



# Case Studies for Exploring Interfaith Cooperation: Classroom Tools

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## Introduction and purpose

Even as public discourse about religious belonging, identity, and diversity in the United States remains divisive, such tensions can seem remote in a classroom full of relatively tolerant American college students, many of whom are often uncomfortable talking about religion. This is largely due to the fact that students have not had the opportunity to talk about religion or religious ideas outside the private sphere, if at all. For faculty interested in teaching courses that touch on topics such as religious diversity, pluralism, or interfaith relations, it can be challenging to help students see how public discourse around religious issues relates to them and to provide meaningful learning opportunities in which they can imagine themselves as participants in this discourse.

Case studies offer one interactive pedagogical method for engaging students around the real-life challenges of religious diversity. Using case studies to explore interreligious tensions or cooperation provides an opportunity for students to identify the complex ways that religious diversity plays out in a given situation, analyze the responses of various actors in such situations, and demonstrate application of theories they have been learning about to concrete situations. As such, students' responses to the case studies can serve as a formative assessment tool to measure student learning.

This toolkit provides several case studies and a guide for use in the classroom. Inspired by the case studies developed by Harvard University's Pluralism Project ([www.pluralism.org/casestudy](http://www.pluralism.org/casestudy)), these cases aim to put students at the center of decision making and problem solving, asking them to consider their own agency in contributing to religious pluralism. Researched and written by Karla Suomala, Associate Professor of Religion at Luther College, and developed in partnership with Interfaith Youth Core, these cases are a complimentary pedagogical tool to use alongside lectures or presentations. These cases will fit quite naturally in courses touching on religion in America, interfaith topics, religious diversity, or introductory religion courses, but will also be useful in courses beyond religious studies that include a unit or focus on religious diversity or pluralism.

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## How to use the cases in the classroom

Each case study has two parts: 1 and 2. Have students read Part 1 prior to class. In class, as a large group, or in small groups of 4-6 students, consider the following questions:

- What is the issue or problem in this case?
- Who are the stakeholders in the case? In other words, who has an investment or interest in the outcome?
- What is the context of the problem?
- What is the setting, situation, etc.?
- Is there an individual or group in the case with whom you strongly identify? Why or why not?
- Whose stance or position do you find most difficult to identify with or understand? Why? How widespread do you think these views or positions are on campus? In society more broadly?
- What opinions or alternatives are available to the decision-makers in this case in working toward a solution?
- What solution would you recommend and why? Is your solution "workable" within the context of this case?



- Can you imagine something like this happening on campus? Would the outcome be similar or different? Why?
- What information is missing? What information would you like to have?

If students worked in small groups, consider bringing them back to a large group to share highlights from their conversations before transitioning to the next section of the case study. Then, pass out Part 2 of the case, which contains the resolution of the situation. These are much shorter and the students can read through them quickly in class. After students finish reading, ask them to consider the following questions:

- What do you think about what actually happened? Are you satisfied with the outcome? Why or why not?
- How close is the actual solution to the solution you recommended?
- Did the solution bring to light factors you did not consider?
- What might be the impact or consequences of the solution?

## The cases

### Chalking Muhammad, part 1

One May evening, just before the academic year came to a close at Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois, students from Secular Humanists for Inquiry and Free Thought (SHIFT) chalked stick figures representing the Prophet Muhammad on sidewalks around campus. According to SHIFT President Cassy Byrne, the group sketched the figures to “make a statement that we support the freedom of expression, specifically that we stand behind South Park.”<sup>1</sup> Most students learned about the chalk figures on the pages of The Daily Northwestern the following morning. Members of the Muslim-cultural Students Association (McSA), responded immediately in a letter to the student newspaper, indicating that while they fully supported free speech, “it was very disappointing to us when that right was invoked in such a way that is hurtful to Muslims.”<sup>2</sup>

They pointed out that while “the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) is very dear to Muslims and respecting his memory is something we firmly believe in ... Muslims obviously don’t expect others to revere him like we do.” That being said, McSA said that they “expect respect and consideration for the beliefs of any faith or religion on campus.” The problem, as they outlined it, was not so much the drawing of the Prophet since these types of depictions have been fairly common in the art of many Muslim cultures. “The problem occurs when he is depicted in a disrespectful or offensive manner.”<sup>3</sup>

#### Muhammad's Cameo on "South Park"

What happened at Northwestern, as well as on many other college and university campuses around the country, was directly connected to the April 2010 Comedy Central broadcast of the 200<sup>th</sup> episode of “South Park.” To celebrate this milestone, producers Trey Parker and Matt Stone filled the episode with nearly all of the famous people they have made fun of in the show’s history, including celebrities and religious figures. In addition to Barbra Streisand, Tom Cruise, Buddha, Moses and Jesus, Parker and Stone also wanted to include Muhammad, Islam’s most significant prophet. Since actual depictions of Muhammad are generally forbidden within Islam and have created significant controversy in the last few years, they opted to disguise the prophet in a bear costume.<sup>4</sup>

