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GU Religious Leaders Encourage Middle East Reconciliation, Dialogue

By Rebecca Regan-Sachs
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Yahya Hendi, Georgetown's Muslim imam and Harold White, Georgetown's Jewish rabbi, not only represent significant religious groups on the university's campus, but two major world religions whose members have attracted considerable media attention for their bitter political conflict in the Middle East. A hot topic for debate around the world, the issue has often incited contention and controversy among Georgetown's student groups. In the following dialogue, Imam Hendi and Rabbi White discuss the history, the problems and the similarities of the two religions — as well as the possibilities for reconciliation, both on campus and around the world.



Charles Nailen/The Hoya
Imam Hendi and Rabbi White discuss how to resolve the conflict in the Middle East, denounce the use of religion to justify terrorism and share their differing visions of a religious state.

Imam Hendi is a native of the Palestinian town of Keflhares and has served as the Muslim chaplain for four years. Rabbi White is a native of Hartford, Conn. and has served as the Jewish chaplain for 35 years.

How are Islam and Judaism different and how are they alike?

Hendi: I want to focus on how similar they are. Both Judaism and Islam focus on the worship of the one and only God, the creator. That's number one. Number two, we [have] in common our belief in, our trust of Moses, as a prophet of God. Number three, we share many Biblical stories. Very often the very same stories that you find in the Torah or the Tanach, you also find in the Koran. We share many ethical, moral perspectives on many issues ... The focus on law is very important in both religions. And I might [add], in this list that could go forever, the issue of Abraham. Abraham is a very important figure in Judaism, and he is a very important figure in Islam.

White: Also, the theological perspective is very similar, because we both believe in a God who is without body and without form. A God who is not incarnate; a God who defies a human description. In both Judaism and in Islam, it is forbidden to portray the divine in human form; therefore, we concentrated on calligraphy. In both Judaism and in Islam, the decoration is calligraphy rather than the image [of God].

In terms of rites of passage, they're very similar. If you look at marriage rites,

burial rites, the dietary laws — Islam has halal, which is the equivalent of [kosher] — So in all those rites and rituals ... the parallelism is incredible.

Hendi: I agree with that. The only thing I would say here is, we could go for days talking about the similarities that do outnumber differences. I think you agree with me, the differences are on very minor issues, not on basic issues.

White: They're very minor.

Hendi: You know, I think historically speaking, both communities learned from each other.

White: Oh yes. The history of the relationship between Islam and Judaism is a very positive one, incredibly positive. There's an age known as the Golden Age of Spanish Jewry. Well, it's an age where Jewish poets and writers flourished under Islamic rule, and there was a great dialogue that existed between Jewish philosophers and Arabic philosophers, Islamic thinkers. So the parallelism is there. And it's a history of excellent, wonderful dialogue and interrelationships.

What do you see as the main problems between Jews and Muslims today?

White: It's not an area of the religious. It's an area of the political, and that's what we should understand. And not only is it an area between Jews and Muslims, but Jews and Arab Christians as well, you have to understand that. People think that the Arab-Israeli conflict is a Jewish-Muslim problem; it isn't. It's a problem of two peoples claiming the same land. So it's political, rather than religious. And I think that's terribly important to bear in mind.

Hendi: I think some people do like to call it a religious struggle, or war. I think religion has been used, in order to gain support, to gain legitimacy for the war. But at the end of the day, it's really ... two communities claiming ownership of all the land and how that land should be used, and therefore I do not see it as a religious struggle. I see it as a political struggle, [and] religion should not be used in any way.

White: And in both cases — you know, some people look at Zionism as a religious movement. It was not a religious movement; it was a political movement — or what I would describe as a movement of Jewish national liberation, a return to roots. But the same is true of the Palestinians. That is not a religious struggle. It's a cultural struggle; it's a national struggle. And you have to separate religion and the political. Otherwise, you get yourself into serious trouble.

Hendi: I do believe that [when] the Arab-Israeli conflict is solved, Jews and Muslims could become the role model for inter-religious dialogue worldwide.

