

bold time religion SPEAKING FREELY AND LEARNING

An interview with a Muslim imam



Kassas says the Quran is his most cherished part of his religion.

Adib praises Dubuque for its acceptance, discusses his love for his religion, how some people misuse the Quran and the potential of facing hellfire.

BY JIM SWENSON
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One of Adib Kassas' favorite religious memories while growing up as a Muslim in Damascus, Syria, was praying the dawn prayer in his neighborhood mosque.

Even as a middle school-aged boy, he often would be the only one from his family of seven getting up at 4 a.m. to make the walk to the location.

"You walk in the streets, sometimes you see the cats, you see a couple of people and you would greet them," Kassas said. "I felt a personal relationship with God when I was younger. I felt how sweet it was. It was making me happier."

While in his mid-20s, Kassas moved to Albany, N.Y., for an internship in psychiatry. He did his residence in Mobile, Ala., and fellowship in Dallas, before moving to Dubuque in 2005 to work at the Gannon Center. When it became part of Medical Associates, he went along and is a psychiatrist there.

Now 46, Kassas is married to Yaman,



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Adib Kassas is imam for the Tri-State Islamic Center in Dubuque.

and they have five children ranging in ages from 3 to 18. He is the imam — the person who leads the prayers in a mosque — for the Tri-State Islamic Center, located at 4980 Radford Court.

We sat down in his office for a podcast interview one frigid afternoon as sounds of construction crews working on a new cancer-care facility could be heard from outside.

Swenson: How did you decide to come to the United States?

Kassas: There were better education opportunities. We always believed back home that America is more welcoming for us as doctors to come and specialize. We know we'd get the best education in the world and that our lifestyle will improve a lot. And we would have a lot of reputation if we would go back.

Swenson: What do you like most about our community?

Kassas: The Children of Abraham. It is an organization where we started with a Christian, a Jewish and a Muslim, who

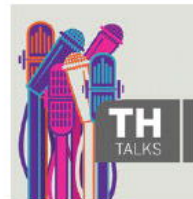
decided to meet together. First, we wanted to get to know each other and talked about making those meetings more open to (other) people.

We felt the necessity of people of different religions to come and talk with each other and experience that experience of inter-religious community and building bridges. We meet monthly.

Swenson: Have there been any challenges being a Muslim in Dubuque?

Kassas: I haven't had any. I'm very thankful for the Dubuque community. People seem to be respectful and professional as colleagues, as friends ... Sometimes, they don't maybe mingle with you a lot or they're kind of concerned or scared or don't know who you are. But that doesn't mean they're going to attack you because of that.

And my family can attest to that, too. My wife covers her head so that most people easily know she is a Muslim, (but) she said that always the people who know her are the best people — where



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she shops, when she takes the kids to school. We've never really felt a prejudice for being Muslim.

Swenson: What do you cherish most about your religion?

Kassas: The Quran. I think about it a lot. I try to study it, words by words. I try to explain it to the people and I learn from it as I'm explaining it.

I'm privileged as a native Arabic speaker, which is the language of the Quran. It is native to us. We believe God is the author of that book. The Koran has helped me a lot to stay Muslim.

See **BOLD TIME**, PAGE 9A

BOLD TIME:

Jesus and 'Maryam' significant in the Muslim Quran

Continued from page 8A

Swenson: There are passages in the Christian Bible that some readers have taken to justify slavery, violence or the condemnation of specific groups of people. Anti-Christians will point to them as evidence for disparaging my religion.

I'm guessing there are passages in the Quran that you are not proud of, that people who are prejudice point to in their case against your religion.

Kassas: There are no passages in the Quran that I am not proud of. I'm not proud of how Muslims use some of the passages, or they take them out of context. They misunderstand them, in my opinion. Then, they think they are going with God (and) war. And they believe it for 100 percent!

That's why I hate when somebody thinks he knows exactly what God thinks. That he becomes the hand of God acting on earth ... executing people and blowing (up) people and destroying people and thinking that that's what God says. God is going to destroy the bad people, these are bad people, in God's opinion, and there's no problem if I destroy them.

I have a problem with taking the Quran and being hijacked by people interpreting it on their own desires, and then saying, that's what God is telling us. That's sad, because, if they knew the Quran well and they read it and they thought about it and ... they questioned, I'm sure they will know.

Swenson: I didn't realize, until researching for this interview, that Jesus and the Virgin Mary are part of the Quran. How do you view them?

Kassas: Jesus in Arabic is Isa. For us, he's a very respectable prophet of God. For us, he is God's creation. He is not God himself, incarnated into a human being. As anyone else is God's creation, Jesus is. He is similar to other prophets, such as Muhammad and Moses, elevating us to higher understanding of God.

And in Arabic, it's Maryam. Maryam was a very important figure our religion. For Muslims, we have difficulty understanding that she was married to Joseph. We don't accept that. We believe she was a real virgin. And everybody knew that she was a virgin. She had no other children. She devoted herself to God.

Swenson: I also found, from the Quran, an interesting story following Jesus' birth. Apparently, people thought Maryam was evil and they were giving her a hard time for having a child out of wedlock. But, in this story, the newborn infant miraculously spoke up from his cradle to defend her.

Kassas: God said that Jesus talked, and he told them that he is created by God and that he is a gift for people and that he's going to spread peace. He's going to be teaching people and guiding people to God, and stuff like that.

Swenson: Many Christians believe the Bible is infallible. Do you believe the Quran is infallible?

Kassas: It's the word of God and God doesn't make mistakes. It's not time-related, sometimes, but I like to say that the word of God is written in a way that can always regenerate meanings from it that are more consistent with current times. That's what I love about the Quran.