

R.I. Muslims celebrate as community

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Imam Farid Ansari speaks as members from the R.I. State Council of Churches and other clergy gather at the Roger Williams statue to show solidarity for tolerance of Islamic religious beliefs.

The Providence Journal / Andrew Dickerman

PROVIDENCE — They came with coolers and picnic baskets, spreading out by the thousands on the lawn in front of the Temple to Music at Roger Williams Park, to celebrate the end of yet another month-long Ramadan fast.

If an observer were looking for a sign Friday that Rhode Island's Muslims were being distracted by a Florida pastor's on-again, off-again threat to burn copies of the Koran, he might have come away empty-handed.

Granted, Imam Abdulah-Giyath Mayaleeke, of the Providence Muslim Community Center of Rhode Island, referred to the Koran controversy in a closing prayer, calling the pastor "ignorant" and asking Allah to change his mind.

But mostly people's minds were on other things. For some, it was the pride of having proved to themselves that they could keep their appetites at bay and, through self-discipline, inch closer to being better Muslims.

A few hours later, in a car ride to Virginia where he, his wife and children were planning to visit his parents, Mufti Ikram Ul Haq, the Pakistani-born imam of the Masjid Al-Islam mosque in North Smithfield, said the Koran is certainly the "most noble and most holy book," in Islam, believed by Muslims to be the literal "speech" of God.

Nonetheless, he said, it wouldn't be "the end of the world" if someone chose to desecrate it.

That's because, the 26-year-old imam said, the Koran is not simply to be found on printed books.

“It is preserved in the hearts of millions of Muslims who try to memorize it every single day.”

According to the teachings of Islam, the story of the Koran goes back to the year 610 when the Prophet Muhammad encountered the archangel Gabriel outside his birthplace, Mecca, in what is now Saudi Arabia

It was no chance meeting, the story goes. The angel had come to bring a message to the onetime shepherd and camel driver that he had been selected to be God’s final apostle and prophet, to complete the revelations that God had given to Jews and Christians through Abraham and Jesus.

It is there, Muslims also believe, that Muhammad learned that he — not the Holy Spirit — was the one Jesus had predicted would come after him to guide his followers. Over the next 23 years, Muslims believe, Muhammad received “Allah’s testimony” as to what men and women must do to avoid eternal damnation.

Mufti Ul Haq said Friday that Muslims would find it “painful” to see the Koran treated with disrespect, as he is sure Christians and Jews would be pained at seeing the Bible or the Torah treated that way. But attacking the Koran would not quite rise to the level of “an attack on God,” which Catholics see as happening when they see someone desecrating the Eucharist, which they believe to be actual body and blood of Christ.

“We believe God is beyond all our powers, and that no one in history has the power to attack God,” the mufti said. “If someone attacks the Koran, he is only going to bring a curse on himself.”

He said he told members of his congregation Friday morning that instead of “getting furious and upset” about a proposed burning of the Koran, “we should see this as a moment to promote tolerance and education.”

To be sure, there were more than a dozen clergy — Protestant, Catholic, Jewish and Muslim — who felt compelled Friday to speak out against any proposed burning of the Koran.

Standing beneath a statue of Roger Williams in Providence’s Prospect Park, they expressed solidarity with Rhode Island’s Muslims.

“I stand with you and look forward to making peace together in our community, in our country and in our world,” declared Rabbi Peter W. Stein, president of the R.I. Board of Rabbis.

To which the Rev. Matthew N. Kai, president of the Rhode Island State Council of Churches, added: “We believe that the sacred text of any faith group must be respected.”

With reports by Bryan Rourke