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Dialogue on Islamic Faith in the Jesuit Environment

Seid M. Zekavat

A Muslim faculty member reflects on Islam and his own positive experience as a faculty member at a Jesuit university.

In all my years of experience, both as a student and as a faculty member, I have seldom met a non-Muslim who had even a basic knowledge of Islam. There were some exceptions but, considering the vast number of people I have met over the years, they were very few. It was only after the Islamic Revolution that intellectuals began, with some reservations, to recognize Islam as a major religion and started to familiarize themselves with it. Unfortunately, the impression of Islam conveyed by the educated few did not reflect the true nature of the religion, and the events attributed to different Muslim extremists caused them to perceive Islam as a harsh, aggressive faith, conducive to terrorism. The Islamic Revolution in Iran, the ensuing persecutions of hundreds of thousands of its citizens, and the terrorist acts carried out by various groups of Muslim fanatics -- often supported by the ruling Islamic governments -- have cemented this bad image in the non-Muslim's mind. The tragedy of September 11, 2001 further damaged the image of Islam.

This undesirable image has adversely affected both Muslim faculty and Muslim students in Christian learning institutions, causing them to become self-conscious and withdrawn in the company of their peers. They often observe their religious duties in seclusion, and tend to hide their religious identities. Another drawback has been the tendency of educated people to define their opinions of Islam by the cultural aspects of the faith, instead of making an in-depth exploration of the true Islam. The self-satisfying Christian and Jewish belief that "ours are the true faiths and others are simply man-made religions" adds another unfavorable element that promotes isolation. What the holders of this view can offer is a

sympathetic attitude toward Muslims as followers of an ambitious founder.

One major reason for misunderstanding Islam has been the reluctance of learning institutions to look for common ground between Islam and Christianity, and to recognize Islam's compatibility with the fundamental beliefs of other religions. Most Christians would be surprised to learn, for example, that in the Quran there are twenty verses -- each a paragraph long -- that speak of Mary, the immaculate conception, the birth of Jesus, and his life and miracles. Below is a passage from the Quran regarding the immaculate conception:

Then we (God) sent to her our Angel and he appeared before her as a man in all aspects. Mary said to him: I seek refuge from thee to God most gracious. The Angel said nay! I am here only to deliver from thy Lord to thee the gift of a Holy son. Mary said how shall I have a son when no man has touched me and I am not unchaste. The Angel said it shall be as it is thy Lord's will. Thy Lord saith it is easy for me and we shall appoint thy son as a sign unto man and a mercy from us. Glory be to Him. When thy Lord determines a matter He only says to it "Be" and it is done. This is a matter so decreed. Quran: 19:19, 19:20 and 19:22.

There are numerous verses in the Quran about Moses and all the other prophets before him. Elaborate accounts are given of Abraham as God's true friend and Moses as the carrier of God's message. The stories of

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Jacob and Joseph, and detailed events in the life of Moses -- from his birth to his death in the desert as he led the Israelites to the Promised Land -- are elegantly chronicled in the Quran as lessons to be learned by all human beings.

Knowledge of other religions and dialogue among the members of different faiths can only enrich minds and enhance relationships. But the most valuable dividends of establishing a dialogue among people of different traditions are mutual understanding and peaceful coexistence that someday, hopefully, will become contagious throughout the human race.

My experience at Loyola Marymount University, however, has always been inspirational. Because of my view of Christianity, I never felt inhibited in initiating a sincere relationship with my fellow Catholic faculty and Jesuits. I have always wholeheartedly admired the Jesuits for their open-mindedness and humble personalities. I will never forget Fr. Casassa's gracious acceptance of my invitation to him and other Jesuit officials to my humble home some years ago. I could

not yet afford to furnish my living room, but Fr. Casassa (the President of the University) and his Jesuit companions took off their jackets and collars, and sat on the floor. We ate dinner, laughed, and conversed like a group of close friends.

I am a sincere admirer of our Chancellor and past President of IMU, Fr. Donald Merrifield, S.J., who pioneered the founding of the Interfaith Group on campus. As a member of this diverse group, I truly enjoy my colleagues' views and dialogue. While we are very much aware of the institutional commitment of our school to Roman Catholicism, we converse freely about other faiths and traditions. I can attest to the fact that the emergence of the LMU Interfaith Group has contributed to our understanding and tolerance of each other's faiths. We learn and we respect one another's faiths to the extent that we consider involving others in the interfaith mission, with the hope that such tolerance and respect will spread beyond the boundaries of the group.

IMU currently is fortunate to be under the



Institute of Catholic Studies Conference

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leadership of President Robert Lawton, S.J., who recognizes that intellectual diversity and intercultural dialogue can only expand our minds and promote the level of our understanding.

There are interesting questions for the Interfaith Group to explore. Do LMU's mission, goals and objectives in any way conflict with our diverse faiths? Could "the encouragement of learning, the education of the whole person, the service of faith and promotion of justice" be contradictory to our beliefs? For me, they are not. As I see it, to teach and to improve the relationship of a person to God, to others and to him or herself, is the natural result of any true religion that inspires God's purpose through His commandments. I see LMU's commitment to social justice and service as the real essence of education. Its emphasis on diversity by accepting faculty and students of all faiths is admirable and praiseworthy. Diversity widens one's views and expands one's understanding of other cultures and traditions, which is essential for a complete education.

As a faculty member of a different nationality and of the Islamic faith, I have been given ample support and opportunity by this Jesuit institution to excel in both my teaching and my scholarship. I have been treated with respect and embraced by this institution as an intrinsic member of the LMU community. I have learned the Jesuit ideology by observing their inspiring deeds, warm friendship, selfless devotion and dedication to education and character-building. And if all this has had a positive influence on me to become a complete person, it has also inspired my classroom teaching and my students.

When he reached ninety years of age, George Burns was asked: "What is the secret of your longevity?"

"I do the kind of work I like the most and work with people I love the most," he replied.

I shall always cherish my experience at this Jesuit institution, where mutual respect and understanding are the norm.