

## Religion

# Muslim leaders plan summit on protecting non-Muslims in their midst

By Lauren Markoe | Religion News Service January 21 at 5:10 PM

Hundreds of Muslim scholars will meet in Morocco next week to reassert the rights of non-Muslims living among them as Christians and other religious minorities flee extremism across the Middle East for safety and freedom elsewhere.

In these times, Muslims must affirm their tradition's true teachings on tolerance, said Shaykh Hamza Yusuf, co-founder of Zaytuna College, the first Muslim liberal arts college in the U.S. The summit meeting, expected to attract more than 300 Muslim religious leaders, will hark back to the Charter of Medina, in which the Prophet Muhammad enumerated the rights of non-Muslims 1,400 years ago.

"The prophet was religiously persecuted, so he knew firsthand what it was to experience religious persecution," said Yusuf, speaking on a pre-conference media call Thursday (Jan 21). "His religion ensured the rights of religious minorities," and Islamic history reveals a generally strong record of tolerance.

Yusuf, who will attend the Jan. 25-27 conference in Marrakesh, is a student of the conference's leading spiritual voice — Shaykh Bin Bayyah — a Mauritanian Islamic scholar and authority on the rights of religious minorities. Bin Bayyah heads the Forum for Promoting Peace in Muslim Societies, which will host the conference with the Ministry of Endowments and Islamic Affairs of the Kingdom of Morocco — a country lauded for its tolerance in a region often distinguished for its lack of it.

More than 300 religious and political leaders from Muslim-majority nations — including Egypt, Turkey, Iraq, Pakistan and Iran — are expected to attend the forum, billed as the first major effort of its kind in the Muslim world since the Charter of Medina, written in 622 C.E. as the first constitution of the Muslim world. An example of the charter's principles is Article 17: "No Jew will be wronged for being a Jew."

The group aims to end the conference with a new declaration, rooted in Islamic law, which may assert in modern words the rights of religious minorities living in Muslim lands.

"The most important point about the declaration is the fact that Muslim scholars are addressing this issue from within the tradition of Islam," said Imam Mohamed Magid, executive director of the All Dulles Area Muslim Society, an influential mosque in northern Virginia.

But non-Muslims — Christians, Jews, Hindus, Sikhs and other — are also headed to Marrakesh. Cardinal Theodore McCarrick, retired archbishop of Washington, D.C., is expected to attend, as is Rabbi Burt Visotzky of

the Jewish Theological Seminary in New York. Representatives from the Vatican, as well as Hindus and Sikhs, among other religious groups, have also been invited.

Magid said he also hopes that Muslims around the world will rely on the work of the conference as they draw up political documents and design school curricula. The idea, in part, is to remind Muslims themselves how seriously their tradition takes the rights of religious minorities.

The hope is also to counter the bloody philosophy of the Islamic State, the extremist group rampaging across swaths of Iraq and Syria. The militants have shown no mercy for nonbelievers, killing thousands — Muslims and non-Muslims — and inspiring lethal attacks against non-Muslims in the West and in Africa.

We want to counter “the idea that Muslims and non-Muslims can’t live together,” said Yusuf. “This is not who we are or who we want to be.”

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