White: And this so-called conflict is recent. I mean, we're talking about a conflict which arose in the twentieth century, with the creation of a state and the displacement of people who lived in that state. So contrary to popular opinion, it is not a struggle which goes back to the inception of Islam and the prophet Mohammed. That is a distortion, a terrible distortion of history.

Hendi: And to me, there is a way out of this fear, out of this hatred, out of this war. However, are people ready to go that way?

How, then, might one take steps toward resolving the conflict in the Middle East?

White: One of the first areas is education. And starting with the education of the young. I've often thought — I must say, I'm opposed to the war in Iraq — I would rather have that money to spend on the education of Israeli and Palestinian children, where they learn to love and respect rather than to hate. I think we have to begin with the very young. I think we have an excellent opportunity.

Obviously, there's a difference in terms of the standard of living, between people living in refugee camps and people living in Israel in a rather sophisticated technological society. I think that one of the things that could be done by the nations of the world is to put money into creating a Palestinian state and making certain that the standard of living of that [state] is one which is at least somewhat equivalent to that which exists in Israel.

Hendi: Well, I wish people could listen to us. [Laughs] ... I am working with an Israeli Jew who is the director of a very well-known institution within Israel called [Beit Patuach], the Open House ... We are working on publishing an article — I [don't] know where — written by both of us on how religion can be used to bring about peace. The very religions that have been used to bring about war can be used to bring about peace. And I think that is possible. However, everyone has been refusing [and] rejecting religious intervention that can bring about peace. And I think it's about time to bring religion back to the table to see what we can do together. And I think rabbis and imams — and priests — have a lot to do [with bringing] about peace to that land. So that's number one, the religious role to bring about peace.

Number two, mastering the art of listening. Are Arabs ready to listen to the Israeli, to the Jewish story? And are Israelis ready to listen to the Arab story? That's a very important [potential] solution to the problem ... People are trying.

White: People are trying. Unfortunately, the negative publicity outweighs the positive.

Hendi: The children of today are the leaders of tomorrow. The campus students of today are the leaders of tomorrow. If we can bring these ... campus students of today together, hopefully we'll have a different tomorrow.

What do you think of how Muslim or Arab and Jewish or Israeli organizations on this campus have been interacting?

White: I think there are two areas. The Jewish Student Association and the Muslim Student Association [have] co-sponsored programs; we've had a very felicitous relationship, ever since I've been here. So that's one level, that's the religious.

In terms of the political, what you have is reaction rather than dialogue — in other words, one group will do something which the other group will regard as being very negative; they'll respond to that. So you have to distinguish between the religious dialogue that's going on and the political. In the political, it's not dialogue; it's diatribe, unfortunately. Now there have been attempts that have been made by the Office of Student Affairs to bring the groups together, and they've met. Unfortunately, it hasn't worked. Why? Because, as the imam said, they don't listen to each other. They don't hear one another.

And there is something that is occurring ... created by a Jewish student, in collaboration [with] Muslim students and Christian students, which will be a grass roots student dialogue, not affiliated with any particular religious organization. And I hope that that will get off the ground. There's also an organization called SMEP [Students for Middle East Peace], and their aim —

they're holding a conference in March — is to bring students together, where they will dialogue and listen to each other and present various points of view.

So there are attempts — with a limited degree of success.

Hendi: I believe students have failed in some cases to reach out, to open up, listen or dialogue with the other side. And I have seen very bad experiences in that regard ... to be honest. However, as the rabbi said, there have been attempts to overcome these experiences with that which is right.

For example, there have been Muslim students participating in Shabbat services on Friday night. That has been a very good experience for Muslim students and also for the Jewish students. We also at one point have the Ramadan dinner, or Iftar, the breaking of the fast, with literally, I would say, tens — at least 78 — Jewish students participating in that Iftar. That was a very good thing to do. After Sept. 11, because Muslim students were afraid of discrimination, of being attacked by their fellow students, the Jewish students and the Christian students stood up very clearly in support of the Muslim community. There have been messages of support when the menorah was vandalized some time ago; the Muslim students stood up in support of the Jewish community. When the ... prayer room for the Muslim community was vandalized, the Jewish students were also the first to stand up and [support them].

