

10 years: N.Y. Islamic leader, followers disown 9/11 attacks



Koran/Islamic Gallery British Museum/Foter.com

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HUDSON, N.Y. -- Being a Muslim American is a lot more complicated than simply being an American who follows the religion of Islam, especially in the age of Sept. 11, 2001, and its upcoming 10-year anniversary.

But in the small Muslim community of Bangladeshi descent that practices their religion at the Hudson Islamic Center, Muslim America is weathering the 9/11 storm -- despite inaccurate information, outright bigotry and constant suspicion.

And the reason is simple: They will not allow the terrorists of 9/11 infamy to hijack their religion.

Imam Abu Yusuf, the spiritual leader of the Hudson Muslim community, makes it clear, in fact, that there is no way the attacks of 9/11 was a religiously justified act.

“The 9/11, we saw an evil thing. So many innocent people died. Anyone who did this, this is bad,” said Yusuf, during a recent interview. “We like to have peace. We like to get through that. We like to help each other. Our religion tells us we are peaceful. If we have done good, we go to heaven. We talk all the time, if we become good, then all the world will become good. People who do good, get help from God.”

Imam Yusuf, talking during a break from religious studies in the Islamic center's basement Masjid (a small mosque), is best described as an Islamic teacher. Other than taking off your shoes as you enter the Masjid, Yusuf has only one restriction on questions during the interview: "I will not talk politics," he said. There is no need to ask why.

The Imam does not speak English well, or he does not trust his English when talking to the media on certain subjects. He clearly understands English well, though. After some questions, he talks in Bengla to Sourove Hassian, the oldest of the 15 or so students with their Imam. Then Hassian answers some of the questions.

"As far as the event, according to the Koran, if you intentionally hurt an innocent person, you are in the wrong," said Hassian. "The killing of innocent people is the same as murder. If you do that, you are not considered a Muslim. We do not accept that whoever is responsible for the attacks on 9/11 as being Muslims ... we consider those people not Muslims."

No change in religious practice

In the 10 years since the attacks, despite some early problems, the Hudson Muslim community has changed little in the way members observe their religion.

"I don't think it has changed," said Hassian. "At the time of the event it was difficult, because of how we are perceived. But no, not really."

Hassian also said the people in his community find no need to "defend" Islam in the wake of the attacks. "Listening to scholars, defending (Islam) is not recommended because we should not need to defend our religion if we are on the right path. We are not doing anything wrong. What we are doing is simply practicing our religion; in America, you do not need to defend your religion."

"America is one of the only countries in the world which actually allows cultural and religious differences to exist, to co-exist, in a peaceful way," he said.

While the majority of Bangladesh's 145 million Muslims follow the basic Sunni doctrine of Islamic religion -- which is the predominant of the two world Islamic religious sects; Shia is the other sect -- Yusuf, who is also Bengali, says he does not label his teachings as Sunni and he teaches a Islamic doctrine which focuses on the writings of the Muslim prophets, the "Haditts."

"We don't really classify ourselves as Sunni," the prominent sect in Bangladesh, "we are Muslims. We follow the Koran and follow the Haditts," said Hassian.

To make it simple -- which, like any religious discussion, it is not -- the practice of the religion of Islam is not all that different from the practice of the religions of Judaism and Christianity. Not surprising, as the three religions are tied together by the same God and many of the same prophets. The Koran teaches Muslims that both Jewish and Christian religions believe in the same God as Islam, and they follow the same prophets. Mohammed, the prophet basis of the Islamic religion, is simply the last of God's prophets. Other than Mohammed, Jesus is the most quoted prophet in the Koran.

Unlike in some Muslim cultures, everyone in the Hudson community can have a copy of the Koran, not just the Imam. However, on that day, Hassian proves he is as much a young American as he is a Muslim -- he reads the Koran from his iPad.

"There are electronic versions," he said. "There are certain cleanliness rules for handling a Koran and they do not apply to electronic devices, but you still treat it with respect."

Yusuf adds to the discussion: "It is the words that matter, not the book," he said, patting his Koran lovingly as if to say his "old-school" way is still his preferred form of reading the "words."

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