

Buffalo News Viewpoint UIS 3-3-2019

<https://buffalonews.com/2019/03/02/viewpoints/>

Viewpoints: Muslims, Christians share core beliefs and values

By *Staff* Published Sunday March 3, 2019

By Khalid J. Qazi and Thomas H. Yorty

Special to The News

In early March 1998, Westminster Presbyterian Church of Buffalo organized a program titled “Major World Religions” and invited professor Khalid J. Qazi to make a formal presentation about Islam. A follow-up presentation, related to geopolitical issues in the Muslim world, was equally well received and revealed to church members how little they knew about Islam in general and Muslims in the United States in particular.

The terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, and issues faced by Muslims across the country in the aftermath of the attacks added urgency for a more structured conversation between the Christian and the Muslim communities of our own region. Hence, a formal “Understanding Islam Series” was established in response to this tragedy and to the escalation of hate crimes and the profiling of American Muslims that followed. Westminster members acknowledged that not only did they lack knowledge of Islam, they also lacked general interactive experiences with their Muslim neighbors.

The original and the sustaining goal of “Understanding Islam Series” was and is to deepen our understanding and awareness of this great faith tradition, to understand the diverse culture of Muslims as well as to strengthen and nurture the relationships that were emerging with the Muslim community in our region. An organizing committee drawn from the Muslim Public Affairs Council of WNY and Westminster took shape with the blessing of the leadership of both the organizations to establish a monthlong series on a yearly basis.

This year's theme, "Two Faith Traditions: One Destiny?" will enable us to explore, side by side, four major areas of Islam and Christianity – Concept of God/Allah, Sacred Texts, Jesus and Muhammad, and Practice of the Faith. This will be our 18th annual conversation.

Because both of our traditions originate, as does Judaism, with the biblical and historical figure of Prophet Abraham, we will discover that the faiths we practice as Muslims and Christians have core beliefs, values and practices in common. We will also discover the important differences that distinguish our traditions and thereby we will gain deeper understanding, appreciation and respect for one another's religious commitments and practices.

Ultimately, what we hope to achieve from this four-week "conversation" with presenters and one another is to continue to build bridges and strengthen relationships. Our allegiance to the God we worship, who is the same God, transcends not only our religious differences but also transforms stereotypes and labels about differences of ethnic culture and custom into bonds of friendship, citizenship and common purpose as we work for a just and peaceful world.

This annual collaboration is as relevant today as it was in the first days after 9/11. More recently, an increasingly bold and public white supremacist and nationalist ideology fuels fear, inflates dangerous stereotypes and threatens the basic rights and principles enshrined in our democracy. The danger is that this deeply embedded bias may continue to isolate and disparage Muslims across our country.

We realize, therefore, that this annual program is a much bigger conversation than a dialogue between Muslim Public Affairs Council and Westminster. We understand that embracing our diversity through mutual understanding and discovering the common ground we share as people of faith, as Americans and as human beings makes our communities and nation stronger. Therefore, we have invited a dozen congregations of varying denominations to co-sponsor this year's program and join us as we gather around the tables for a simple halal dinner and then engage the evening's topic.

Our series is open to all who would like to enter into the conversation in the spirit of mutual understanding and friendship that has been its hallmark from the beginning. Our aim is to affirm the elegant quilt of diversity in our community and strengthen us against the fear on which prejudice and discrimination feed.

Khalid J. Qazi is founding president and senior adviser of the Muslim Public Affairs Council of WNY. The Rev. Thomas H. Yorty, Ph.D., is pastor of Westminster Presbyterian Church in Buffalo.