So there have been good experiences. However, there are bad experiences that [we'll] need to overcome. And to be honest with you, I don't know if we will ever overcome them. This is a reality of life that we have to deal with.

White: ...The imam and I regard ourselves as facilitators for dialogue. That's not always true of faculty on this campus. And unfortunately, I think that we have faculty who are firebrands, and really stir up students not for dialogue, but for the opposite, and that's unfortunate.

Hendi: On the other hand, I think the university leadership has been very supportive.

White: Oh, they have.

Hendi: From the president himself, on many occasions, to the university chaplain ... The Board of Trustees also pushed for [reconciliation], no doubt about it.

What do you think of terrorists or governments using religion to justify their actions?

White: I think that — you know, there's this statement that the Devil quotes the Scripture —sometimes Scripture is used as a pretext rather than as a text. There are many distortions of religion. And any government that uses religion as a mode for terrorism — they're distorting religion. And I have very little use for that type of incorrect exegesis.

Hendi: I believe that terrorism has no religion. And violence has no faith. Violence is violence, and terrorism is terrorism, whether they are conducted by Jews or Christians, Muslims, Baharis — any of those communities — and they have to be condemned. And I also believe that there are three types of terrorism: the one that is sponsored by individuals — people on their own [who] act [and] have these agendas — or groups, and there are many of them around the world — and states. You have state-sponsored terrorism, you have

group-sponsored terrorism, and you have individual-sponsored terrorism. All have to be rejected, no matter what.

... Any religion cannot support terrorism. But can a religion be used to promote terrorism? Of course. And I think all of our religious communities — within the Jewish community, within the Christian community, within the Muslim community — we all have done so. And that has to be rejected.

White: You also have to understand that two of the principles which Islam and Judaism share [are], one, the respect for life and two, forgiveness. And within the Koran, I believe that the word for forgiveness occurs more than any other word. And terrorism just runs totally contrary to either the respect for life or the idea of forgiveness.

Hendi: I mean, the Arabic word for terrorism is hirabah. And it is a term that was developed about 1,000 years ago by Muslim jurists ... Hirabah means what I mentioned, the three types of terrorism, either [sponsored by] states, government or individuals ... And it was condemned by Islamic jurists those hundreds of years [ago]."

White: Also understand that both Hebrew and Arabic are similar tongues, and hirabah is probably related to chereb, which in Hebrew means "sword."

Hendi: Yes, yes.

White: So we share that common heritage in terms of linguistics.

What do you think of the concept of the religious state?

White: Well, that kind of concept of government religion is not new. It goes back to the days of the Ottoman Empire. Through your nationality, you are your religion.

Personally, I am opposed. I don't speak about Israel [and] I'm not speaking about any Arabic state. I would like to see a separation between religion and state in Israel. I don't like the idea of Israel being considered as a theocracy. It's not a theocracy, it's a democracy. If I were an Israeli citizen and voted in yesterday's election [Jan. 28, 2003] I would probably [have voted] for the Shinui action party, because they're involved in the lead for change.

And in terms of physical Judaism, there was always the separation between religion and state. The prophets dealt with the political, and the priests dealt with the religion. I would like to see that revisited in terms of contemporary Israel.

Hendi: Well, I guess my answer might be different here. It depends on how you define religion. I would like to see an Islamic state, influenced by Islamic law and by shariah [rules about governing Islamic society, derived largely from the Koran]. However, my argument ends with those who don't understand what Islamic law means and what shariah means. To me, America is an Islamic state.

