don’t think we would have this controversy if the unemployment rate was only 5 percent.”

Panel participants, besides the mufti, were Imam Farad Ansari, of the Muslim American Da-wah Center in Providence; Imam Abdul Hameed, of Providence’s Masjid Al-Karim, the Islamic Center of Rhode Island; David Coolidge, the Muslim chaplain at Brown University; Jennifer Ead, founder of the Islamic School of Rhode Island, based in West Warwick; and Catherine Wilson, secretary for the Rhode Island Council for Muslim Advancement.

Ansari said he takes personal offense at attempts by outsiders to denigrate Islam and to portray it as anything other than what it is, a religion of peace. Ul Haq said people need to be reminded that 300 Muslims were among those killed in the Sept. 11 attacks; Ansari observed that Muslims were also among the first responders who died. Coolidge said that even now, Muslims suffer at the hands of Muslim extremists, noting that a recent “breaking of the fast” at Brown was sponsored by a young woman whose sister was killed by a suicide bomber in Pakistan.

“So why are there so many Muslim extremists?” Barbara Lee, of Cranston, wanted to know.

Ul Haq said there are far more Muslims who are loving and peaceful, but it is always the violent exception that gets the media’s attention.

Ead said she and 50 Muslims attended a 9/11 commemoration at the State House, only to find someone quoted that night saying: “Where are all the Muslims?” She said she had been standing right next to the TV reporter. “It’s all about what they choose to cover.”

Another man wanted to know why Islam treats women “so poorly.” And a woman asked why Muslim women are told they must cover themselves.

The imams answered that some of the rules and regulations found in some Muslim countries, including Pakistan and Indonesia, have more to do with the cultures of those countries and were in place even before they became Muslim, so the practices have nothing to do with the true observance of Islam.

Ead, a convert to Islam, said she thinks some of the requirements, such as separation of men and woman at worship, make practical sense. Ul Huq said it is odd that when people see a nun or a Jewish woman covered, they see her as a devotee, but when a Muslim woman covers herself they say she is under subjugation.

Hameed said people who say the Koran denigrates women need to be reminded of the words of the Prophet Muhammad who said “the best men are those who are best to their wives.”

In the area of politics, Coolidge said he suspects that most Muslims today are Democrats, but there have also been Muslims in the Republican Party. “I think a lot of them are feeling betrayed by their party. They feel they have been stabbed in the back.”

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