

Dialogue helps bridge religious and cultural divides

It's Wednesday night at the local mosque on the corner of Locust and Fifth Street.

Upstairs, in the prayer room, about 40 men of all ages stand next to each other in elbow-rubbing distance — all facing east toward Mecca, the holy city of Islam. They bend over, kneel, then prostrate, a process repeated several times. The women do the same in a separate room. When prayer ends, I shake hands with most of those present — a sign of respect and friendship.

Even if they are not featured in the stories you are about to read, Muslims at the

mosque that night — and on many other occasions — allowed the Missourian to attempt to understand the local community, the fundamentals of Islam and the struggles American Muslims face on a daily basis when trying to blend faith with culture and society.

We engaged in conversations on numerous topics — from the impact of extremism on the public profile of the faith to the nature of interactions between men and women. They allowed us to learn about their lives and struggles, and they let us document their daily activities. Rehab El-Buri, whom you will meet in this section, said she endows her actions with purpose, something required if a

Muslim is to walk the right path. Talking to a reporter also had a purpose — to promote and present her faith to Columbians unfamiliar with local Muslims. Rehab was born and raised in Columbia and is one of about 1,500 Muslims living in mid-Missouri.

Her openness and the openness of other Muslims is an invitation to interfaith dialogue and communion.

I knew little about Islam when I began reporting this story in January. I knew even less about the local community of Muslims. As you read some of their stories, I hope you will come to the same realization of universality I did. No matter the religion or the path one chooses to walk,

the experiences we go through as human beings are similar. Finding purpose, integrating into society and defending our kin are moments of life we share.

Muslims will be the first to tell you that some use the Quran to justify violence. What they ask for in return is for the community to listen to the ones who don't, because that is mainstream Islam.

The lesson I've learned is that Muslims will engage and talk about all of this. They do it in these stories and they'll do the same in person if you ask them.

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BY CRISTIAN LUPSA

Inside this section

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Sources for this story

In addition to interviews, this story is based on research conducted using books, articles and Web sites.

Books

- Quran, English translation
- Ian Buruma and Avishai Margalit, "Occidentalism: The West in the Eyes of its Enemies"
- John Esposito, "What Everyone Needs to Know About Islam"
- John Esposito, "Unholy War"
- Irshad Manji, "The Trouble with Islam"
- Gilles Kepel, "Jihad: The Trail of Political Islam"
- Bernard Lewis, "The Crisis of Islam"
- Meryll Wyn Davies and Ziaddin Sardar, "The No-nonsense Guide to Islam"

Articles

- "Killing (for) Politics," Political Theory, February 2002
- "Muslims in America," CQ Researcher, April 1993
- "Islamic Fundamentalism," CQ Researcher, March 2000
- "The Revolt of Islam," New Yorker, November 2001
- In-depth reports in publications such as Newsweek, Time and The New York Times Magazine

Web sites

- altmuslim.com
- islam.com
- en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Islam

Glossary

Islam: Peace, submission or surrender to God.

Jihad: Striving, struggle. Any earnest striving in the way of God for righteousness and against oppression and wrongdoing. The prophet Muhammad made a distinction between the lesser jihad, war, and the higher jihad, the struggle of the soul.

Ijtihad: Systematic original thinking, independent interpretation of the Quran.

Jahilyya: A time before the prophet Muhammad when Arabs worshipped multiple gods. Also referred to as the age of ignorance.

Sharia: Conventionally translated as "Islamic law."

Fatwa: Islamic legal opinion.

Allah: God.

Halal: Good, allowed.

Haram: Harmful, forbidden.

Sources: [The No-nonsense Guide to Islam](#), [wikipedia.org](#)

The worldwide struggle

The modern world is witnessing a struggle between various factions within Islam in an environment where mainstream discourse is dominated by imagery of extremism and intolerance. Ordinary Muslims and scholars of Islam wrestle to keep violence away from the public profile of the religion, while pushing for dialogue. They argue that Islam is not at odds with the Western world and that violent acts committed by Muslims have to be put in the context of history and regarded not as a reflection of the Quran, but as a political statement. For this change in discourse to happen, they say, Islam, the world's fastest growing religion, needs to stop being treated as an antiquated system. **Page 3**

What is Islam?

Islam, meaning "submission to God," belongs to the monotheistic Judeo-Christian-Muslim religious tradition. Muslims believe Islam, a religion born in the seventh century, to be God's finalized message to humankind. Learn about the basics of the faith. **Page 10**

Profiles of Columbia Muslims



▲ **Hasan Askari's** life is the intellectual and spiritual journey of a man who as a teenager questioned the faith he was born into. Refusing to take God and Islam for granted, he set out to answer the questions himself, thus souring relations with his parents. He says he went on to prove the existence of God through logic, which is also how he explains the choice of Islam. His understanding of the religion is uncommon even among Muslims, few of whom would dare to overtly challenge God. Askari's inclination to question is at the core of his openness to dialogue and human interaction. **Page 11**

▼ **Rehab El-Buri** is an American Muslim woman, born and raised in Columbia, who strives to find her place in a society that emphasizes a successful career over a successful family. Her traditional choice of dress is the embodiment of the internal and external conflicts between the socially active and the privately conservative first generation American Muslim female. The hijab (veil) is perceived as a symbol of empowerment by women like Rehab and a symbol of repression by some of her American counterparts. **Page 14**



▲ **Caleb Carter** is a 20-year-old American who converted to Islam nine months ago in search of a system that nurtures his spirituality and imposes better rules than his own. His story is the struggle of a young man growing up in an agnostic family who comes to terms with believing in God and strives to harmonize passion for religion with the desire to find love. As he adapts to being a Muslim in America he also learns to balance culture with religion and youth with the strictness of faith. **Page 17**

The reach of Islam

Islam has constantly expanded its reach from the times of the prophet Muhammad to the dominant era of the Ottoman Empire. Today, Islam is the second-largest and the fastest-growing religion in the world, comprising more than 1.2 billion faithful. A map shows the distribution of the world's Muslims. **Page 20**