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Muslim Chaplain Sees Potential Turning Point

John L. Allen Jr. | Jun. 4, 2009 NCR Today

President Barack Obama?s speech this morning in Cairo, combined with Pope Benedict XVI?s recent trip to the Middle East, may collectively mark a decisive turning point in relations between Islam and the West. That?s according to the first Muslim chaplain at an American Catholic university and a longtime veteran of Catholic/Muslim dialogue.

Imam Yahya Hendi, a native Palestinian who today serves as chaplain to Muslim students at Georgetown University in Washington, D.C., spoke to NCR by phone.

Taken together, Hendi said, the outreach to the Islamic world from both the pope and the president ?may not change the minds of the terrorists, but it will influence young Muslims who are not sure where they stand,? and will ?give the moderates in the Islamic world some ground to stand on.?

Obama?s speech this morning came just three weeks after the pontiff?s own swing through the Middle East. During that trip, Benedict expressed a desire for improved relations with Muslims. His itinerary included a visit to the King Hussein Mosque in Amman, Jordan, and stops at the Dome of the Rock in East Jerusalem and a Palestinian refugee camp on the West Bank.

Hendi said both the words and gestures from both the pope and the president have been ?very positive moments, reaching out, opening doors and building bridges.?

Hendi said that he followed the discussion of the pope?s trip carefully in the Arab-language media, and that he?s been paying attention this morning to Arab reactions to the Obama speech. In each case, he said, conservative Muslim scholars who in the past have voiced skepticism about both the Catholic church and the United States praised what they called a ?tone of reconciliation.?

In terms of where things go from here, Hendi said what he?s waiting for is a ?well-known Muslim religious personality to reach out to the West and to America,? in effect reciprocating the one-two gestures from the pope and the president.

Who might that be?

That, Hendi said, is ?the million dollar question.?

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