

Scholar describes tensions within Islam

SAN FRANCISCO – “It is a mistake to judge Islam on the basis of terrorists, just as it is (unfair) to judge Christianity from the Crusades,” an Islamic scholar told a San Francisco audience.

Mona Siddiqui, founder and director of the Center for the Study of Islam at the University of Glasgow in Scotland, made the comment in response to a question following a highly annotated lecture on divine love and divine law as they relate to human dignity in Islam.

“To see Islam through the example” of suicide bombers “is so very negative and so toxic, and it does Islam a great injustice,” she said.

Atonement Father Elias Mallon, also a well-known scholar on Islam who provided a formal response to Ms. Siddiqui’s presentation, agreed. The most positive route to dialogue between faiths, he said, “is to bring the best of ours and the best of yours.”

However, he added, “the temptation is to focus on the worst of mine and the worst of yours” because the more positive approach can “be boring.”

The two scholars were featured Feb. 26 at the 28th annual Paul Wattson Lecture on the campus of the University of San Francisco. The event is co-sponsored by the Jesuit-run university and the Franciscan Friars of the Atonement, a religious order that champions the cause of Christian unity and interreligious dialogue.

Ms. Siddiqui outlined the Muslim concepts of human dignity largely as defined in the Quran, the sacred book of Islam.

Like Christianity, she said, Islam views humankind as being assigned stewardship and dominion of the earth by God. Both religions also point to the creation of humans in a special way by God as underscoring the dignity of humankind.

However, she said, the faiths differ in their understanding of God. In Islam, she said,

a “tension between knowability and unknowability remains.”

In broad terms, she said, Christians’ fundamental view of God is anchored in the Incarnation, God becoming man, while for Muslims God remains “completely transcendent, absolute and one, all of which forms the fundamental core of Islamic monotheism. However near God may be to man, there is an essential difference between God and man and which affirms the unknowability of God.”

“Nowhere in the Quran,” she said, “is there any specific mention of man being created in the image of God.”

The first Muslim woman to be appointed head of the theology and religious studies department at Glasgow University, Ms. Siddiqui also commented on Shariah, or Islamic law.

“Obedience to God is understood on several levels in Islam,” she said. “Prostration in ritual prayer is a physical reflection of humility but acts of worship ... are not confined to obeying ritual and observing the law.”

While “worship develops man’s sense of himself and his love for God,” she said, it “is also about heightened awareness of the bond he has with those around him. Thus, obedience should not be equated with servility, but rather with an enhanced awareness” of humankind’s place in “God’s eyes” and “the respect and dignity which must form the basis of relations with fellow beings.”

However, in its simplest definition, she said, “Shariah is not law as we understand law in the modern world – a set of imposed rules and regulations.”

Rather, she said, Shariah sets forth principles for Muslims upon which civil and social behaviors should be based.

Too often, she said, specific laws or penal codes of some Islamic governments violate “the inherent teaching of the Quran itself,” which does not state any punishment.