

**washingtonpost.com**

## Islam's Up-to-Date Televangelist

Advertisement

Amr Khaled Has Bridged the Religious and Secular With His Feel-Good Message

By Robin Wright

Washington Post Staff Writer

Tuesday, September 11, 2007; C01

The rhythmic clapping began the minute Amr Khaled stepped through the door of the packed Crystal City ballroom. Surrounded by security guards, the Egyptian preacher had to weave his way through the crowd -- men both cleanshaven and bearded, women both fashionably coifed and dressed in conservative Islamic dress -- that had come from up and down the East Coast to hear him. Two massive screens projected his image to those in the back.

"My goal is that you leave happy," Khaled began softly, once he finally got to the lectern. "My goal is to fulfill the hadith of the prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, that says, 'Whoever puts joy in the hearts of the believers, his reward is not less than Paradise.'" The crowd ate it up. For the next 90 minutes, they laughed at his witticisms, smiled at his stories, nodded at his exhortations and clapped again -- spontaneously and often. But most of all, they listened intently.

The rock-star preacher in the designer suit, often called "the anti-bin Laden," had arrived in America with his new brand of upbeat, feel-good Islam.

For American Muslims beset by the tensions of the post-9/11 world, Khaled came to address a deep crisis of confidence. He tried to bridge the gap between conflicting allegiances, notably their U.S. citizenship and their fury at U.S. policy in [Iraq](#) and other Muslim countries.

"I feel what 9/11 has done to you. You are all crying aloud: 'This is not Islam. We reject this,'" he said at the appearance sponsored by the Council on American-Islamic Relations and the [Islamic Society of North America](#). "At the same time, we don't agree with what is happening in Iraq. We feel confusion, pain. . . .

"You came to this country to provide for your families. Do we isolate ourselves from society? Or do we completely assimilate and forget our faith and our background? Do we hate the society we live in?" he asked. "No! The prophet Muhammad taught us kindness, justice, mercy, coexistence with others, that God created us different so that we can get to know one another."

In sermons, speeches and appearances throughout his first trip to the United States, in May -- he said he hopes to return often -- Khaled spoke consistently of compromise and coexistence. "My message is: Please be rightful representatives for your religion," he said in an interview. "Please show people here your good manners, your attitude of hard work, how you can succeed in this society, what you can add, your positive integration while maintaining pride in Islam -- so people know how really great this religion is."

The message resonates. Over the past decade, Khaled has emerged as the top-ranked televangelist in the Arab world, a New Age Islamic guru likened to tele-megastars Joel Osteen and [Dr. Phil](#). His appearances are uploaded on [YouTube](#). His [Web site](#)-- in 18 languages, including Danish, Turkish, Hebrew, English and Russian -- gets tens of millions of hits. This year, he ranked 62nd on [Time magazine's](#) list of the world's 100 most influential people.

In programs broadcast worldwide on four satellite stations, Khaled has also revolutionized the way Islam is ministered and the focus of the faith's message. He tells folksy tales of the prophet adapted to modern life. In slangy Arabic, he preaches hard work, good works and good manners. Wearing a mustache but no beard, sometimes dressed in jeans instead of the trademark robe of Islam's clerics, he reaches out to the young and encourages women.

"His spirituality is very raw. It's fresh. You don't feel like it's artificial or old. When he prays, he gets emotional and his voice changes. Sometimes he cries," said Hadia Mubarak, who grew up in [Panama City, Fla.](#), and is a former president of the national Muslim Students' Association in the United States. She has watched Khaled on Arab-language programs beamed by Arabsat satellite.

"My mother also watches him all the time. He's her favorite speaker. He even attracts females who wear jeans, tank tops, don't cover their hair -- and don't normally go to mosque. The content of his talks is geared to day-to-day practical advice. He always ends with what are you going to do as audience members? He'll say go to your closet and see what clothes and things you haven't used and send them to this address, or create a food bank in your community," she said. "Joel Osteen, the Christian televangelist, talks about eating well based on the Bible and staying in shape. Khaled reminds me of him."

Khaled, a tall man with piercing eyes and an impish laugh, usually begins his lectures slowly and softly, the cadence and emphasis steadily building. As he gets worked up, he gets more animated, pinching his fingers together or spreading his arms. At his [Crystal City](#) lecture in May, he urged American Muslims to be proactive. "So I implore you, be active in society, don't isolate yourselves. . . .

"I want you to imagine having lived in the U.S. for 30 years, and you died and four of your friends follow the funeral procession, talking about you. One of them says, 'He did absolutely nothing,'" he said, his eyes sweeping the room. "Alternatively, imagine this: Your non-Muslim neighbors are following the procession and they say, 'America has lost a great person today.'"

In his 50-episode "Life-Makers" series of television lectures, Khaled presses for proactive good deeds and self-help in the Arab world as well, from teaching the illiterate to fixing potholes. In a YouTube short, he advocates hard work at school, in exercise and with charity.

