

INTERFAITH INSIGHT

Listening to new voices: Calvin College Muslim student speaks

Tuba Jaherun Student at Calvin College

Editor's note: The third in a series of insights from area college students based on talks they gave at this year's Abrahamic Dinner. Tuba Jaherun is a sophomore at Calvin. By blood and by heart, she is a pure Bengali, born and raised in Bangladesh. She grew up in a Muslim family and was raised to follow and respect Muslim values. From when she first started school, math and science have always been her interests, and she since has aspired to be a scientist. She is pursuing a bachelor's degree in chemistry at Calvin, with hopes to go to graduate school or pharmacy school.



Calvin College student Tuba Jaherun is a guest columnist for Interfaith Insight.

Like the majority of the population in Bangladesh, I was brought up Muslim. But while growing up, I never realized how different my religion and culture were from the rest of the world. I was just an average girl from an average family. Same rules applied to me as anyone else. I was always excited about Ramadan, waking up before dawn in hopes that I would get to fast that day. My mom would tell me, children have to eat to fast in Ramadan, and I believed her. Being the youngest and smallest child, my parents would say anything to get me to eat.

My parents were my greatest role models as Muslims. Although I have read the Quran, it was in Arabic, which I don't speak, and so my parents taught me everything I know about Islam.

My father is a regular, old-fashioned dad, always absent-minded, but giving me random reactions as if he knows exactly what I am talking about. He will crack the worst jokes and laugh in serious situations, making my mom furious sometimes. He always has advice or opinions, even if he knows nothing of the situation.

My father is the most honest man I know, and this is because of his faith. He says, "God will provide for me and my family." Even on a small scale, he retains his integrity. For instance, he made me return stationery that his assistant gave me, because he did not want us to use it for personal things, and then bought me my own the next day.

My father retired as a colonel, but at home my mother is still the general. All she cares about is her family. She finished her education when my older siblings were very young. When I was 1, our family was posted in a place with no proper school for my siblings, so she founded her own school, which still exists today, years after we moved away. She has always been my support and my moral guide. She would still do anything for my success, and she wouldn't give up on me even when I gave up on myself. Both my parents would stay awake with me during exams, praying for me more than I would for myself.

By now, you must be wondering what all of this has to do with my faith. My parents are the kind of Muslims I watched, and the kind I wanted to become.

I saw the world through their eyes, that

being Muslim was about being a human, who has emotions, remorse and empathy. A big word in Islam is Gunah, or sin. My parents taught me that it was Gunah to take what isn't yours, to hurt someone's feelings or to break any rules that were made for the betterment of others. It was Gunah to disrespect someone else's culture, religion and point of view. Especially as a Muslim girl, they taught me the importance of modesty without expecting me to wear a burka or hijab, because, at the end, my mom always said, it is my personal choice on how I choose to maintain my relationship with God. Of course, I still ask for my mom's opinion when I dress up, like we all probably do, and she will still remind me to do my daily prayers.

My point is that faith is about doctrine and theology, of course. But at the end of the day the whole reason to believe in what may be bigger than just us, is to be accountable and responsible for our own choices. It is to make us better people, even if it is for the love or fear of God. I try my best to practice my faith with the time I have, but I know being human also means I have my flaws and limitations.

At 15, when I came to the U.S. as an exchange student, I was exposed to so many different views. I was forced to open my mind and try to understand objectively the new perspectives that I encountered. I got to know some very exclusive views from people of other cultures, and I had some unpleasant experiences with people of different faith traditions. At first, I had the impression that everyone of a certain faith, Christianity for example, was trying to convert me or tell me that I am wrong.

It wasn't until my first interfaith experience that my view started to become more flexible. I was lucky enough to be part of a conference called "Better Understanding for a Better World" in San Diego, organized by Imam Mohamad Bashar Arafat. I really wasn't excited about attending. However, I was not only able to make friends of all different backgrounds, but it dynamically changed my way of thinking. We were able to visit a local church, synagogue and mosque, and talked to their leaders. All three of them were friends with Imam Bashar, and so we were welcomed with the greatest hospitality.

At the end of the day, I found myself uncomfortable with a few things the leader of the mosque had to say. He wasn't offensive, he said some nice things for sure, but there were certain things he said that made me realize not everyone thinks like my par-



Two women listen during a service March 15 at the Islamic Center of Saginaw. MLive.com files

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ents. That is when I recalled something my math teacher in second grade had told me: "Always put yourself in other people's shoes." Only because my interactions with Christians and other traditions were so limited, I generalized their opinion about me. If this mosque leader was my only example as a Muslim, I would have had a different idea of what Islam means. I think this applies to everyone. This is why we want to get to know people who are different.

My best friend on that trip, Ci, was an atheist. We argued about God the whole time. I still remember her saying, "What if science proves that there is no God?" I don't quite remember how I replied. But I do remember that she would always save me a seat on the bus, go on rides with me at Sea World and share her peach ice-tea when I was parched and tired. We had only known each other for a few days, but it felt like it was a lifelong friendship. Because we were so different we always had something to talk about. Her ideas made me think about my own, and I really started thinking about why I believe what I believe. Though she wasn't trying to convert me, my faith did become stronger because she challenged my thought and I was still able to affirm my beliefs.

Four years later, when I was accepted

to Calvin College, I was still very nervous about being in a Christian college. At Calvin, where I am surrounded by Christian students, I have begun to notice the diversity within Christianity. Ironically, while being in a Christian environment, I was able to think about my own Muslim faith. Calvin teaches us to think deeply about all perspectives, such as evolution and predestination. I was able to make my own very different faith stronger just by being in a religious environment.

I learned so much about Islam in a course, "Developing a Christian Mind." Until I took the class, it frightened me. I didn't want to "develop a Christian mind." But at the end, I came out with not only a better understanding of Christianity but also a better understanding of Islam. I learned that if your faith is strong, you shouldn't be afraid to learn about other faiths. Rather, we should all make a conscious effort to understand each other so we can accommodate everyone and cater to their needs. We should learn to make friends, because we should not only love our enemies but also love our friends.

Now when I make friends, I look to see not just their background, culture, religion, gender or otherwise, but who they are as people.

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