

U.S. imam has voice young can relate to

By Dana Borcea
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Muslim clerics are not typically considered a huge draw with Canadian youths.

But a popular American imam proved his influence among local young Muslims during a weekend stop in Hamilton.

More than 400 people packed a McMaster University auditorium Sunday night to hear Imam Zaid Shakir speak at an event titled A Struggle Against Hate.

The forum was organized in response to last month's on-campus hate crime that saw anti-Islam and sexist graffiti spray-painted on Prof. Muriel Walker's office door.

The vandalism was considered a backlash for an event organized by Walker, a non-Muslim woman, to raise awareness about the hijab.

Organizers convinced Shakir to add Hamilton to his weekend-long multi-city speaking tour across southern Ontario in an effort to help heal wounds on campus and the wider community.

The mainly young and Muslim audience listened with rapt attention as Shakir presented a vision of an Islam sensitive to Western realities but still rooted in tradition.

The California-based scholar, who often inspires comparisons to the 1960s American black Muslim leader Malcolm X, also challenged several stereotypes, including those that paint Islam as a self-serving and inward looking faith.

He reminded the group, made up of both the devout and the curious, that heaven is not reserved exclusively for Muslims.

"God hasn't promised us a rose garden," he said.

Despite the serious subjects tackled, Shakir peppered his comments with cultural references to everything from American football to Martin Luther King.

Shakir's proponents say his modern sensibility is rarely found among other imams who are often imported from the Middle East and lack the language skills or cultural knowledge to connect with Muslim youths struggling to define their identities.

"He's very popular among high school and university Canadian-raised Muslim people who take their religion seriously but want to see it expressed in articulate English," said Hussein Hamdani, a member of the North American Spiritual Revival group that helped organize the event.

One of seven children, Shakir was raised in public housing in Georgia and Connecticut by a single, Baptist mother.

He converted to Islam after joining the United States Air Force.

In addition to earning degrees in international relations and political science, Shakir spent nearly a decade in Egypt, Syria and Morocco, studying Arabic, the Koran and Islamic law.

Also on the panel were Walker, who spoke about her ongoing commitment to promoting human rights and local rabbi, Dan Selsberg, who cautioned against letting "disagreement dissolve into hatred."

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