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Imam Yahya Hendi-inspiring peace in a conflicted society

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Early one Thursday afternoon in November, I sat on a bench in the grandiose entrance corridor of Healey Hall. From my locale, with red carpet beneath my feet and chandeliers suspended high above my head, I could see into the office marked 112. At a desk positioned in front of windows that stretch from the floor to the ceiling sits Imam Yahya Hendi. Wearing a dark suit and a bright yellow tie, the Imam is deep in conversation with a group of six men, similarly clad. He leans towards his visitors, intent upon gathering their questions and comments. In response, he stretches back in his burgundy leather chair, as if to make room for the emphatic hand gestures that accompany his Arabic phrases. From outside of Healy 112, only the voice of the Imam can be heard.

On paper, Yahya Hendi presides as both the Muslim Chaplain at Georgetown University in Washington, D.C. and the senior imam of the Islamic Society of Frederick County, MD. In person, he is an academic and spiritual leader of Islam who insists on the importance of inter-religious dialogue. Imam



Hendi, born in Palestine, plays an integral role in the Georgetown community as well as the larger D.C. community. His message of dialoguing for peace remains the same regardless of venue, and he champions this message in classrooms, prayer rooms and in consult with the United States Department of Defense. His work at Georgetown is a microcosmic manifestation of his larger long term goals.

In 1999 Hendi became the first full time Muslim Chaplain at any university in the U.S. Since Georgetown set this important precedent, other schools have begun to follow suit. Trinity College in Connecticut and Princeton University in New Jersey now have Muslim Chaplains. "All of that happened in the last two years, because of Georgetown University," determines Hendi. Georgetown's action of hiring a Muslim spiritual leader has been welcomed by the Campus Ministry as reflective of the University's spiritual intent and Jesuit identity.

Abed Bhuyan, Georgetown Student and president of the Muslim Student Association (MSA), echoes Hendi's modus operandi: "Inter-religious dialogue is of the utmost import." Bhuyan says Hendi's presence on campus is a "blessing," and that he often hears of friends who have had conversations with the Imam that are "supremely memorable." Bhuyan's praise of Hendi proves the assertion of Father Timothy Godfrey, S.J.'s, director of campus ministry, that the Imam has been positively received by the Muslim student population at Georgetown-a population that forms 2.1% of the student body, as reported by University officials.

Hendi's impact on the Catholic campus resounds beyond the newly dedicated Muslim Prayer Room-a project that was realized last spring after two years of dedicated effort by a team that included Hendi-to include Friday services and official campus ministry events.

At this year's Yom Kippur services, Rabbi Harold White invited Hendi to address his congregation. Calm and confident, Hendi immediately commanded the attention of those gathered as he spoke of his children and personal history, imploring everyone to join in his desire for peace that could only come through unity. And he won; at least for the moment there was Muslim-Jewish understanding and appreciation. Upon conclusion, Imam Hendi received a standing ovation that resounded amidst the Catholic iconography that adorns Gaston Hall. The significance is staggering-a Palestinian Muslim had captivated a Jewish audience within the confines of a Catholic University.

It's uncertain which element of that equation is most impressive. But the product has been Hendi's objective since childhood. He knew he wanted to be an imam from the time he was thirteen. The imam in his village approached him to lead a Friday service when he was just entering his adolescence. Hendi says of the experience: "I liked what I did, I think, and people liked it." Besides positive encouragement from his foray into spiritual leadership, Hendi's desire to become an imam is rooted in the problematic practices of Islam he experienced in his Palestinian village. "I felt a distance between the people and their faith. I felt that the culture was ruling the religion, not the religion ruling the culture." Thus he embarked on a mission to bridge this gap between Muslim people and the Islamic faith-through education.

Though his agenda was a noble one, Hendi's parents were not completely supportive. "They wanted me to become a doctor, a physician, of course. They thought that it would make me richer, more financially stable, to become a doctor. But I was really determined." Determination is the common denominator amongst all of Hendi's endeavors. He left Palestine to study Islamic Law and Theology in Amman, Jordan. From Amman, Hendi made the move to Texas by himself. As he made the cultural leap from the Middle East to the U.S., he also expanded his academic objectives. He decided to pursue studies in the

other Abrahamic traditions, first with a Masters in Comparative Religions and Christian-Muslim Relations at Hartford Seminary and then with a Ph.D. in Comparative Religions at Temple University.

The inter-religious focus of his education makes Hendi an invaluable asset to Georgetown and the nation, especially as the Islamic world continues to frequent the front pages of our newspapers. After the attacks of September 11th, Imam Hendi was called upon by the Bush Administration, along with other Islamic Scholars and leaders in the U.S., as an Islamic consultant. He has met with President Bush, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice and Under Secretary for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs Karen Hughes. He speaks with the Department of Defense relatively frequently. Hendi describes his goal throughout these interactions as an effort to "try to help them [the lawmakers and government officials] be more sensitive to the culture they go to, because when they are sensitive to the culture they go to they will do their job better and they will protect themselves better."

But are they listening? "They have been receptive to change, to reform and to renewal" because, according to Hendi, they realize the mistakes they have made through ignorance. Hendi's appreciation and love for the government and the US military is evidenced by numerous photos, such as Hendi posed with military officers and important political figures, that create a jigsaw effect on the east wall of his office. While Hendi lilt praises of the military, he makes sure his dedication to education takes precedent: "Bullets do not find the right peace. I believe only with education and love this world can be a better world for all of us. Therefore I hope that America does not depend only on its military but rather on its minds."

His self proscribed mission as educator and religious leader keeps Hendi on the go, both within and outside of the Georgetown community. His speech, accented English with a sprinkle of Arabic, reflects his lifestyle. He is hurried and passionate; the words fire from his mouth communicating urgency, dedication, as well as educated, experienced and reflective thought. The upbeat cadence of his words is reinforced by the smile that spreads through his dark beard.

In a recent phone conversation, rushed in typical Hendi-style, I caught Hendi in his car and experienced what I believe to be quintessentially Yahya Hendi. After insisting that this was in fact the perfect time to talk, Hendi discussed the Muslim Prayer Room, how he responds to criticism and finally his overwhelmingly positive relationship with Rabbi White. I scribbled furiously, my thoughts chasing, trying to keep up with the pace of the conversation. I tried to recollect myself and press him to describe how he and Rabbi White interact in the classroom, when I slipped and committed quite the faux pas. "Rabbi Henâ€ Oh I'm so sorry, I meanâ€"

"Oh no, please, call me 'rabbi.'" Hendi went on to say that last year while in Sydney Australia, which he recommended as a destination, he was dialoguing with a local rabbi. They got along quite well, and shared similar ideals. Upon departure, the rabbi said to Hendi "I can give you the title of 'rabbi.'" Hendi rejoiced in this anecdote and explained that, after all, it's the same God.

Houlihan is assistant editor and an English senior.

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Sue Badri

posted 2/05/07 @ 8:33 PM EST

When you have a fulfilled heart through work, home and family, there is no reason whatsoever to feel desperation. When you have a full tummy through having enough food and a contented heart, there is not reason whatsoever for frustration. ([Continued...](#))

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