

## Propagating the principle of Islam

Scholar spreads simple message of love for Allah

**By Amy Lazar, Standard Staff**

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Using subtle humour and modern-day anecdotes, one of North America's leading scholars in Islam delivered an inspiring sermon to about 900 people at the Islamic Society of St. Catharines Friday.

Imam Zaid Shakir's message: put your love for Allah first and it will provide principle and balance to your life.

The 50-year-old man, who was born in California and accepted Islam in 1977 while serving in the U.S. Air Force, is a frequent speaker at Muslim events around North America.

His appearance in St. Catharines was the first of a six-city tour around southern Ontario over the weekend, organized by the North American Spiritual Revival.

During his sermon, he challenged the listeners to think about his message from another perspective.

"Non-muslims hear it and say, 'If you love Allah and the prophet of Allah more than you love anything, would it make you open to be terrorists?' " he said.

"What does the Qur'an say to a person who kills innocent human life? Whoever takes an innocent human life, it's as if they are murdering all of humanity, and the one who saves a life, it's like saving all of humanity."

He also applied the message to daily life at work and home with a few simple anecdotes.

A husband who has a new job and is introducing his wife to co-workers for the first time asks her to remove the hijab, or head scarf, just for a few hours is not putting his love for Allah first.

Selling alcohol, which is forbidden in Islam, in the family store to increase profits so that the children can attend a better university isn't putting Allah first either, Shakir said.

As he spoke, he stood at the front of the men's prayer room at the Masjid al-Noor mosque on Geneva Street.

Some of the women and children, who pray in another room, watched him through windows or on a television feed.

But most just listened to his voice broadcast by a small speaker.

People came from cities as far away as Washington, Buffalo, Hamilton and Toronto to hear Shakir speak.

One of them, who lives in Niagara Falls and whose family built the St. Catharines mosque, took what he said as a reminder.

"To remember that Islam is a way of life," said Sharifa Al-Harazi. "It's not a Friday religion, you have to practise every moment of every day."

Al-Harazi's niece, who is a third-year Brock University student left with a similar feeling.

"It was a good reminder about the love for brothers and sisters and how you don't have to change because someone wants you to," said Maryam Al-Harazi.

Shakir's teachings come from years of study.

He first earned a bachelor's degree in international relations from American University in Washington and later earned a master's degree in political science at New Jersey's Rutgers University.

After a year of studying Arabic in Cairo, Egypt, he settled in Connecticut and co-founded Masjid al-Islam, the Tri-State Muslim Education Initiative and the Connecticut Muslim Co-ordinating Committee.

He also taught political science and Arabic at Southern Connecticut State University before leaving for Syria, where he lived for seven years studying Islamic law, Quranic studies and spirituality.

In 2001, he graduated from Abu Noor University and returned again to the U.S. to begin writing and speaking on various issues.

Two years later, the published author became a scholar-in-residence and lecturer at Zaytuna Institute in California.