Parker and Stone, thinking that they had figured out a way to get around the thorny issue of depicting Muhammad, were surprised when the day after the episode aired, a threatening post appeared on the web

site of the group, Revolution Muslim. Referring specifically to both Parker and Stone, the post said that the program had insulted the prophet, and stated: "We have to warn Matt and Trey that what they are doing is stupid, and they will probably wind up like Theo van Gogh for airing this show. This is not a threat, but a warning of the reality of what will likely happen to them."<sup>5</sup> Van Gogh was a Dutch filmmaker who was killed by an Islamic militant after he made a film that looked at abuses of women in some Islamic societies.

### **Everybody Draw Muhammad**

Parker and Stone responded by exercising "a degree of self-censorship" in the next week's program, Episode 201, which continued the previous week's story line about the Prophet Muhammad. This time, however, the "character was hidden underneath a 'CENSORED' graphic, and an audio bleep was heard when his name was said."<sup>6</sup> After they delivered the completed show, noted Parker and Stone, Comedy Central made further changes and indicated that it would not allow the episode to be streamed on the Web site where shows normally appear after they are broadcast.

The press quickly picked up the story and widely reported Comedy Central's decision to make changes to the program. Many of the show's fans weighed in, expressing their frustration at what they perceived as Comedy's Central's capitulation to extremists rather than exercising their right to free speech. Molly Norris, a Seattle-based cartoonist, responded by creating a cartoon that made fun of the censorship by declaring May 20, 2010, "Everybody Draw Mohammad Day." Although Norris later stated that she had not meant for anyone to take the piece literally, within days of the cartoon's publication an "Everybody Draw Mohammad Day" Facebook group was created. The Facebook initiative swelled to 100,000 participants, and generated off-shoots including a counter-protest called, "Against 'Everybody Draw Muhammad Day.'" It wasn't long before the incident was making headlines in the United States and around the world. As the cartoon and the Facebook page generated international protests, Pakistan temporarily banned Facebook for its citizens.

### **Chalking Muhammad at UW-Madison**

Incidents similar to those at NU were reported at other colleges around the United States. Atheists, Humanists, & Agnostics (AHA), for example, a student organization at the University of Wisconsin at Madison (UW-M), also engaged in a "Draw Muhammad" project on their campus. One day in advance of the event, however, they sent a letter to the Muslim Student Association (MSA) on their campus warning them that they would be chalking stick figures of the Prophet Muhammad around campus, protesting what they viewed as extremist responses on the part of some Muslims over the South Park episode.<sup>7</sup> In the letter to the MSA, the Atheists, Humanists, & Agnostics president Christ Calvey, wrote:

"We are aware that depicting images of Muhammad is a controversial issue that is highly offensive to many Muslims around the world. We acknowledge that you may view this as an unproductive, misguided, or hurtful event. We are very sensitive to these facts, and want to ensure that this event is done in a way that does not lead to Muslims feeling uncomfortable on campus."<sup>8</sup>

The letter then went on to describe how the group intended to proceed and provided a rationale for their actions, which included their right to free speech. The MSA quickly responded, indicating they would not accept the advance apology of the AHA.

"To slap someone in the face," wrote Ahmed Fikri, MSA Vice President, "despite warning the person in advance and assuring them of your good intentions does not make slapping someone in the face ok. ... Why do you not direct your protest to the groups in question instead of engaging in acts that you yourself acknowledge will offend the vast majority of Muslims, on this campus and off?"



Fikri then pointed out that he considered AHA's intended actions a violation of the University of Wisconsin's policies on racism and other discriminatory conduct. "I politely suggest that you cancel this event and prefer instead that we meet and discuss the issue respectfully before resorting to what we feel to be rather drastic measures," concluded Fikri. The chalking went ahead as planned, and there were reports that some students followed members of the AHA around campus with chalk of their own, adding boxing gloves to the stick figures and "Ali" next to Muhammad.

### **Miscommunication, misunderstanding?**

Saleha Malick, a senior at NU and member of McSA, said that SHIFT had contacted the McSA in advance of the event to talk about what they planned to do in response to Comedy Central's self-censorship. The meeting never took place though, perhaps as a result of disagreement among SHIFT's members as to whether chalking was the best way to respond. Some of them wanted to go ahead, as a demonstration of free speech, while others were concerned that it might offend members of the Muslim community on campus. Saleha wonders whether things might have turned out differently if they had met. "If they had come to us, we could have constructively figured something out together to protest the Comedy Central censorship, but in a way that didn't offend anyone."<sup>9</sup> But that didn't happen.

