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Muslim in the Jesuit World

Mercy meets Love

By Omer M. Mozaffar

take care of each other by becoming active bystanders in situations that could lead to sexual assault.

The Canisius Step Up! Griffs Bystander Intervention Program encourages students to assume personal responsibility when situations could potentially evolve into a sexual assault.

Beginning in spring 2016, peer educators were trained to facilitate classroom discussion focusing on relationship violence. The film "Escalation" has been shown in classrooms with a peer-led discussion following the film. Canisius recognizes Sexual Violence Awareness Month in April each year when sexual violence prevention education is prominent throughout campus.

Over the last two years initiatives have included a colorful Consent Awareness poster campaign, student signing of a Know the Line pledge, showing the film "It Happened Here," tabling events and classroom discussions. Collaboration with the Undergraduate Student Association has been key to the success of Sexual Violence Awareness Month initiatives.

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The most common complaint that Muslim students express in my office is anxiety. Some anxiety springs from lacking resilience. Much comes from being Muslims in an America that both stretches and constricts them.

The Muslim experience in the Jesuit academy is distinct from that experience at other institutions: support for Muslims came as a recognition of Islam, theological differences notwithstanding. In the other schools, sympathetic administrators or faculty pushed for Muslim inclusion as a campus benefit. Or, Muslim activity was categorized either as an expression of culture, or something under the generic category of "spiritual life," where religious expressions were interchangeable.

The decades-long evolution toward including Muslims in the campus tapestry began in the 1950s,

with Muslim student organizations. In the past two decades, schools provided Muslims with prayer spaces, sometimes shared with others. Now, schools hire Muslim chaplains. The next phase is the development of centers for Muslim life, as well as articulations of non-Sunni approaches to Islam.

The assumption in the above is that Islam on campus is an experience of developing faith, an exploration of identity, an articulation of culture, but not a political movement. In contrast, in our contemporary American society, we witness the reverse: despite centuries of presence in the Americas, Islam gets framed as a triumphalist political system, an archaic culture failing to modernize, a foreign identity seeking acceptance; and if it is a faith, then it is one enforcing conformity and subjugation. A Muslim seeking to articulate faith through political work receives pushback in both environments, in one, risking losing "faith" status, and, in the other, risking criticism as a participant in sedition. These Muslims are still the minority on campus and in society.

The common undergraduate Muslim students, however, live with various levels of faith somewhere within this tension of an academy that may provide welcome, in a nation of too many political aspirants who threaten their well-being. Because the Ignatian method regards faith as not only real but primary, the Jesuit campus becomes a conversation space for a Muslim's growth.

Just as the Muslim students engage in their own colloquy, seeking the *Ayat* (signs) of God, in the model of the Prophet Muhammad – as the Qur'an calls upon them to do – within themselves, within the world around them, and in the heavens, so too the Jesuit seeks God in all things, reflecting upon the Incarnation. Thus we have space for two necessary engagements. In the first engagement, we might build upon the Qur'anic call for Muslims to engage with People of the Book (further elucidated in the "A Common Word" movement) and the invitations that branch from *Nostra aetate*, the Vatican II document on interfaith relations, developing a mutual respect through commonalities, after many instances of mutual hostility.

My request, however, is to take this conversation a step further: toward mutual healing. As the Muslim seeks the manifestations of God's *Rahma* (intimate mercy) and as the Jesuits seek Divine Love, the two are seeking a detachment from the allures of the world into the realms of true reality,

against a world's chaos that obscures vision. This second conversation can provide the solace and stability that faith should do for a believer's heart, before faith might enter the believer's heart. This means that if the Jesuit university is the space, then the participant is the vessel through which the Divine mercy or love visits the Other.

I write this article during the Pope's Year of Mercy. Further, tonight is the night between the annual pilgrimage (the Hajj) and annual Festival of the Sacrifice (Eid al-Adha). The first commemorates the footsteps of the Prophet Muhammad, who was himself commemorating the footsteps of the Prophet Abraham. The second commemorates the moment that the Divine tested Abraham's love in calling on him to sacrifice his son, may peace be upon them all. Further, it was in the Divine will that this year the Hajj lands on the fifteenth anniversary of September 11, 2001. While Muslim Americans were mourning the atrocities of that day, as well as the subsequent atrocities in response to that day, those experiencing pilgrimage vicariously in our homes were fasting. The process of embodying all these moments might provide multiple pathways to the Divine or, for the undergraduate, clashing sources of confusion. We can heal as pilgrims, together, *Insha Allah*.

Omer M. Mozaffar is the Muslim Chaplain and a lecturer in theology at Loyola University Chicago.

Happier times. Students from Fairfield University enjoy lunch together. Previous page, graduates from Marquette University.

