

Imam Yahya Hendi Challenges Stereotypes in The Bible Belt

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Imam Yahya Hendi speaks on “Judaism, Christianity and Islam: Confrontation or Cooperation?” at the Virginia Military Institute. (PHOTO COURTESY ROCKBRIDGE INTERFAITH)

Personality

By Marvine Howe

THE MUSLIM CHAPLAIN at Georgetown University ventured recently into Rockbridge County, VA, a largely conservative pocket of the Bible Belt, which includes the towns of Lexington and Buena Vista. In a series of talks in November, Palestinian-born Imam Yahya Hendi challenged the stereotypes of Islam—and pointed to paths of interfaith cooperation. These were the first Muslim-led series of interfaith, intercollegiate talks and prayer services ever held in Rockbridge County. It's an area better known for competitions over Christmas decorations, rows over Confederate parades and its pro-gun rights movement.

Formerly a chaplain at the National Naval Medical Center in Bethesda, MD, Georgetown's first Muslim chaplain is also a Public Policy Conflict Resolution Fellow at the University of Maryland, and president of Clergy Beyond Borders. Imam Hendi's visit was hosted by a community group, Rockbridge Interfaith, as well as local colleges and churches. The imam spoke to cadets, faculty and visitors at Virginia Military Institute (VMI), as well as students and faculty at Washington and Lee University in Lexington and mostly Mormon students and faculty at Southern Virginia University (SVU) at Buena Vista. He also spoke at interfaith prayer services at Lexington Presbyterian and Grace Episcopal churches.

"Yahya knows how to build bridges and plant seeds for the future," said Rev. John Thomas, spokesman for the interfaith group, who recently retired from the Children's Hospital in Washington, DC, where he came to know the chaplain well. A former Methodist clergyman, Rev. Thomas emphasized that Imam Hendi's words of love and tolerance are more needed now than ever "as a kind of inoculation" against religious and ethnic prejudices.

In a subsequent interview with the *Washington Report*, the chaplain disclosed that several individuals had voiced opposition to his visit to the Rockbridge area but this had discouraged neither the organizers nor himself. Imam Hendi said he had come to America in 1990 because he believed there was more freedom here than elsewhere and he thought he could be more effective. He admitted that being the only Muslim in the Christian seminary at Hartford, CT, was difficult, "but it gave me the opportunity to grow."

Asked to comment on President Trump's Muslim Ban, the imam declared: "After nearly 20 years in the United States, I was surprised, shocked and horrified that Muslims were told they don't belong and were not welcome in a country built on religious diversity. I just hope America does not lose its soul under Trump's policy that flouts our history, Constitution and fabric, and goes against what distinguishes America as a country by and for all."

Imam Hendi's main message to VMI cadets was that there were more elements uniting Islam, Judaism and Christianity than there are divisions. "How can there be conflict when we read almost the same scriptures?" the cleric asked his listeners.

The imam acknowledged that many people believe Muslims are enemies. "I dare to disagree," he declared, noting that he had spent 20 years studying the three Abrahamic religions. His conclusion is that there are real differences, namely that Muslims do not believe in the divinity of Jesus, "but we have much common ground with the other religions."



Imam Hendi speaks to Jewish and interfaith students from Washington and Lee University and Virginia Military Institute at a Shabbat dinner. (PHOTO COURTESY ROCKBRIDGE INTERFAITH)

The Muslim cleric proceeded to list in detail the shared beliefs of the three religions, which were each born in the Middle East. "Our origins and destiny can bring us together," he said, pointing out that it is written in the Bible, the Torah and the Qur'an that humans came from dust and will become dust. All believe in one God and a Day of Judgment, he emphasized. And the three holy books contain the Ten Commandments, many of the same prophets, religious stories and miracles.

Anticipating his listeners' questions about the 9/11 terrorist attacks, Imam Hendi declared that they had been directed against civilians and thus "a violation of Islam." He went on to say, "I hate terrorists more than you do." Asked about the common expression *jihad*, the imam declared that it has been widely misinterpreted to mean the killing of all non-

Muslims. “The Arabic word *jihad* means to strive to do good in the Qur’an,” he said. He pointed out that the Islamic Prophet Muhammed was married to a Christian and he called Christians his brothers.

When a member of the VMI audience asked him about the Israel-Palestine question, Imam Hendi stressed that this was not a religious conflict but territorial. “Religion is used by the rival forces but God is not a real estate agent,” he quipped.

The Muslim cleric received the warmest applause for his defense of women’s rights from the SVU audience. He explained that he had undertaken the journey to become an imam “to give a voice for women in religion.” The imam stressed that while women could run for president in the United States, “they can’t even get an education in the Taliban’s Afghanistan.”

The main message Imam Hendi had for SVU was: “What matters is what you are doing, not how long you live.” He added that as a chaplain, he had sat down with kings and queens and presidents “but none of that means anything.” What he will remember are events like when he was asked to deliver \$50,000 to rebuild a hospital for a charity in Ghana.

At SVU, the imam was also asked whether life was different in the U.S. before and after 9/11. “I am sorry to apologize to fellow Americans for what was done in the name of religion,” he responded, adding: “That was not Islam but crazy nuts, haters, who should be rejected.” He went on to point out both the dark and bright sides of the aftermath of 9/11. For one thing, Georgetown University held its largest interfaith rally against hatred with some 600 students. But then he was surprised by the many attacks on Muslims wearing veils and even Sikhs with turbans. “But also, so many churches and synagogues opened their doors to Muslims after 9/11, like never before,” he said.

While there are no mosques or synagogues in the Rockbridge area, Washington and Lee University has been striving for greater diversity in recent years. In 2010 the school opened Hillel House Center for Jewish Life, which offers the use of its multipurpose room and sanctuary for special interfaith events. During his visit, Imam Hendi presided over a Muslim prayer service and Shabbat dinner at Hillel House. He also spoke at a roundtable on chaplaincy and held an interfaith prayer service at Lexington Presbyterian Church, and addressed Grace Episcopal church’s “education hour” followed by a “Mediterranean Food Festival and Community Meal.”

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