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### **Student Profile: Saleha**

Saleha grew up in a suburb of Chicago and lived between two communities. She attended public schools that were predominantly Christian, and where her best friends were Roman Catholic and Episcopalian. "But I also grew up in the context of family and friends who were all Muslim, and we went to weekend school Islamic Foundation Mosque. My dad was a teacher there, and he eventually became the vice principal. I kind of grew up at that mosque." Growing up going back and forth between religious worlds was the norm for Saleha and she got used to translating her life as a Muslim for her Christian friends. "I was a minority, but I knew about my friends' religions and they always knew when Ramadan was starting and when I would have to pray and do other things like fast. I had always been open about my religion; but I also really wanted to understand it for myself."

So when Saleha discovered that Northwestern had an Interfaith Hall she was interested. One wing of a larger residence hall has been turned into an intentional community focused on living and learning together in an interfaith setting. Beginning in 2005, it hadn't been in existence for very long when Saleha moved in. By her senior year, there were about 20 students from a variety of religious and non-religious perspectives who lived on the Interfaith Hall. The students on the hall worked together to plan interfaith-themed campus-wide events as well as smaller, informal group discussions and activities.

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In many ways, we were more offended that a group of students at our own University would target us because of what was going on with Comedy Central and "South Park" than the actual chalking of the prophet around campus.<sup>10</sup> It seemed to Saleha that an act purporting to uphold freedom of speech was at the expense of a vulnerable segment of campus community. She felt that there were many other more productive ways that the group could have exercised their right to freedom of speech, and that Muslim students would have been happy to join in.

### **Defending free speech...**

Maintaining that "they were not attacking Muslim students or directing their stick figures at any particular

group,” SHIFT’s publicity chair, Angela Potter said, “We just feel like that’s not the message we’re representing. It’s censorship through intimidation, that’s what we’re protesting.”<sup>11</sup> In addition to sketching figures of Muhammad, SHIFT also posted flyers advertising an upcoming meeting titled “Should Your Beliefs Affect My Actions?” where students “were invited to discuss freedom of expression and political correctness.” For Byrne, SHIFT’s president, “There should be no image that is taboo, that is isn’t protected by the freedom of expression.”

### **Or Targeting Muslims?**

When SHIFT said that the chalking wasn’t about Muslims, Saleha had her doubts. “How can you be part of this campus community with different faith groups, different student groups in general, and not be aware there is a population of Muslims on campus that could feel targeted, even if they are explicitly the target.”<sup>12</sup> For much of that same academic year, Saleha had been part of a committee made up of different religious student groups as well as SHIFT that was creating a document outlining an ethical framework for engagement between students and student groups on the NU campus. At a meeting that took place not too long before the “Draw Muhammad” controversy erupted, a draft of the document was distributed to all of the groups. While the document was not in its final form, Saleha said representatives from SHIFT “looked it over, and pretty much agreed to support it.” At that same meeting, she said, “we talked about our responsibilities to each other members of the campus community, and discussed ways that we could be respectful of our differences.”<sup>13</sup> It seemed that the committee had reached an understanding.

For Saleha, the fact that SHIFT went ahead with the chalking despite all the work of this committee was a surprise. She felt as if their actions really went against the spirit of the ethical framework they had spent so much time developing together.

### **Chalk back!**

Anisa Rahman, also a senior at NU at the time of the “Draw Muhammad” incident, and a member of the McSA, was really angry when she heard that SHIFT went ahead with the chalking. Feeling that she couldn’t just sit back and do nothing, Anisa approached the McSA’s Executive Board to see how they planned to respond. Based on their research of similar incidents at other colleges and universities, the McSA told her that aside from sending a letter from the group to The Daily Northwestern, they had decided not to take any particular action against SHIFT. McSA was concerned about being the only group to draw attention to the issue, feeling that it might be counterproductive. They were worried that Muslim students might be perceived as opposed to free speech or accused of overreacting.<sup>14</sup> As a result, Anisa was convinced that if there were to be an effective response, it would have to originate outside the Muslim community. But what kind of response and by whom?

