



Islamic America

A study conducted by the Pew Research Center in 2010 reports that there are over 2,500,000 Muslims living in America.

After the events of September 11, 2001, this population came more into the public eye than ever before. As a native American, I have noticed a certain stigma attached to the faith by several of my peers. Being shoved into the spotlight by a small group of believers has forced the Muslim culture to adapt in a country that associates the whole with the part. In this tense and almost fearful environment, one wonders if Muslims in America truly feel that they enjoy our nation's promised freedom of religion. I visited the Darul Arqum Islamic Center in Ames and spoke to Sal Syed about the changes that the Muslim community has undergone in the past decade.

Syed moved to America from southern India in the mid-1990s. He explains the Muslim community in Ames as being "pretty much like the United Nations," being made up of people from places such as Africa, Malaysia, and Singapore as well as native Iowans.

When asked about any changes in the atmosphere surrounding Muslim culture since 9/11, Syed said that problems existed even before 2001. The mosque in Ames opened in December 2001, after a long struggle with the city, which was resistant to the opening of a Muslim center in town. Syed explains the reason for this struggle as humanity's fear of the unknown. Every country, he says, has its own problems to overcome when it comes to acceptance and tolerance of what is different or foreign. He draws the conversation around to America in particular, questioning the extent of our freedom of religion. "We think this an open society, but it is really a closed one... in America, we don't mean freedom of religion for all but freedom of religion within the Judeo-Christian society. Everything has a different definition in America." Is it truly a democracy, Syed posited, when our supposed freedoms are defined by our cultural standpoint? When every word is redefined in American terms?

The question of ignorance is one that rings loud in this discussion. Do we, as Americans, simply fear what we do not know, or are we afraid of what we think we understand? Syed brought up the example of Sharia, the

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moral code and religious law of Islam. Many Americans are up in arms about this code which they often view as incorrect, inhumane, and in opposition to what we see as "right." One example of this resistance is the infamous Terry Jones, who in a mock trial found the Quran (a major source from which Sharia law is derived) "guilty" of such crimes as murder, rape and terrorism. As Jones, a pastor by trade, is a radical example of the Christian faith, so the stereotyped "terrorist" Muslim is the most radical incarnation of its culture. Syed explained that there are multiple different aspects and interpretations of Sharia law, and that the interpretation Americans fear most is the most radical, marginal interpretation. He expressed his desire to explain to Americans that the truth about Muslim culture is not what many may think; regrettably, he said, when our nation looks for examples it often turns to the most outspoken and radical example for an answer. "We



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are supposed to tell them what we are like,” he said, “but we are not on the loudspeaker.” The martyred people, those in the middle who are caught in the conflict, become forgotten and marginalized while they are left to bear the brunt of our fear and opposition.

Because of this seeming aversion to accepting Muslim culture in America, the community has become fragmented and defensive, Syed said. He expressed worry about inequality that leads to the perpetuation of this fear culture: “Every mosque in the country has been tapped...what about the churches? If the government taps the [Christian] churches, they will suffer for it. But they can get away with doing it to the mosques because we are the minority.” He alluded to the hate crimes enacted against members

of the Muslim community since 9/11, and expressed a sense of sorrow at the state of American democracy. Democracy is indeed a majority rule, he said, and that rule unfortunately acts against the Muslim community; the majority is saying that exclusion and fear are legitimate policies, and so the disconnect continues between cultures. He said of the current atmosphere in the country, “If one person is hurt and we keep watching, it is not justice regardless of who it is. And that is what we have become; we have become a country of picking on minorities, and once that is done [against the Muslim community] we will move on to some other minority. It’s not going to stop somewhere, it’s going to continue.”

I asked Syed if, despite all of this worry and defense in the Muslim community, there was still hope that the state of the community will improve in the future. Yes, he said: “When people are pushed to their limits, they push back.” People, he said, will always come to seek the truth, to question the popular view and get to the root of any problem. What is great about America, Syed said, is that it is an experiment in progress. Unlike when slavery was the common policy in the country, Syed says, Muslims today at least have the freedom to practice, if not the acceptance that they deserve and long for. He remains optimistic, though: “Bad things happen in one night, good things take years,” he says. “A scholar said that America is an experiment in progress...in a few hundred years, things have changed for the better, and not just for Muslims. I think that is the good thing about America, that things are changing for the better. But it is a long fight.”

HATE CRIMES AGAINST MUSLIMS IN AMERICA POST-9/11

(from the US Department of Justice website)

United States officials have investigated over 800 incidents of violence, threats, vandalism or arson against Muslims and individuals of Middle Eastern origin since 9/11. These incidents include the following.

- 2/23/2011: a man set fire to a playground outside a mosque in Texas.
- 2006: a man blew up a van belonging to a Palestinian-American family’s home. The van was parked outside of the family’s home at the time.
- May 2010: a former TSA employee verbally assaulted an elderly Somali man because he believed the man to be a Muslim.
- In Tennessee, three men spraypainted swastikas and “white power” on a mosque and subsequently started a fire that destroyed the building completely. They were sentenced to jail time in 2009, with sentences ranging from 6 to 15 years in prison.
- 2006: a man sent threats via e-mail and voicemail to the Director of the Arab American Institute and members of the Institute’s staff.