



Magazine

ODE TO MAKING A DIFFERENCE

Comedy act brings better understanding to the Muslim world

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Marco Visscher | August 2009 issue



Azhar Usman says his stand-up routine can help make Muslims better understood.

Photograph: Wanakhavi Wakhisi

A Muslim, a Hindu and a Christian stand together on a stage... it sounds like the opening line of a joke, but it's not. The three comics are on the program of a traveling show—"Make Chai, Not War"—that offers an evening of multicultural stand-up comedy. "We want to show the world we can get along just fine," says Azhar Usman, a comedian who happens to be Muslim, and a little self-deprecating humor helps emphasize the point. Usman tells the story of a friend who said he wasn't interested in organized religion: "So I said, great, become a Muslim; we're the most disorganized people on Earth."

The collaboration with Rajiv Satyal, an Indian Hindu, and Paul Varghese, a Christian, isn't the only curious alliance Usman has forged. He also tours with Rabbi

Bob Alper (in a show called "Laugh in Peace") and two other Muslim comics, Preacher Moss and Mohammed Amer ("**Allah Made me Funny**"). Why the religious crossovers? "Stand-up comedy is personal, and one of the things I care most about is the need for better understanding of Muslims," Usman says. "With these guys I share a passion for humor and waging peace."

Born and raised in Chicago, Usman was a lawyer and owner of a small Internet company when he first tried to make an audience laugh in 2001. He always thought an Arab or Islamic comedian could break down social barriers for Muslims in the same way Bill Cosby and Richard Pryor did for African-Americans. So he decided to write his own jokes. "A black man says he can never get a fair trial in

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America, but Arabs and Muslims say they can't even get a trial." He's been funny full-time since 2004.

Usman believes it's time for Muslims to become visible. "Because Muslims are now being talked about by pundits and commentators we need to hear from them directly," he says. "I think there's a role for Muslim artists, writers, musicians and comedians to tell our own stories." Still, Usman feels that it's all about making people laugh. "If I've done this," he says, "I've done my job."

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