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## **Student Profile: Anisa**

Anisa also grew up in a suburb of Chicago, and while she went to public schools where there weren’t many Muslims, she received her religious education at a nearby Muslim Education Center on weekends. Her friends were primarily Christian and Jewish, and by high school she describes her Islamic identity as more cultural than religious. When she arrived at Northwestern University, she met a lot of other Muslim students and joined the Muslim-cultural Students Association. It was really the first time that she had had Muslim friends and she was surprised and excited about how open and diverse they were in their views, coming from a wide variety of backgrounds. She also found more Muslim female role models, something that she hadn’t had outside her family. “It felt



good to re-discover Islam on my own, as an adult," she said. "At first my parents were shocked and concerned, though," Anisa added, "since they were afraid that I was going to get too conservative!" But during her time at NU she was able to take on leadership roles in McSA, and saw those as formative years for both herself and the organization which was fairly new. Today, Anisa identifies as a practicing Muslim.

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<sup>1</sup> Lark Turner, "SHIFT chalks depictions of Muhammad, Monday," The Daily Northwestern, May 10, 2010.

<sup>2</sup> Muslim-cultural Students Association, "Letter to the Editor: McSA responds to SHIFT's actions," May 11, 2010.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Most notably, in September 2005, the Danish newspaper, Jyllands-Posten, ran an article which contained 12 political cartoons featuring Muhammad by 12 different artists. The publication set off a furious debate over free speech which could include criticism of Islam and self-censorship.

<sup>5</sup> Dave Itzkoff, "'South Park' Episode Altered After Muslim Group's Warning," The New York Times, April 23, 2010, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/04/23/arts/television/23park.html>.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Chris Stedman, "Talk the Talk, Don't Chalk the Chalk: Drawing a Divide With the 'Draw Muhammad' Campaign," posted May 4, 2010 on his NonProphet Status blog, <http://nonprophetstatus.com/2010/05/04/talk-the-talk-dont-chalk-the-chalk-drawing-a-divide-with-the-draw-muhammad-campaign/>.

<sup>8</sup> Chris Calvey, Atheists, Humanists & Agnostics blog, May 3, 2010, <http://wiscatheists.blogspot.com/2010/05/letter-to-muslim-student-association.html>.

<sup>9</sup> Saleha Malick, interview with author, Sept. 2010.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Turner.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Anisa Rahman, interview with author, Sept. 2010.

## Chalking Muhammad, part 2

### Students take action

Anisa set to work within hours of learning of the chalkings, writing an email to 20 of her closest non-Muslim friends who had leadership positions within different organizations around campus. “Friends,” she wrote, “I’m mad, and frustrated, and immobilized ... ” She emphasized that while she supported SHIFT’s right to free speech, she was upset about the way they exercised that right. “Just because you have the right to do something [is not] reason enough to do it. We all have the right to drop the n-bomb, but common decency stops us from doing so because it is offensive.” In the same way, “drawing Muhammad is offensive to Muslims,” and the “Muslims at NU are extremely rattled by this situation.”<sup>1</sup>

Many of students to whom Anisa sent the email responded by drafting a public letter to the community and to the administration. In it they urged the University to act in a timely way and highlighted the fact that the chalking was part of a larger issue of how students treat each other within a community and also how Muslims are viewed by the community. No one who signed the letter, except Anisa, was a Muslim. While she sent her original email out in a moment of frustration and anger about what had happened, Anisa wasn’t sure what it would actually accomplish. “I underestimated my friends,” she said later. “Many forwarded my email on to their friends or quoted from it as they spread the word across campus. They really seemed to understand how important it was for a response to come from outside of the McSA.”<sup>2</sup>

### The president weighs in

On Wednesday of the same week, four days after the chalking, NU’s President Morton Schapiro spoke with members of SHIFT in a fireside conversation that had been planned months earlier. In that meeting he told students, “If you had talked to me before, I would have said, ‘Please don’t do that.’ There’s a better way to get honest dialogue here.” Despite his concerns about SHIFT’s actions, went on to say, “But you did it, you had the right to do it, and you deserve to be protected. But I think it was a mistake.”<sup>3</sup>

### Collaborating for the future

The NU administration was open to conversation when approached by students who were concerned about building and strengthening community at the university. They brainstormed a number of proposals, including the “Cultural Awareness Challenge,” a program that would mandate courses in the curriculum to address cultural and religious diversity. [See below.] As the year came to a close, they hoped to pass this challenge on to the faculty for further discussion.

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<sup>1</sup> Email correspondence from Anisa Rahman, Monday, May 10, 2010.

<sup>2</sup> Interview.

<sup>3</sup> Lark Turner, “Schapiro: SHIFT’s chalking a mistake,” The Daily Northwestern, May 13, 2010.





