

In Redwood Falls, Minn., event, Muslim leader calls Christians to trust, understand

Syed: 'All of us have to make an extra effort to understand the other'

by Duane Sweep

The relationship between Christians and Muslims should be one of trust and understanding; the relationship should not feature fear and hatred.

"All of us have to educate ourselves. All of us have to make an extra effort to understand the other."

That's the crux of the message Dr. Sayyid Syeed, national director for the Office for Interfaith and Community Alliances for the Islamic Society of North America, brought to Redwood Falls, Minn., when he spoke at the First Presbyterian Church and other locations in that community Sept. 15-17.

Syed, who holds a doctorate in sociolinguistics from Indiana University, brought a message of history and the potential for harmony when he spoke Saturday morning to more than 150 at the First Presbyterian Church.

Syed laid out the history of the Islamic faith, saying historical power and political structures, not religious differences, have built a wall between Christians and Muslims.

During his visit to the community, Syeed delivered his message to churchgoers on Sunday, then spoke Monday at the Rotary Club and then to middle- and high-school students in the community's schools.

Syed came to the community at the invitation of the Rev. Scott Prouty, pastor of First Presbyterian in Redwood Falls, who first spoke to Syeed when Prouty contacted him this spring as a reference for J. Herbert Nelson, who was then a potential candidate for the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)'s stated clerk post.

"After I finished asking all the questions," Prouty said, "we just talked awhile longer about his family and his travels around the world. I was just fascinated with him. In the back of my mind I was thinking about the kids back here in Redwood Falls."

Prouty said, "I was feeling really bold; I asked him, 'Do you ever come to small towns?' He kind of paused and said, 'Well, if I'm asked.' So I asked him and he said, 'Call my office and set it up.'"

That culminated this past weekend when Syeed made the trip to Minnesota.

Islam, Syeed said, recognizes “the oneness of mankind ... that all mankind is from the same father and mother.” Syeed described how Mohammed, born in Mecca (a city in modern day Saudi Arabia) 570 years after the birth of Jesus, delivered monotheism to a society in which tribes worshiped multiple gods.

Syeed then moved his presentation on to the age of empires — a Christian empire centered in Rome and an eastern Muslim empire — and to the year 1095. “The relationship [between the two empires] is not very religious,” Syeed said. “The relationship is now based on power ... the political interest of the groups.”

He said, “The pope (Urban II) declared that Mohammed was an antichrist,” adding, “It was the duty of every Christian to go and invade and destroy the Muslim empire and the Muslim people.” That declaration led to the Crusades, pitting west against east, for more than 200 years.

And when the Crusades withered away, Syeed said, “It was as if there was a wall in the world; you have Christianity on this side and you have Muslims on this side.”

The Crusades were followed by the inquisition and European colonialism, Syeed said, pointing out that of the 57 predominantly Muslim nations in the world today, 54 were under colonial rule.

“A Muslim cannot be a Muslim if he does not respect Jesus; do you understand that?” Syeed said. “But on the other side it is possible to curse Mohammed because he was something new.”

He said, “I’m saying this because we have a thousand years of hate, a thousand years of demonization behind us.” And the past has caused the west and east to miss “tremendous possibilities of cooperation, tremendous possibilities of building a civilization throughout the rest of the world.”

When the world’s power structure shifted in the 20th century and the European colonial empires passed away, Muslims sought education abroad, but Muslim students were still treated as a lower class in European universities. But it was different in the United States.

“The Christians of America opened their doors of their churches for Muslims to come and pray there; did you know that?” he said. “It was for the first time in America a new thing was happening.”

That openness was bolstered in 1965 by the Catholic Church’s Declaration on the Relation of the Church with Non-Christian Religions. In that declaration, Syeed said, the Catholic Church stated Muslims “are part and parcel of the Abrahamic family of faith. We cannot totally condemn them to fire.” Through the declaration, he said, “Not only did Jews get a reprieve; Muslims also got a reprieve.”

Syed said, “Muslim Americans are as diverse as America itself.” He said, “We have created an identity which is Muslim, but at the same time connected with our roots, with our traditions.”

For a case in point, Syed said while women are not allowed to drive automobiles in Saudi Arabia, his interpretation of the Quran allows that his daughters should be trained to drive. “It was very simple that we should train our good Muslim, American-born daughters to be in the front seat and drive the car,” he said, “and luckily today our three daughters are not only good drivers of cars, but they are drivers of American institutions in leadership positions.”

Such adaptations have produced a Muslim organization that does not restricted into one particular path of the ancient Muslim schism into Sunni and Shia denominations.

Disagreements do arise in the Muslim community just as they do among Christians, but “if there are problems, we have to face them together,” Syed said. That’s possible in the United States, where there is a separation of church and state. “When you adopt them as an official religion [of the state] then you have to put the resources, the power and the authority of the state behind that particular brand of religion and the result is a failure.”

On Saturday afternoon, Syed shared a table at the front of the sanctuary of First Presbyterian during a panel discussion that included the Rev. Joyce Graue, pastor of St. John’s Lutheran Church in Raymond, Minn.; Jaylani Hussein, executive director of the Minnesota chapter of the Council on American-Islamic Relations; Elona Street-Stewart, executive for the Synod of Lakes and Prairies of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.); Dr. Bernard Evans, recently retired associate dean for the faculty in the School of Theology at Saint John’s University in Collegeville, Minn.; and Nahid Khan, a special consultant to the Jay Phillips Center for Interfaith Learning at the University of St. Thomas in St. Paul, Minn.

When the panel was asked about the global impact of American Muslims, Syed said, “Whatever you are doing at the grassroots level, it goes up and it has a global impact.”

But first, there has to be the work. “We need to do this connecting,” Syed said. “No extremists can be reined in by you and by us until we collectively build mutual trust, mutual understanding and the mutual destiny that we have to humanity. American Muslims, American Christians and American Jews have a great responsibility to do that.”

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