What do I mean by that? Shariah and Islamic law speak of what they call the foundations of shariah ... Maqasid shariah. And Maqasid shariah are, number one, to safeguard and protect the dignity of each and every individual within the state. Number two, to safeguard and protect the religion of each and every individual within the state. Number three, to safeguard and protect the intellect and what comes out of it — the freedom of speech and this and that — of

each and every individual within the state. Number four, to safeguard and protect the wealth, and the right to gain wealth, of each and every individual within the state. And the last one, the honor and dignity of each and every individual within the state. That is what shariah is about, and that is what Islamic law is all about.

Any state that does promote these five values is a state [influenced] by Islamic law ... By that I mean, I feel comfortable living in America because these values are very well-respected: the freedom of religion, the freedom of speech, the freedom to accumulate wealth and so on and so forth. Now the details of how you do that are debated by Muslim scholars and will continue to be debated

... I would like to see an Islamic state. I don't think we have one now, but to have an Islamic state that protects the dignity of each human being in it and gives the freedom of the press, the freedom to talk. And we don't have it. If we had it, of course I would [support] that.

White: And the question remains: is Israel a Jewish state? If it's a Jewish state, then it has to be ruled by Jewish values. And I think one of the problems to deal with, in terms of non-Muslims and non-Jews, is the understanding that Judaism — and Islam, to a great degree — are civilizations. They really incorporate even more than the religious. They incorporate a sense of peoplehood, a sense of nationhood, and a sense of religion.

So nationhood is really part of Judaism. Nationhood is very much a part of Islam. I think one of the things that most Jewish students really react to is when someone says to a Jewish student, "I like Judaism, but I don't like Zionists." Well, I'm a supporter of the state of Israel; that makes me a Zionist. But that does not make me an oppressor. Because I'm very much on the left in terms of creation of a Palestinian state — I'm very critical of what's happening currently in Israel.

So Zionism, from a Jewish point of view, has to be understood not in a negative connotation, but in a more positive connotation. And that's again where you get some of these political problems, and really it's education. It's really education. And even my Jewish students don't understand the history of the Zionist movement. They know it from 1948 on; they don't know what preceded it. They don't know what the formulators and the philosophers thought about it.

Hendi: ... The very existence of Judaism is an Islamic principle ... Because in Islamic law, there is an article that says that the priority should be given to Jews and Christians in Islamic law before Muslims. Any that feel internally inferior — that inferiority feeling should be rejected and overcome by making them feel a part of the majority.

White: And the other thing to bear in mind is that the history of Jewish-Islamic relations is far more positive than that of Jewish-Christian relations. One example: when Moses Maimonides, one of our most famous philosophers of religion, realized and experienced the oppression that occurred in Spain under Christian rule, what did he do? He fled to Egypt, where he became the consulting physician to the caliph. And so, Islamic countries were places of refuge for Jews who were being oppressed by the Christian community. And I think that that story has to be told and re-told, because people don't understand that.

What can ordinary people do to improve relations between Muslims and Jews (or Arabs and Israelis)?

White: The first thing is to become better educated about both traditions, become better educated not only about the Koran and the Torah, but also better educated about the history of the relationships between the two groups. Education is the answer.

Hebrew likes homonyms — one word that has two meanings — and one of the great homonyms is that the word for education, which in Hebrew is chinuch, also means dedication. It's our way of saying that if you're going to be dedicated to any principle, then you'd best be enlightened about the meaning of that principle. What we have, within the Israeli-Arab conflict, is people who are dedicated, but the dedication comes out of ignorance rather than enlightenment. And so enlightenment, to me, is the best guarantee and the best avenue for dialogue.

Hendi: I would say number one, reconciliation must be promoted. Number two, visit each other. Go to the home of someone from the other side. Participate in their religious services. [Learn] about them from within, and do not do that from without. To better know about Islam, you need to know what Muslims like about Islam. And to better know about Judaism, you need to know what Jews like about [Judaism] and what Jews believe Judaism to be. So from within, rather than from without. Number three, we have to stop idolizing people, you know, the concept of the idol. The prophet Muhammad said ... your father is Adam, and Adam is created from dust. We are brothers and sisters in one human family. In that case, we have to work out our differences. Not necessarily give up our differences, but work out our differences in a way that brings about peace to our communities.



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