## Grappling with religious difference at UIC: Coercion or conversion? Part 1

### Varied faiths, common goals

Nick Price arrived on the University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC) campus that fall as a new staff worker for InterVarsity Christian Fellowship, an evangelical Christian ministry that works with students and faculty at colleges and universities across the country. A recent college grad himself, Nick had just completed a two-year training program with InterVarsity. He was excited about his new position and was just getting to know the UIC community. Since InterVarsity is primarily a student-led organization, Nick's job involved training students, both individually and in small groups, to lead small-group Bible studies, plan and execute outreach events, and seek out and create service opportunities on and around campus. "Basically," he explained, "we're the ones behind the scenes training and equipping students to lead the ministry on campus."<sup>1</sup> In addition, Nick looked forward to meeting and collaborating with staff from other religious groups at the university through an interfaith organization called the Religious Workers Association (RWA) at UIC.

While UIC is a public institution and doesn't sponsor any particular religious activities or groups, it does make a place for the religious life of students on campus. Set up by the Dean's Office, the RWA allows the professional staff of different religious organizations on campus to come together and talk to each other about what they are each doing with students. In addition, members of the RWA work with the university administration to address the kinds of concerns that can arise within the UIC's very religiously diverse community. To join the RWA and become registered with the university, an organization must sign a covenant or agreement. By doing so, the group commits to a number of common goals, including "fostering a sense of human community at UIC around humane concerns," "making known to all at UIC the availability of religious counsel, fellowship, and worship offered by the UIC Religious Workers Association communities," and "cooperating with University administrators in services to the UIC community." Each member agrees to follow a set of guidelines for the way religious groups can operate with each other and with members of the campus community.

### Considering Cru

At the first RWA meeting that Nick attended early in the fall, the chairperson of the group informed fellow members that Campus Crusade for Christ ("Cru"), an evangelical Christian organization, had expressed interest in joining the RWA. The chair also indicated that he had taken the preliminary step of meeting with Cru staff to explain the work of the Association and to go over its covenant. He reported that Cru staff responded positively to all of the RWA's goals and commitments, except for one. Specifically, Cru was concerned about committing to the line in the RWA covenant which read, "We will ... not initiate personal religious opportunities designed to draw persons from another religious community into [our] religious community." As an organization whose primary aim is to share the gospel and invite people to have a relationship with Jesus Christ, they felt that agreeing to this statement would limit their ability to live out their calling on the UIC campus. They couldn't, in good conscience, sign the covenant in its current form. So, the chair asked, how should RWA respond to this situation? Should Cru simply be denied membership because the group refused to sign the covenant in its current form? Or was there any willingness among RWA members to adjust the clause in such a way that would allow Cru to sign the covenant? Or could RWA simply remove the clause that troubled the evangelical organization, leaving it out altogether?

Nick vividly recalls this meeting because in hearing about the situation with Cru, he was taken by surprise. He remembers thinking, "Does this statement basically mean that as members of the RWA, we cannot share our faith with anybody of another tradition?" Nick was torn. He had long been interested in and involved with interfaith work, and the RWA seemed like a good place to further this interest at UIC. However, he wondered

whether he, as an InterVarsity staff member dedicated to sharing the Christian message, should be a member of the RWA when one of its commitments seemed to go up against some of his own beliefs and practices. Nick expressed concern about the clause in question. “We [InterVarsity] can’t have this in the covenant,” he said, “because our Christian faith demands that we share what we believe with others. In fact, this isn’t even an exclusively evangelical Christian thing! There are Muslims who believe that their faith tradition compels them to share their faith with other people. This clause is prejudiced against people’s faith claims.” A number of the other RWA members, however, were just as adamant about keeping the clause which meant denying membership to Cru.

### **An uncomfortable conversation**

The conversation broadened to the larger questions of how to deal with religious groups for whom proselytizing (the attempt to convert a person from one religion, belief, or opinion to another) and evangelizing (communicating the key messages of one’s religious tradition to others) were central aspects of religious identity. In the meantime, RWA members realized that they were not going to be able to settle the Cru matter quickly. Over the course of the academic year, the RWA reconsidered the language in their membership covenant, realizing that they each had very different understandings of what proselytism and evangelism entailed. What became evident was that a level of discomfort existed about how to accommodate religious groups who both hold very specific truth claims and who think these claims should be shared with others. Campus Crusade, for example, states that “Christianity is not just another man-made religion or philosophy, but [that] ... it alone makes provision for man’s basic need, which is forgiveness of sin.”<sup>2</sup> In addition, Campus Crusade believes that, “The Lord Jesus Christ commanded all believers to proclaim the Gospel throughout the world and to disciple men of every nation. The fulfillment of that Great Commission requires that all worldly and personal ambitions be subordinated to a total commitment to ‘Him who loved us and gave Himself for us.’”<sup>3</sup> According to Nick, the RWA conversation moved away from the logistical question about what to do with a particular clause to the much deeper question of “How do we, though we have different theologies, still get around the table together and really talk through differences?” “And I’ll be honest with you,” he says, “this was a very tense conversation at times. There were a lot of us who came into the room and were not happy to be there.”

