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### Muslim cleric brings message of cooperation to St. Thomas

By LYDIA HARRIS

Saturday, February 5th 2005



Imam Yahya Hendi

Noted Muslim cleric Imam Yahya Hendi is on St. Thomas to deliver a message of cultural and religious unity.

Brought to the island through the St. Thomas Hebrew Congregation's World of Difference program, the imam spoke Friday at the St. Thomas Islamic Center and the Jewish synagogue's shabbat services.

On Sunday he will be the guest speaker at the St. Thomas Reformed Church's 9 a.m. worship service.

Hendi's final engagement will be at 6:30 p.m. Monday at Frederick Lutheran Church, where he will present "Judaism, Christianity and Islam: Confrontation or Cooperation."

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Rabbi Arthur Starr met Imam Hendi at Hartford Seminary last June.

"I was impressed with his eloquence, his message of unity and understanding, and I knew that our community on St. Thomas could benefit from his presence here.

"I'm delighted that the synagogue is able to bring this wonderful human being to speak in our community," he said. "I hope that everyone interested in interfaith relations in our community will have an opportunity to hear him speak."

#### Traveling for understanding

An American citizen, this Muslim chaplain at Georgetown University in Washington, D.C., is the imam - a position similar to a rabbi, priest or minister - of the Islamic Society of Frederick, Md.; the Muslim chaplain at the National Naval Medical Center in Bethesda, Md.; and spokesman for the Islamic Jurisprudence Council of North America.

In addition to traveling around the world talking about Islam and issues relating to Muslims, Hendi works with government officials, nonprofit organizations and inter-religious groups to help foster an understanding of the Muslim religion.

His travels have taken him to Africa, Europe, Central Asia, the Middle East and now the Caribbean in pursuit of his goal to "spread the idea we are all alike. Our common denominator is that we are all human beings created by the Divine Creator," he said.

Born in a small town near Jerusalem, when people ask where he comes from, Hendi prefers to say, "I come from dust." He uses the question as an opportunity to talk about that fact that once skin color, religious beliefs and cultural, ethnic and regional backgrounds are removed, everybody is the same.

"We all came from dust," he said. "I am from The Land, the Holy Land. I grew up in the midst of the conflict between Muslims and Jews." He added, however, that he never adopted an attitude of violence or hatred. Simply put, it is not who he is.

"I am a citizen of the world, geographically and physically," he told The Daily News.

Throughout his travels, Hendi said he has been continually reminded how much alike we all are.

In fact, during a trip to Uzbekistan, he was pleasantly surprised to see that Jewish and Muslim clerics dress almost the same, right down to their square black hats.

#### Finding common ground

Whether at home or abroad, Hendi encourages "inter-religious dialog, not inter-faith" dialogue. Starr emphasized that they are not the same.

Hendi's message is that each religion is unique and that that uniqueness should be celebrated.

"I don't want convergence by giving up who you are," Hendi said. "I say, 'Let me understand you and you understand me.'"

To illustrate his point, Hendi told the story of a controversy at Georgetown University, a private Catholic and Jesuit school. He said some people wanted to remove the crucifixes from campus. So he and the school's rabbi went to the university president.

"We told him that the day the crucifixes came down would be the day we both would resign," he said, adding that "people should not be threatened" by another person's faith.



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**IMAM, continued**

Saturday, February 5th 2005

People who are secure in their faith, he suggested, never feel threatened by other faiths and don't have to convince others that "I'm right."

Hendi admires Pope John Paul II, he said, "because he has a clear, intimate relationship with his own faith."

He's been able to "reach out to Jews and Muslims because he doesn't feel threatened."

For Hendi, the bottom line is this: Even if we have divergent views about how to practice our faith, we can accept each other. We can agree to disagree.

"No one can claim the only path to God," he said.

Referring to some of the internal and external conflicts in Islam today, Starr noted that "Judaism and Christianity have undergone a filtering process that goes on over time. Islam is still going through it."

The Islamic religion started about 600 years after Christianity, in the same region where Judaism and Christianity began. This is just one commonality these major monotheistic religions share.

**Making it work**

"We can make it work," Hendi said. "In the name of the three religions, it's time to make it work. ... Governments and religious leaders have to sit down and talk to each other," because in the current Israeli-Palestinian conflict both sides have to deal with fundamentalists.

"We have to bring the extremes to the table and find ways to learn to like each other," Hendi said. But that takes real leaders, and real leaders are courageous, he added.

As an example, he said that one time he spoke to a group of rabbis in Washington, D.C., but arrived 35 minutes late. Finally at the lectern, he apologized, saying he was late because a rabbi gave him the wrong directions.

Then he told them that the week before he was an hour late to speak to a group of imams. The reason he was late, he told the rabbis, was because the imam gave him the wrong directions.

"If our leaders give us the right directions, we'll get there on time,"

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were his final words before starting the talk he'd prepared.

"Dreamers make dreams come true by bringing family and friends along," Starr said, after noting that the peaceful coexistence among religions and ethnic groups in the Virgin Islands is an example that it can be done.

"It will happen in my lifetime," Hendi said. He believes, as does Starr, that through efforts to bring people together in understanding and peace, "even if I die, it still happens in my lifetime because I started it."

To this wise, young cleric, "It doesn't matter how long you live, but how you live," no matter what your beliefs.

"God doesn't ask about results. He asks if we are part of the movement toward the results," Hendi said. "I will give my life, but not by blowing up a bus."

Instead, he will give his life by creating an atmosphere in which cooperation and love of God exist among all the world's religions.

Monday's discussion is open to the public. Admission is free. For information, call the synagogue at 774 - 3212.

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