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Humor Helps Break Stereotypes About Muslims

Muslim comedy subject of Ramadan panel



By Carolee Walker
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One way to deal with a sensitive topic is to make fun of it, says Muslim comedian Azhar Usman. (Photo courtesy Spark Media)

Washington -- There is not anything funny about Ramadan, the Muslim holy month of fasting and reflection, or about the threat of violent al-Qaida terrorists around the world, but that does not mean the average person cannot appreciate a good Muslim joke.

Sometimes the best way to deal with a sensitive subject is to make fun of it, says Muslim comedian Azhar Usman.

Muslims, like everybody else, are capable of laughing and being funny, Usman said at American University in Washington at the virtual town hall meeting "Laughing While Muslim." The October 3 meeting held during Ramadan used digital video conference technology to

link Muslim panelists at American University (AU) and the University of Southern California (USC) in Los Angeles to talk seriously about comedy.

During the month of Ramadan, which in 2007 ended on October 11 or 12, depending on the sighting of the moon in the various Muslim countries, Muslims refrain from eating or drinking during daylight hours and break their fast at *iftars* after sunset.

In the United States today, Muslims use the month of Ramadan to reach out to their fellow citizens and to build bridges with the community at large.

Since 2004, Usman, born and raised in Chicago by Indian parents, has performed his "Allah Made Me Funny -- Official Muslim Comedy Tour" in more than 12 countries over five continents. Although Usman is a lawyer by training, he has taken his comedy show on the road to counter misconceptions about Muslims.

Comedy is a funny way of being serious, Usman said, quoting the late actor Peter Ustinov. "People always come up to me after my show and say, 'Thank you so much for making me think,'" said Usman, whose jokes about racial profiling lighten up the seriousness of what he calls the "unnecessary evil of life after 9/11."

"There is much truth said in jest," Usman said. Stand-up comedy is the quintessential art form of disenfranchised groups, he added, noting that Jewish and African-American musicians and comedians have been particularly successful at opening up Americans' minds to new ideas about stereotyped groups.

"Even if you're speaking the truth, if people don't trust you, it really doesn't matter," said Kareem Salama, a country music singer-songwriter on the USC panel who is studying law in Iowa.

"Because artists speak from their heart, people trust them," he said. Salama was born and raised in Ponca City, a small town in Oklahoma where his parents immersed him in diverse cultures by taking him to rodeos, bluegrass music festivals, the "Grand Ole Opry" country music show in Nashville and Native American powwows.

Now Salama uses his American country music sound to carry a spiritual message praising God and peace. His latest album, "Generous Peace," is the English translation of his Arabic name.

Local interaction is the essence of American civil society, said Eboo Patel, founder and executive director of the Interfaith Youth Core, a Chicago-based organization building a global interfaith youth movement, on the AU panel.

"If Islam is about one thing it is about mercy," Patel said, and when young people of all faiths get together to work on service projects, they begin to share each others' stories and learn about each other.

Patel suggested that comedy also might help spark a national conversation about ethnic profiling, the status of women, violence and where people can come together on common ground.

If everyone in the room listening to this conversation starts another conversation outside the room, then people can begin to envision a picture of Islam different from the videos of terrorists cutting off people's heads or planes crashing into buildings, Patel said.

"The real religion in my home, growing up Muslim in America, was achievement," Patel said. Both his parents worked as professionals and led busy lives, but on Saturday mornings, Patel's father helped immigrants with their paperwork at the Motor Vehicle Bureau so that they could get their driver's licenses.

Muslims donate their time and money individually and as part of groups to those in need in the United States, Patel said. After Hurricane Katrina in August 2005, for example, Islamic Relief gave \$2 million to help victims of the disaster in Louisiana and Mississippi, according to the Center on Philanthropy.

"Islam and service are linked," Patel said, and this is what Americans need to know about what Muslims believe.

See also "[Arab-American Comics Use Laughter To Build Bridges.](#)"

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