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Muslim Leader Forges Interfaith Accord

Now a U.S. citizen, Hendi came to the United States 17 years ago. He likes to tell people that his name is the Arabic version of John the Baptist's.

After most of his guests departed, Hendi shed his black robe, known as an *abaya*, for a rumpled charcoal suit. "Now I can go back to who I am," he said.

Asked where he comes from, Hendi, 39, replied, "I am from dust." He studied his listener's face, a smile playing on his own. "In the Bible it says we are all dust to dust."

But the story is only a little more complicated.

Politics and a Plea to End Extremism

A week after the interfaith gathering at his mosque, he was back behind the lectern for the Hopkins Evergreen Society.

One hand in his pocket, a bud microphone on his lapel, Hendi wanted to talk about Islamic ethics, but he kept getting sidetracked by politics. He found himself, again, explaining the term "jihad." Terrorists, he said, have hijacked the word, which can mean any spiritual struggle.

"I do believe that what I'm doing for you is a form of jihad, because jihad is about knowledge," he said. "For those who sit listening, it is also a jihad, because you're sitting here struggling to listen to me with my accent."

People chuckled at his wisecrack. But the tone changed when a student pressed him to explain why the Koran seems able to support extremist views.

"I feel you're whitewashing some things," said Paula Wiseman, 61, a Potomac resident whose parents survived the Holocaust.

Hendi said every religion has blood on its hands. Then he told a story from his own life.

One morning, when he was about 8, his father asked him to gather figs for the family's breakfast from their farm on the West Bank. Hendi set out, hastening to collect the fruit before it became too warm in the sun. But before he reached the grove, he ran into rolls of barbed wire.

"Go back," an Israeli soldier told him. "I need to get figs for my father," Hendi recalled tearfully begging the soldier. "And he said, 'If you don't go away, I'll shoot you,' or something around that idea. And so of course I had to leave."

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The auditorium fell silent.

Later, Hendi expanded on those remarks: "I don't want my children to die. I don't want Jewish children to die. I don't think God is a real estate agent. If we are really the children of God, I don't think He would want us to fight over anything."

And then Hendi got into his Toyota and put a heavy foot down on the gas pedal, late for a luncheon at the State Department celebrating the 10-year anniversary of peacemaking efforts in the Balkans.

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