Marla Baker, Director of UIC Hillel for Jewish students at UIC and a long-time member of the RWA, was very aware of the discomfort that Nick and some of his colleagues were experiencing. “But,” she says, “it’s gray area, and we all live with some amount of discomfort around these issues.”<sup>4</sup> Proselytization, in and of itself, isn’t so much the issue for Marla but rather the way in which groups spread their message. “When, for example, a religious group puts out signs inviting everybody to a really nice pizza party and a volleyball game, but then afterward gets everyone together to talk about their religious beliefs and what they stand for, it’s problematic,” she says. “It’s a problem,” she continues, “because they are not being up front about who they are and what they’re trying to accomplish. Their signs don’t indicate that this event is about evangelization.” Marla recalls situations like this on campus that have bordered on coercion, and they have happened when groups were very aggressive in getting their message out, or not up front in terms of how they approached people.

Sometimes, however, situations are not necessarily as clearly defined. What about a situation when, for example, a group of students puts up a sign inviting hall residents to play basketball, and at some point during the activity or afterward, the conversation turns toward religious matters? Could this be considered coercive behavior? Or situations in which staff workers of religious organizations such as InterVarsity or Cru meet one-on-one with students? For Nick, these types of situations aren’t as problematic. After all, if the students are not trying to play “bait and switch” but are simply open to talking about religion if it comes up in conversation, then there isn’t really any danger of coercion. As for the one-on-one meetings, they are an important part of Nick’s job. They offer opportunities for Nick to get to know students better and accomplish



some of InterVarsity's training and leadership development goals. "Professors meet with students alone all the time for precisely the same reasons," according to Nick, "and that is never viewed as coercive." Some RWA Members, on the other hand, were concerned that both of these scenarios could easily become situations where students would be vulnerable to coercion.

### **When they won't take no for an answer**

Coercive behavior isn't the only problem that is connected to groups that proselytize, notes Marla. There are some religious groups that make it difficult for students to disengage once they've attended a few events, but then conclude, "That was interesting; I enjoyed being exposed to it, but it's really not for me." She points to instances on the UIC campus when a group has continued to harass students about their participation, giving them a hard time about wanting to try other things, and being unwilling to take no for an answer. Marla has also seen situations in which one religious group repeatedly interferes with the activities of another group by being disruptive or trying to push their own agenda on students who have different beliefs. "That's not just coercive," she exclaims, "It's completely disrespectful!" One such instance on the UIC campus involved some Catholic students who were pretty shaken when told by another Christian group that Catholicism was not a legitimate form of Christianity.

Nick agreed with Baker and other members of the RWA that coercive or harassing behavior on the part of religious groups was unacceptable. He was concerned, however, that they were equating proselytization or evangelization with coercion and disruptive behavior, and that they were simply assuming that groups who held exclusive truth claims were coercive. "At InterVarsity, we don't want to see any high pressure tactics being used with students," says Nick. "We want them to feel the freedom to safely question and choose." That being said, however, Nick asks, "Do we want to see people come to know Christ? Absolutely. That's [an] important part of who we are as an organization. We're not going to be shy about that. Theologically, we believe that everyone is on a journey with God and in their relationship with Christ, and we want to create spaces where we can talk, explore and ask questions with the hope that people will become Christians. But if they don't, we want to honor that choice too." Nick has the same approach to other religious groups who want to win converts or invite people to join their tradition. "The UIC has one of the largest Muslim student groups in the United States," says Nick, "and every year they host an Islamic Awareness Week where they make it very clear that they are sharing the message of Islam and trying to help people look at Islam with new eyes, with the hope that people will become Muslims. And you know what? I'm OK with that."

### **Up front and open**

The bottom line for Marla was that she wanted groups to be up front and say, "This is what we represent, and we'd like to have a conversation with you about it," or "Are you interested in learning more about who we are?" "That's what college is about," she adds. "It's a place where students have an opportunity to be exposed to all different kinds of things and make up their own minds. It's the making-your-own-decision part that's crucial." Baker reflects that on a personal level, "my problem with proselytism is the same problem I have with any fundamentalism, that students are in college so they can learn to do critical thinking, to live with gray area, to make decisions for themselves about how they approach those things. Any tradition that reduces things to black-and-white answers or says, 'We have the truth and you don't, so listen to us,' whatever the truth might be—Jewish, Christian, or in an area that isn't religious at all—is really problematic because it's not in keeping with the university's mission and goals. The university is a place that challenges simple truths and allows students to struggle with finding the truth in their own way."

