

INTERFAITH INSIGHTS

# Living under the microscope as a religious minority

**Editor's note:** *Sarah Mageed, senior at Forest Hills Northern High School, member of the Student Interfaith Leadership Council and winner of a recent essay contest on her interfaith experiences.*

Recently in biology class, we spent a majority of our class period examining fruit flies.

We noted their wing type, eye color and feverishly noted their reactions to the little world to which we had imprisoned them.

Scrutinizing them at an extremely high magnification, every little move was carefully watched with multiple sets of tunnel-vision eyes. If the fly someone was looking at had different colored eyes, a flurry of assumptions were thrown out — Was it an environmental reaction? Did its parents have different colors? Were we watching an evolutionary phenomenon unfold in front of our very eyes?

Now, you are probably thinking, OK, that's great, but why

do I care?

Well, as I sat here, trying to reflect on my time in an interfaith dialogue setting, I realized I could empathize with the



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morose life we subject those flies to. Being a minority of any kind — race, religion, age, sex, anything — can make you feel like the

object of a spotlight that shines unwelcomely. It became evident at a very young age, that my individual actions would always be used as a representation of my religion. I must be incredibly aware of myself at all times.

If I slipped up even once, the assumptions people would jump to were bound to be harsher and more damaging than with my classmates and our fruit flies.

Any dark clouds in my life cast a shadow over my entire religion; any passed-up opportunity of a good deed was a

missed opportunity to maybe change someone's negative opinion of my religion.

My experiences with this Interfaith group have been nothing but pleasant. Walking into an environment full of open-minded, accepting people is like pulling the poor fruit flies from under the microscope.

I didn't realize how much of a physical weight I felt from peoples' eyes on me — whether they were actually there, or not — until I walked into a room replete with eyes that didn't search for judgment, but knowledge.

The Year of Interfaith Understanding was genius in its simplicity. It had one goal: get people of faiths together.

A majority of issues between religions are bred by ignorance and misunderstandings. All it takes is one person to take the initiative, to gather us in a room and let us discuss.

The first time we were thrown together was to attend a gala with Tony Blair. It immediately made us believe that what we were going to do as

a group was important. The group became a forum for discussing all our religions, from Islam to Christianity to Sikhism and even atheism.

We made a connection with a New Delhi school and had a conference call to discuss our different cultures and traditions.

For all intents and purposes they were just like us, except all the way across the world.

Being a part of a minority religion means sometimes forcing yourself to be outgoing, when all you want to is live your life in private.

I can't hide. My belief system has ensured that I will always be peppered with questions and must always be open to discussions. I can truly say that being a part of this group never made me feel like a fish out of water.

Although we were different, we all were similar in our desire to blur the lines that were our differences. I think it's a blurring of lines that should happen a bit more often in our black and white world.

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