

Muslims launch campaign to 'understand' Shariah

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(RNS) Against a backdrop of heartland fears that U.S. Muslims seek to impose Islamic law on American courts, a leading Muslim group will launch a campaign on Monday (March 5) to dispel what it called misconceptions about Shariah.

The "Defending Religious Freedom: Understanding Shariah" campaign comes at a time when more than 20 states are considering or have passed laws forbidding judges from considering Shariah in their deliberations.

Many Americans associate Shariah with the harsh punishments carried out in a few Muslim countries like Afghanistan and Saudi Arabia, even as U.S. Muslim groups insist they have no desire to introduce Islamic law on themselves or others.

"There were all these wrong notions about Shariah," said professor Zahid Bukhari, president of the Islamic Circle of North America, which is sponsoring the campaign.

The most worrisome thing, he said, was that the level of hatred toward Shariah had spread from the margins of society to the mainstream. The ICNA campaign has already drawn fire from "anti-Shariah" groups in the United States.

The roughly \$3 million dollar campaign will feature billboards in at least 15 U.S. cities, "Shariah seminars" on 20 college campuses, and town hall-style forums and interfaith events in 25 cities.

Sponsors also set-up a 1-855-SHARIAH hotline where callers can ask volunteers about Islamic law, and has even hired an outside public relations firm,

The TASC Group in New York City, to shepherd the effort.

At least two billboards are already up. "Shariah is not scary" is the message that flashes on an electronic billboard above New York City's Holland Tunnel, seen by an estimated 120,000 people every day. Another billboard on I-70 in Kansas City reads "Shariah: Got Questions? Get Answers," and lists the toll-free number and campaign website.

In March, ICNA will sponsor town hall meetings or lectures in Dallas, Houston, Chicago, Boston, and several other U.S. cities and college campuses. Even before the campaign was launched, there was already pushback from two groups, the American Freedom Defense Initiative and Stop the Islamization of Nations, both categorized as hate groups by the Southern Poverty Law Center.

Pamela Geller, a founder of both groups and a lead organizer of the opposition to a proposed Islamic cultural center near Ground Zero, called the campaign "a complete whitewash."

The two groups have designed a billboard parodying ICNA's Kansas City billboard. "Shariah: Got Fatwa? Get help!" it says, along with a toll-free number and website, neither of which worked.

Geller wrote on her blog that the Quran endorses wife beating and mandates that a woman's testimony is worth half that of a man's. Shariah, she said, mandates the death penalty for apostasy and the subjugation of non-Muslims. Muslim scholars counter that Geller and like-minded critics cherry-pick from Islamic scripture or quote it out of context to paint a false picture of Shariah.

Sheikh Abdool Rahman Khan, an ICNA Shariah expert and resident scholar at the Islamic Learning Foundation outside Chicago, acknowledged that early Islamic law said a woman's testimony was worth half a man's, but only in some areas, such as finance and medicine, where there were few women bankers or doctors.

"It wasn't about equality, it was about participation of women in certain professions," Rahman said.

Modern Shariah scholars reason that because there are now many women in finance and business, their testimonies are equal to a man's, Rahman said. In practice, that means a woman can certify a medical diagnosis or sign a business contract by herself.

"If you are looking for problematic texts in the Quran, yes, they exist. They also exist in the Bible and Torah and other books," said Abdullahi Ahmed An-Na'im of the Emory University School of Law in Atlanta.

"But Christians aren't judged based on what the Bible said 2,000 years ago, but on how they behave today. Why are Muslims judged according to these literalist interpretations, and not according to how the vast majority of good Muslims behave today?"

Bukhari acknowledged that some imams interpret Shariah in misogynistic or intolerant ways, and that ICNA recognizes the problem. The solution, he said, was better training for imams.

"The Muslim community also needs to be educated about Shariah," said Bukhari, "and we will be having these programs also for Muslims."