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U.S. Imam: Muslims Giving Islam a Bad Name

NewsMax.com Wires
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WASHINGTON -- Yahya Hendi is not sure that an "American Islam" exists. When the Palestinian-born imam talks about his religion, though, it sounds as if it has become as integrated into American life as he has.

Hendi, 40, is the Muslim chaplain at Georgetown University, a Catholic institution that in 1999 became the first university in the United States to hire a full-time imam. He teaches a course on interreligious dialogue there along with a priest and a rabbi.

He is also chaplain at the National Naval Medical Center in Bethesda, Maryland, and a mosque in Frederick, another suburb north of the capital. He lectures around the country to explain Islam to non-Muslims and U.S. religious pluralism to Muslims.

The question of whether Islam can be "westernized" - a key aim of European officials seeking a "British Islam" or "French Islam" to help integrate Muslim immigrants - seems to be more than an ocean away for this pragmatic thinker.

"Islam is a very inclusive religion, but Muslims have given it a bad name," Hendi, who was born in Nablus on the West Bank and came to the United States 20 years ago, told Reuters.

"Islam demands that Muslims adapt to their circumstances," he said, arguing that Islam had taken on some local customs and rejected others ever since it appeared in Arabia 1,400 years ago.

The two million or so U.S. Muslims are well-equipped to adapt. Of the two-thirds born abroad, many are well-educated, in contrast to mostly poorer Muslim immigrants in Europe.

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The other third are black Muslims or children of immigrants.

Of the 400 Muslims in Georgetown's 14,000-strong student body, 93 percent were born in the United States.

"When I preach in America, I preach in English," Hendi said, noting traditional Indian and Pakistani imams preach in Arabic, a language their congregations do not understand. Those imams would also not preach without wearing a prayer cap.

"I just go like this," he said, tugging at the suit he was wearing. "Sometimes I go in a T-shirt and give my sermon. Nobody argues with it or thinks it's out of the ordinary."

At his mosque, there are no separate doors for women and men and no curtain separating them during prayer. The mosque board was headed by a woman for the past five years.

"This wasn't an issue for us," said Hendi, who studied Islamic theology in Jordan and Christianity and Judaism - including Hebrew - for his doctorate in the United States. "It would be unheard of in Europe or the Arab world."

So is an American Islam emerging? "I hesitate to use that term because it could imply changing the theology, and I hope that never happens," Hendi, a U.S. citizen since 1993, said in his slightly accented American English.

"One of the glories of Islam is its ability to adapt to new circumstances without losing its soul," he explained. That meant that all Muslims everywhere -- even secular ones -- still agreed the "five pillars of Islam" are the core of the faith.

"Islam beyond this is very much debated by Muslims. They will debate, but they will not touch these red lines."

In his ministry, Hendi said, he focuses on the justice, equity and community solidarity he sees rooted in Islam.

"No government can be successful and true to itself and its people if it does not do justice to all members - minority or majority, black or white, educated or undereducated, gays or lesbians or straight - all have to be welcomed," he said.

"God wanted us to be different," he insisted. "He wanted unity - but not uniformity."

The most American factor in his ministry, Hendi said, is the freedom Muslims have in the United States to study Islam and shed traditions that stem more from Arab or other Muslim cultures rather than from the faith itself.

American Muslims now use astronomy rather than the naked eye to say when the new moon signals the start of the fasting month of Ramadan. Leading European imams endorsed the idea last month but Muslim states still go by direct sightings.

They have also opposed the idea widely held among Muslim conservatives that Islam considers music haram, or forbidden.

After citing so many differences between Islam in the United States and in the Muslim world, Hendi seemed ready to agree there was an American Islam after all, but then pulled back.

On a visit to Jordan earlier this year, he explained, imams he met agreed with him in theory, but cultural influences have to be changed.

The fact that change is slow in the Arab heartland of Islam does not invalidate his view, Hendi argued. "The important thing is that they acknowledge they are following the culture. So I am not coming up with a new American version of Islam."

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