

INTERFAITH INSIGHT

Listening to other voices: A Muslim perspective

Zahabia Ahmed-Usmani

Program coordinator, Kaufman Interfaith Institute

The Holy Quran says: "Oh mankind! We created you from male and female and made you into nations and tribes, that ye may know each other (not that ye may despise each other). Verily, the most honored of you in the sight of Allah is the most righteous of you. And Allah has full knowledge and is fully informed." (Chapter 49: verse 13)

At our annual Abrahamic dinner, we reflect on the lessons we can learn from Sarah and Hagar, the wives of Abraham in the Islamic tradition. We connect their story to God's intention to create a diversity of nations and tribes. In Islam, we believe that God promised Sarah and Prophet Abraham a child and, that after much praying, trying and waiting, Sarah gave Abraham permission to marry Hagar, an Egyptian pharaoh's daughter, who gave birth to a son, Prophet Ishmael. Through Hagar's devotion and obedience to Allah, a flourishing community was created. Among Prophet Ishmael's descendants would be Prophet Muhammad, the leader of my Muslim tribe.

Meanwhile, just as Allah had promised, Sarah gave birth to Isaac, whose descendants would be our cousins, the Jewish and Christian tribes. Sarah and Hagar's role in the creation of our Abrahamic faiths was fundamental. Had Allah willed it, we could have all descended from prophet Ishmael or from prophet Isaac. But that was not His will. God has put into motion the blueprint for the diversity we see in our world today. Furthermore, God has challenged us to "know each other."

Unfortunately, as we know, diversity does not mean inclusion, and some research even shows that without engagement, diversity can result in an isolation of thoughts and beliefs. The last thing we want is for our communities of worship to become echo chambers. Our work to "know each other" is accomplished through active engagement with the diversity around us.

RELATIONSHIPS GIVE DEPTH TO DIVERSITY

God has given us a number of gifts to do this righteous work. One of the gifts is the knowledge of the intention of diversity as the blueprint for all of time to come. But how do we work to "know each other" by embracing, accepting and loving one another? Thankfully, humans are social creatures. Forming interfaith friendships and engaging in interfaith dialogue is one way we descendants of Sarah and Hagar can get to know one another on that deeper level.

I am so thankful for the variety of friendships I have and the new ones I am constantly making through my interfaith work. A recent friend is a person named Wes, who is Baha'i. He told me how his mom had survived by picking cotton in the South, but finally went back to school to become a teacher. As a teacher, working full-time, she raised three children. Wes' reverence for his mother got me talking about my mother, who was an immigrant and also worked full-time while caring for my brother and me. Then he said, "Did you ever ask your mom, how did she do it?"

While growing up, I always appreciated my parents'



Zahabia Ahmed-Usmani is program coordinator for the Kaufman Interfaith Institute at Grand Valley State University.

hard work but took for granted how she must have felt — how many hardships and sacrifices she must have made. So, I breezily said, "Well I know how she did it." He challenged me again saying, "No, did you ever ask her, how did she do it?"

In that moment, I was moved to tears. Thinking of the reverence that I, as a Muslim, should have for my mother, I realized now that I am a mother, how she was modeling for me how to balance religious duties with the responsibilities you have to your family. This casual friend deeply wanted to help me, and I was completely taken aback. I immediately realized my selfishness and arrogance, and I quickly asked God for forgiveness. I also said a heartfelt prayer for my mother. Time after time, my interfaith friendships have taught me how to be a better Muslim.

POINTS OF INTERSECTION

In my role at the Kaufman Institute, I have the privilege of interacting with and building relationships with people of all faith or belief traditions and believe it is sacred work. The Abrahamic faiths hold a special place in Islam. The Quran often refers to "the People of the Book" and says: "And argue ye not with the People of the Book, except with means better than mere argument, apart from those among them who inflict wrong and injury upon you. Tell them that we believe in the Revelation which has come down to us and in that which came down to you: Our God and your God is One and it is to Him we submit." (Quran 29:46)

Another gift the Abrahamic faiths have been given are unique points of intersection that each tradition shares with the others. For Muslims and Christians, we share our love for Jesus. For Muslims and Jews, we share our understanding of strict monotheism. Jews and Christians share the Hebrew Scriptures. While there are fundamental differences in our traditions, our places of intersection have provided those touch points we can use to "know each other."

As each of us works toward building interfaith bridges, I am reminded that each time Muslims pray, in addition to bringing peace and blessings upon the prophet Muhammad and his family, we also ask God to bring peace and blessings upon the family of Abraham. As a community, we are actively praying for our Jewish and Christian cousins during each prayer. And while appreciating the intentions of our prayers is important, it is more important that our actions follow suit.

As we know, the most loved by Allah are those who actively work to bring into realization that which has been prescribed. Let us join together to actively honor the notion of bringing peace upon prophet Abraham, as we do in our prayers, by "knowing" our friends of other nations and tribes.

interfaith@gvsu.edu