The kind of atmosphere that Marla describes—one that is open and honest and where students have the opportunity to reach their own decisions about religion, among other things—is also one that is important

to Nick. Being able to ask questions and come to his own conclusions has been central to Nick's religious path. Not growing up in any particular religious tradition, Nick describes himself as a religious skeptic by the time he reached high school. At that point, he started doing a lot more reading on his own, though, about different religious traditions, and asking a lot of questions. "I remember trying to figure out if I fit into a particular religious category," Nick says. "Eventually I began seriously exploring Christianity and learning everything I could about it." Even though his parents were a little alarmed by his growing interest in religion, Nick says he talked to them a lot about his reading and his questions, and they were reassured that he "wasn't into anything shady." By his junior year in high school, Nick finally "came to the conclusion that Christ was who he claimed to be, that he was God, and that he'd come to live among us and to save us," and he became a Christian.

### Well-worn tracks

Nick's problem with the RWA's conversation about Cru and about religious groups that proselytize on campus was that it seemed to be running along the well-worn tracks of religious progressives vs. conservatives. In a blog article he wrote about evangelicals and interfaith engagement, Nick points out that progressives increasingly hold that evangelicals "represent an outdated and intolerant worldview which cannot constructively add to religious dialogue between different faith traditions."<sup>5</sup> In his experience, the message from mainline Christian churches and other more liberal religious groups to him was that an evangelical Christian or anyone with an exclusive truth claim shouldn't be involved in interfaith work, because that individual just won't be able to authentically engage people who believe differently. "How can a group," says Nick in response, "say, 'We are open; we accept everyone,' but then show such hostility when somebody with an exclusive truth claim shows up?"

On the other hand, acknowledges Nick, it is often true that evangelicals are just as wary of progressives and of interfaith dialogue because they fear they will be pressured "to accept the theological truth claims of other faiths that directly contradict their own deeply held spiritual beliefs." Nick admits that when he first became involved in interfaith work, many of his evangelical Christian friends asked him how he was able to maintain his own beliefs while still respecting the faith of others. They wondered if he wasn't being superficial or maybe even hypocritical. After all, he had never hidden the fact that he believed in Jesus Christ and that he was committed to sharing this message with others. "That being said," says Nick, "there are many evangelicals who are interested in building bridges, and in working together with people of other faith traditions. For interfaith engagement to be authentic," he adds, "it must be able to accommodate groups with these kinds of exclusive truth claims."

When it came down to making a decision about Cru and the RWA covenant, RWA deliberated about the best course of action to take. Group members considered how they might change the wording of the particular clause "We will ... not initiate personal religious opportunities designed to draw persons from another religious community into [our] religious community," or whether they should keep it at all.

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<sup>1</sup> Nick Price, interview with the author, Feb. and Mar. 2010.

<sup>2</sup> Bill Bright, "Jesus Pardons Sin," Campus Crusade for Christ International, <http://www.ccci.org/how-to-know-god/jesus-and-the-intellectual/03-jesus-pardons-sin.htm>.

<sup>3</sup> Campus Crusade for Christ International website, <http://www.ccci.org/about-us/statement-of-faith/index.htm>.

<sup>4</sup> Marla Baker, interview with the author, May 2010.

<sup>5</sup> Nicholas Price, "Evangelicals in an Interfaith World," Posted by on January 22, 2009, <http://bridge-builders.ning.com/profiles/blogs/evangelicals-in-an-interfaith>. The blog post is a reprinting of an article that was published in the Fall 2005 issue of CrossCurrents magazine.



## Grappling with Religious Difference at UIC: Coercion or conversion? Part 2

### Varied faiths, common goals

"I think a lot of fruit came out of our conversations," says Nick of the RWA's yearlong process, "and I feel as if a lot of trust was built over the year that we talked about this issue." In terms of the covenant, the RWA finally decided to change the language of the clause that started the whole discussion. Now the clause in the RWA covenant is more specifically focused on the use of coercive tactics to draw students away from various faith communities, and it reads, "We will not target students of other faith traditions to undermine their faith traditions for the purpose of recruiting them to our own faith communities. Instead, we will promote mutually enriching conversation about religion (both in our similarities and differences) with respect, integrity, and transparency."

"Basically," says Nick, "we were able to articulate a line that said what we really intended to say in the first place. The way that the RWA came to terms with groups that proselytize or evangelize was to say that, 'We know that people from some faith traditions feel that they need to invite students to explore their tradition, and possibly convert. What we don't want to see is one faith community specifically focusing on another faith community with the intent to convert the entire community. We want students to have the space to freely question, explore, and choose.'"

