# Puzzled by pluralism: Muslim visitors question the American way

by Patricia Mei Yin Chang in the September 6, 2003 issue

Since the 9-11 terrorist attacks the U.S. State Department has sponsored a number of study programs that bring Muslim scholars from around the world to the U.S. with the aim of showing off the American way of separating church and state, and demonstrating how American society is able to both nurture faith traditions and support religious diversity. The implied intent is to promote an American-style separation of mosque and state in Muslim countries.

After being an academic director for two of these programs, however, I am acutely aware of how appealing a religiously aligned state is for Muslims, especially for those who live in countries where Muslims are the majority. This may particularly be true in Iraq where Saddam Hussein's brutally repressive secular regime is viewed by some as a cautionary tale of what happens when religious influence is absent from government.

We held the first Fulbright seminar in September 2002, almost exactly a year after the 9-11 attacks. It attracted 13 religion scholars, roughly half of whom came from the Middle East, including the Palestinian Authority, Jordan, Egypt and Bahrain. The others came from Central Asia, Southeast Asia and Africa. The majority had never traveled to the U.S. before, and they confessed to us later that they feared that they would be attacked in the streets for being Muslim.

We went to great lengths to try to make our visitors comfortable. We determined the direction of prayer (toward the qabah) and the correct prayer times for the dates of the seminar according to the longitude and latitude of each day's location. We scheduled the program so as to allow for the prescribed five times of prayer each day. We located halal caterers to provide food at receptions and provided facilities for ritual washing prior to prayer. Still, we were continually reminded that most of our visitors had very little idea of what to expect outside a Muslim country.

Upon arrival they asked to be taken to the nearest mosque to pray. When told that it was a 20-minute drive away they were shocked. “In our country there is a mosque on almost every corner. When it is time to pray you simply walk into the nearest mosque,” explained Ahmed Al Dawoody of Egypt. Religion is woven into everyday life in their countries, incorporated into innumerable daily practices and behaviors from the moment they awake to the time they go to bed. They had difficulty understanding how we could claim to be a religious country and yet keep our religious practices separate from our work and public life.

A large portion of the seminar was devoted to showing off the religious diversity that flourishes in the U.S. and Americans’ great tolerance of diverse faiths. Rather than appreciating the benefits that religious pluralism offers to the larger society, some of our guests were clearly puzzled. On the second day of the program, Munib Ur Rehman, a Pakistani cleric, asked me, “If you believe your religion to be true, and you believe it is your duty to share this truth with others, then why would you think that religious pluralism is a good thing?” I realized that the religious tolerance that we celebrate in the U.S. could be perceived by someone from a religiously homogeneous country as a lack of religious conviction or, worse, a shameful hypocrisy.

I also gained insight into why, in many Muslims’ view, religious forms of governance are preferable to democratic regimes. Ibrahim Maibushira, a Nigerian scholar, explained that the Nigerian government has a constitutional democracy that exactly replicates the American model. Despite this form of government and despite being the world’s fifth-largest supplier of oil, 98 percent of Nigerians live in abject poverty.

Government officials are so corrupt that Nigeria’s northern states, where Muslims are a majority, decided in a democratic election to adopt Shar‘ia law and to create Islamic councils to govern local communities. Leaders chosen by Shar‘ia were less likely to be corrupt, and laws that enforced standards of moral practice in daily life would help resist the corruption and lawlessness that infected society.

When asked about the Nigerian woman who had been sentenced to be stoned to death for adultery, Maibushira and the other Muslim scholars observed that according to the Qur’an conviction for such a crime requires an unusually high level of evidence—there must be four eyewitnesses to the actual act of adultery— and punishments are almost never carried out. They also explained that punishments are intentionally horrific so as to deter people from committing such crimes.

(Eventually the death sentence in this case was overturned on a technicality.)

The impregnability of the Muslims' worldview was evident in the case of the Jordanian legal scholar who insisted that the suicide bombers in the 9-11 attacks could not have been Muslim because violence against innocents is condemned by the Qur'an. Besides, he added triumphantly, "it is reported that one of them was seen drinking at a nightclub the night before the attacks. So how could they be Muslim?"

It was difficult at times to feel that our dialogue was making headway. Attempts to discuss social issues often ended with one of the scholars quoting from the Qur'an or its commentaries, while the others remained silent or nodded in agreement. Only one or two scholars openly discussed issues of interpretation or the relevance of social context to the understanding of the Qur'an.

Textual literalism is an important part of Islamic culture. Most Muslims believe that the Qur'an holds the greatest truth both because it was the last revelation from God and therefore a correction of the Old and New Testaments, and also because Muslims have received this scripture in the original language of Mohammad—Arabic. Unlike other sacred texts, it has not been corrupted by translation. For this reason, the traditional Muslim practice is to learn the Qur'an in Arabic through rote memorization.

Interestingly, Muslims do not learn Arabic in order to read the Qur'an, but rather learn Arabic by reading the Qur'an. This means that a traditional religious education provides no independent language skills with which to read the text critically. This makes issues of interpretation difficult, if not impossible, to discuss.

After the program ended, many of the Muslim scholars wrote to say that their visit had convinced them of the basic kindness of the American people. They were also surprised in some cases to find that Americans were not as irreligious as they had thought. Still, the differences in perspective remained large.

In the days before the invasion of Iraq, U.S. officials spoke of a "democratic domino effect" by which the installation of a democratic government in Iraq would set off a wave of pro-democratic regime changes elsewhere in the Middle East. Paul Wolfowitz, the deputy secretary of defense, argued that the transition of Iraq to the "first Arab democracy" would "cast a very large shadow, starting with Syria and Iran, across the whole Arab world."

My experience with Muslim scholars makes me skeptical that a “democratic domino effect” is about to unfold. And as I look at the current turmoil in Iraq and remember my conversations with Muslim scholars, I have a better understanding of the popular appeal of theocracy in Muslim-majority countries that have been ruled by brutal and repressive secular rulers. I can also better understand that in times of uncertainty it may be easier for people to trust a learned religious leader than a democratically elected elite put in place by dubiously motivated political constituencies.