



JASON JOHNS/Missourian

A sign in Arabic and English appears above the main entrance of the Columbia mosque that quotes the Quran, Sura III, verse 64: "In the name of Allah the beneficent, the merciful, say O people of the scripture come to common terms as between us and you, that we worship none but Allah."

country, you are caught between a rock and hard place. You are between regimes that want to silence you and extremists that will attempt to kill you."

Few American Muslims use contemporary categories and buzzwords to define themselves. Nizam of the local Islamic Center says there are Muslims who believe in the "real Islam" and there are "deviants" who have strayed from the path.

Abdelmunsif El-Buri, who holds a degree in political science and has been living in Columbia for 25 years, will probably never return to Libya. He says he is in danger from Muammar Qaddafi's government, which he criticized for breaching human rights. His wife, Fadhiah Corban Ali, was born in a strict Saudi society and doesn't feel at home anymore when she visits. In the United States, she can drive, speak up and make choices. But the El-Buris don't see themselves as belonging to a particular category of Muslims — they are not fundamentalists or moderates — they are immigrant American Muslims.

Pressure to define Muslims increased after Sept. 11 — are they or are they not aligned with Western values? This black-and-white approach is hurtful, the El-Buris say, because the public can speculate and say you are against democratic values if you don't fall into the right category.

Labels such as fundamentalist, moderate and radical do little to foster dialogue inside and outside the faith, Ibrahim says. To make the public quit equating Islam with terrorism and all fundamentalists with violence, scholars are pushing for a political interpretation. To them, violence is nothing but a form of political expression.

"They do it in the name of God, and God represents so many things: political freedom, not being run by a dynasty, not having your country turned into a gas station, earning some respect," Ibrahim says. "This is God. The fundamentalists are not fighting because of God — but because they have no trust in God. Their God let them down, and they are doing his work."

Violence is one of many ways of doing things, Ibrahim adds. You can condemn it, you can try to contain it, but you need to understand it.

"You have death squads in Buddhism, you have death squads in Judaism, you have death squads in Islam," Wallace says. "Every religion has its experiences which are expressed in terms of political violence."

To Ibrahim and Wallace, religion and religiously motivated violence are an integral part of politics.

"Like it or not, politics has everything to do with religion," says Euben, a professor at Wellesley College. "When we have Christian evangelicals in the White House, the idea that politics is both informed and informs religion is a truism we don't want to recognize."

America itself is a religious country, and it should not seem strange that Islam also informs politically motivated actions, Euben says.

"We are in denial about how much religion informs our own political life, and we prefer to say: 'Look at these odd people'."

Some of the "odd people" are fighting to defend their countries from invaders, says Hasan Askari, a Columbia neurologist. "Last I knew, people who fought to liberate their land were known as good

people," he says, drawing a parallel between movies such as "Braveheart" and "The Patriot" and some resistance movements in the Middle East.

"If someone attacks this country — and God forbid occupies it — I'm going to fight for it. I hope I won't be called a fanatic."

Presenting violence as political reality and not a pathological trait of Islam may be a start to interfaith dialogue and conversation within Islam.

"Dialogue is the key to evolve and solve," Askari says. "I would say to fanatics — even if you are sure that person is going to hell, you have no right to expedite their transition."

Euben says countries are often built on violence. The city-state of Athena was built on bloodshed, as was the case with the Republic following the French Revolution and even the United States. Religious justifications aside, Euben says, Muslim extremists are not only driven by the promise of a fulfilling afterlife but, more significantly, by a desire to establish the utopian Islamic state.

"For Islamists this ... signifies an enactment of God's will and the political effort to bring into existence a public sphere in which true justice, equality and freedom are possible," Euben says.

Ibrahim says it's necessary to accept fundamentalists in all forms as a political given if the struggle to crush the stereotype of Islam as an inherently violent religion is to succeed.

"They are going to be around and it's important for them to be around because the debate between the state and religion is never going to be concluded," he says. "It has never been concluded anywhere."