


Religious talk promotes understanding between groups

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Quran expert shares insight with schools of different faiths



by: TIMES PHOTO: JONATHAN HOUSE - Michael Sells, a professor at the Divinity School of the University of Chicago, gave a talk Friday at Oregon Episcopal School on interpretations of the Quran.

It's common for the chapel at the Oregon Episcopal School in Raleigh Hills to hear lectures on religion, but the subject the speaker on Friday came to discuss was a first: Islam.

Michael Sells, a professor of Islamic history and literature at the Divinity School of the University of Chicago, was in town last week to discuss his controversial book and lead a workshop for area teachers.

The lecture and workshop were part of a partnership between OES and Tigard's Muslim Educational Trust, which operates a private school and works to educate the community about Islam.

It was a major collaboration for the two religious organizations, which operate only a few miles apart off of Scholls Ferry Road.

"We have developed a great partnership with OES over the years," said Rania Ayoub, a spokeswoman for MET.

Teachers at both schools have collaborated in the past, with students and teachers at MET's middle and high school traveling to the OES campus as part of the Protestant school's courses about other religions.

Sells, a relative of an OES staff member, was invited to speak, and the two schools collaborated on a two-day event that included a workshop for area teachers, a public lecture, book signings as well as special question-and-answer sessions with students.

Sells is the author of "Approaching the Quran: The Early Revelations," which sparked controversy in 2002 after it was listed as required reading at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

The book translates hymns from the Quran, the Islamic holy book, and annotates selections in cultural context.

The book is the first experience for many English speakers into the Quran, which is traditionally printed in the original Arabic. It drew the ire of groups such as the Family Policy Network, a Christian group, which claimed the book was attempting to "indoctrinate" students at the university into the religion.

The controversy began less than a year after the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks. Critics claimed the book ignored passages that appeared to condone violence.

The controversy sparked national and international attention and was the subject of Sells' Friday night lecture.

On Saturday, however, Sells met with about 30 teachers from across the Portland-area for a workshop that

discussed shared heritage between Judaism, Islam and Christianity, as well as a discussion on how different religious groups have been discriminated against over the years.

“My favorite exercise on Saturday, he read this laundry list of things a group was being accused of, and I was thinking he was talking about the things Muslims were being accused of over the past 10 years,” said Faiza Noor, a psychology teacher at MET who attended the Saturday workshop. “But it turned out to be a list of all things Jews were accused of in the U.S. in the years before World War II.”

Sells said many religions have gone through these periods, and it was common to label religions as “violent.”

“It gave us a really good global perspective of how different people are distorted over time,” Noor said. “It was reassuring. We have overcome this before when people have criticized the Torah, or the Bible, or the Quran. It’s not happening for the first time. We have been successful in overcoming those prejudices and biases in our history.”



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