He has been quick to publicly condemn terrorism, including the 2001 attacks on the [World Trade Center](#) and [the Pentagon](#), and the 2005 bombings of the [London Underground](#).

If his message about practical daily matters is unconventional, his path to the Muslim ministry borders on the bizarre. Khaled was working with Pepsi and [Colgate](#) at the biggest accounting agency in [Egypt](#) in 1997 when a friend asked him to substitute for a local preacher who couldn't make an engagement at the Egyptian Shooting Club. It was a life-changing request. His comfortable folksiness led to invitations at other clubs, then theaters and, finally, for his own television show. Now he is an enterprise as well as a ministry.

Khaled, who turned 40 last week, is married with two young boys. He is widely criticized by clerics for having no serious religious training and speaking in simplistic terms. He is working on a doctorate in Islamic studies at the University of Wales, which has only fueled criticism about his Westernized Islam. Yet Khaled's following challenges both political and religious leaders in the [Middle East](#) worried about both the emergence of politicized Islam and a younger generation of leaders offering alternative worldviews.

Egypt became so nervous about his growing flock that his appearances were monitored by government security officials. As even secular parts of Egyptian society began showing up to hear him, he came under pressure not to speak in public at all. Khaled fled first to [Lebanon](#), then to [London](#). Even then, his appeal did not diminish.

"His popularity in the Arab world is unrivaled," wrote Akbar Ahmed, chairman of Islamic Studies at [American University](#), in his recent book "Journey Into Islam," based on polls he took in the Islamic world. "He is able to instill pride and happiness in people for being Muslim and has helped strengthen faith in Islam at a time when it is thought to be under assault by Westernization, secularism and nationalism."

Khaled's fame spread to the West after the controversial 2005 publication of 12 Danish cartoons lampooning the prophet Muhammad, which sparked protests in [Europe](#) and [Asia](#) and more than 100 deaths. Khaled organized a conference on coexistence in [Denmark](#) four months later, a move widely condemned by leading clerics.

"I took about 40 people and I said, 'We came to talk. We feel bad that you didn't respect our prophet. We didn't come to say we are against you. We came for dialogue,'" Khaled said in a lecture at [Georgetown University](#).

Youssef al-Qaradawi, a fiery octogenarian cleric trained at Egypt's famed al-Azhar seminary, is Khaled's main rival among televangelists. Unlike Khaled, Qaradawi has enormous standing among Muslim clerics. On al-Jazeera, where he is broadcast, Qaradawi rebuked the younger Egyptian for the Denmark conference. "You have to have common ground to have dialogue with your enemy," Qaradawi said. "But after insulting what is sacred to me, they should apologize."

Secular critics say Khaled, the son of a doctor, is fostering a religious revival rather than modern reform. Wael Abbas, a leading Egyptian blogger, said Khaled is the "first step to Islamization. He's charismatic and the girls like him. But Egypt is becoming more conservative as a result of him. More girls have started to wear veils."

True, say others, but at least the scarves are pink instead of black, and the girls are wearing them on college campuses where they are training to be engineers and writers and teachers. After Khaled's speech in [Virginia](#), an Islamic hip-hop band performed.

"The fact that he has no training has actually given him additional legitimacy, as people are tired of the traditional clergy who have not kept up with the current dilemmas facing the young and who present Islam in ways that are archaic and boring," said Radwan Masmoudi, head of the Center for the Study of Islam and Democracy in Washington.

The question now is whether Khaled represents a fad or an enduring trend. Khaled is most popular among the middle and upper classes. Egypt's Al-Ahram newspaper described him as a "Pied Piper" leading Arab youth "to an unknown destination -- much to the discontent of the town elders."

At the end of his Crystal City speech, Khaled was mobbed by both young and old. The scramble to hear or be near him dragged on until almost midnight. A burly bodyguard finally extricated him and Khaled left to even louder applause.

#### Post a Comment

[View all comments](#) that have been posted about this article.

Ad

Join the discussion. Sponsored by Cisco.  welcome to the human network.  CISCO

You must be logged in to leave a comment. [Log in](#) | [Register](#)

Submit

; or material will be removed from the site. Additionally, entries that are unsigned or contain "signatures" by someone other than the actual author will be removed. Finally, we will take steps to block users who violate any of our posting standards, terms of use or privacy policies or any other policies governing this site. Please review the [full rules](#) governing commentaries and discussions. You are fully responsible for the content that you post.

© 2007 The Washington Post Company

**Ads by Google**

**[Muslim Marriage](#)**

Thousands of Muslims Listed Here. Browse Muslim Photos & Profiles.

[www.Mate1.com](http://www.Mate1.com)

**[How to Convert to Islam](#)**

How to convert and become a Muslim with Live Help by chat

[www.IslamReligion.com](http://www.IslamReligion.com)

**[Islamic Prayers Ringtone](#)**

Send this ringtone to your phone right now!

[RingRingMobile.com](http://RingRingMobile.com)