

Being Muslim in the US; Palestinian immigrant speaks in Harrison

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He loves his country and its constitution. He's grateful for the freedoms that he enjoys here. His children were born and raised here. He's a successful and respected businessman in his community.

And he's a Muslim.

Fadil Bayyari, a Palestinian immigrant who's made a home for himself in northwest Arkansas, appeared in Harrison recently to talk about his Muslim faith and how it relates to what's happening in the world today. Bayyari was the guest speaker at the latest installment of the "Look at Islam; Its Religion and Its Politics" series sponsored by the Transparency in Government Group of Boone County in cooperation with the North Arkansas Baptist Association.

"These are difficult times," said Bayyari, who adheres to the Sunni branch of Islam. "It's hard to be a Muslim. Every time I hear of an act of terrorism, an atrocity, I cringe. I pray 'Please, God, don't let it be a Muslim.'"

Bayyari spent a couple of hours, at times a very intense and fervent couple of hours, interacting with the overwhelmingly Christian audience of 50 or so gathered at the Durand Center. Not surprising, his listeners grilled Bayyari about such things as Sharia law and the relationship between Muslims and non-Muslims.

"I love the Constitution of the United States," Bayyari said, "because it gives me the freedom to speak my mind. I thank God for the privilege to come and live in this country."

According to Bayyari, all of the terrorist acts committed in the name of Islam are un-Islamic. Those committing the acts, he said, are criminals and radicals.

"Every time they do something like that," Bayyari said with emphasis, "they give someone like me a black eye."

Bayyari first came to the United States in 1971. He is the CEO of Bayyari Properties and Construction, Inc., a real estate leasing and development company that he founded in northwest Arkansas about 25 years ago. In 2009, he was named Citizen of the Year by the Fayetteville Chamber of Commerce. He was awarded the Tikkun Olam Award by the Arkansas Jewish Federation. A Fayetteville city park and elementary school have been named in his honor. Bayyari has served on numerous boards in the Fayetteville/Springdale area.

"I have no problems doing business," Bayyari said, sharing his secret of business success. "I live my faith. I



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Fadil Bayyari (second from left) talks with audience members following a presentation about Islam at the Durand Center. Bayyari is a Palestinian immigrant who has built a successful construction and real estate business in Fayetteville.

don't lie. I don't cheat. I tell the truth.”

There were a lot of misconceptions in the West about his faith, Bayyari went on to say, and he attempted to clear up some of those misconceptions.

The term “Allah,” Bayyari said, simply meant God. Christian Arabs refer to Allah in the Bible. Islam, like Judaism and Christianity, is an Abrahamic faith, and Muslims believe in God, angels and the afterlife following a day of judgment.

Bayyari pointed out a way that Islam differs from other faiths. While other religions might require only faith, in Islam that is not enough.

“You're not saved just by professing,” said Bayyari, who has studied both the Koran and the Bible. “You have to take care of your fellow man. You serve God by serving man. The way a Muslim purges himself of sin is by doing good works.”

Regarding the divinity of Jesus, while most Muslims reject that idea, Bayyari himself did not. If that was God's plan, he said, who was he to question it. He did express one frustration.

“Jews don't believe Jesus was the Son of God, and they get a free pass,” Bayyari said.

The main focus on both Islam and Christianity, according to Bayyari, is God.

“If you want to take the Jesus route, okay,” he said. “Ultimately, we believe in one God. We took separate routes.”

Bayyari commented at length on Sharia law, which is defined as the legal framework within which public and private aspects of life are regulated for those living in a legal system based on Islam.

According to Bayyari, Saudi Arabia practices the most radical form of Islam.

“I don't like the Saudi monarchy or what they are doing to Islam,” he said. “They do not represent Islam, I'll tell you that.”

Bayyari stressed that he felt bound by the laws of the land.

“There is no room for Sharia law in the United States,” he said.

He went on to say that mixing religion with politics creates problems.

“If you took a poll,” Bayyari said, “most Muslims in the United States would put the Constitution and the laws of the land above Sharia law.”

For emphasis, he went on to say that we have a government that won't lay down the law.

“The idea of Muslims wanting to eradicate anyone not Muslim is not correct,” Bayyari insisted. “The Shiites are responsible for that idea. The Shiites are the ones behind the misinterpretation. As a Sunni, I disavow Shiites.”

There are good and bad in all religions, Bayyari continued. Adolph Hitler called himself a Christian. There are radical Christians, and there are moderate Christians.

Bayyari described an incident in which he faced the hatred that many Muslims in the United States experience. Immediately following the Oklahoma City bombing in 1995, he was approached by an acquaintance who said, "It's your people who did that."

After the man found out that the bombing was perpetrated by a non-Muslim, he apologized to Bayyari.

Bayyari assured his audience that there were others like him, moderate Muslims who needed to come out. He was a supporter of freedom of religion.

"You can't judge all by the actions of a few," he said. "If you are a good Christian, you will not go kill another man. These people are not Muslims. It is our job in this country to eradicate these radicals."