Cru staff then looked at the revised clause and said, "Yeah, we can sign this. We'd like to join the RWA." But when the RWA came together to make a final decision about Cru's membership, there was still no consensus among members about the group's admission, which was basically a default "No." So as it stands now, Cru is still not a member of RWA. So, despite the progress that Nick felt the group made in terms of building trust and dedicating time to the issue, there wasn't as much resolution as he would have hoped for. "I'm sure that this isn't the end of it," says Nick, "but I guess that right now, we are at the point where we are going to continue to work together and foster the relationships we have built with each other. Hopefully, in the future, we can take the conversation about what to do with groups like Cru, with truth claims they feel they must proclaim openly, a little bit further."



## Study or indoctrination? Reading the Qur'an at UNC, Part 1

### Religion was everywhere

"Even though it's a secular, public institution, religion was everywhere," says Mary Ellen Giess of her alma mater, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (UNC).<sup>1</sup> She discovered that it was not just religion in general, but conservative Christianity in particular. "I had friends in high school who were more conservative than me religiously, but I guess we just overlooked those kinds of differences. At UNC, though, religion was impossible to ignore." Growing up as a Unitarian Universalist in Philadelphia, Mary Ellen was shocked by what she saw as she settled into the UNC community. "Religion was suddenly in my face in a way that it had never been before. [At UNC] people were just much more comfortable with living out their faith, especially in a way that was visible to others." One day when she was walking through the center of campus, Mary Ellen recalls seeing two men holding signs listing all the different kinds of people who were going to hell. "It was a profound moment for me," notes Mary Ellen. "Even though some people tend to think of UNC as a very hippy-liberal place, something like 82 percent of the student body comes from North Carolina which tends to be a lot more religiously conservative. It was the first time that I encountered this type of religious expression, and realized that religion was different in different places, and varied according to people's understandings of it."

Mary Ellen didn't have to wait long to see the central role that religion played on campus and in the region. As one of the 4,200 incoming first-year and transfer students coming to UNC in the fall of 2002, she was required to read *Approaching the Qur'an: The Early Revelations* by Michael Sells. New students were asked to read the book over the summer and write a one-page response essay on it. All students would then be expected to participate in small group discussions of the text that would take place on August 19.

### Carolina Summer Reading Program

Each year the Carolina Summer Reading Program selects a book that all incoming first year and transfer students are required to read over the summer.<sup>2</sup> This

### Mary Ellen's Summer Reading Assignment

As she read the book, Mary Ellen considered questions posed by the study guide that included the following:

- What did you really know about the Qur'an before reading this book?
- What ideas or impressions did you have about Muslim cultures more generally?
- What are the main human and personal virtues and vices or flaws that these readings emphasize?
- How does the relationship between human beings and the Divine figure in these suras?
- What do you think are the problems or benefits of reading a religious text from a religious tradition other than your own?
- Now that you have read parts of the Qur'an, do you think more Americans should read all or parts of the book? What do you think the result would be if they did?

Finally Mary Ellen selected one of a number of different prompts upon which to compose a one-page response to the reading. These included:

- Select any sura that you find especially interesting and explain how its text treats the relationship between the external world of nature and the internal world of faith and moral obligation.
- Read a specific sura (from pages 156-180) while listening to the CD recording of the Qur'anic recitation. What exactly does the experience of listening to the recitation add to your overall understanding of the text or to the overall impression it makes on you?
- Select any one of the suras that most interests you; reflect and respond to it using your own ideas and material from the book.



program is intended to introduce new students to the intellectual life at UNC through discussion and critical thinking about a current topic. The program also hopes to create a sense of community among incoming students, faculty and staff by providing a common experience. By mid-May new students receive information about the book they are to read, along with study questions and a writing assignment.

"Westerners for centuries have been alternately puzzled, attracted, concerned, and curious about the great religious traditions of Islam," stated the Carolina Summer Reading Program material to incoming students. "These feelings have been especially intense since the tragic events of September 11. Approaching the Qur'an is not a political document in any sense, and its evocation of moral 'reckoning' raises questions that will be timely for college students and reflective adults under any circumstances." Written by a leading scholar on Islam, the book concentrates on thirty-five short suras (passages) from Islam's most important sacred text. These passages, for the most part, reflect on the experience of the divine in the natural world and on the principle of accountability in human life. Among Muslims throughout the world, they are the most widely known and recited passages. A CD with recitations in Arabic from the reading accompanies the book.

### **In the spotlight**

"What could be a better way to start a college career than by reading from a Good Book?" asked Michael Park of Fox News in a report on July 8, 2002.<sup>3</sup> "Plenty, if the book in question is the Quran and your country has been attacked by Muslim terrorists," according to one pro-family group. In the piece that put UNC's book selection in the national spotlight, Fox News announced that the "Virginia-based Family Policy Network [was] taking aim at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill for requiring all incoming freshmen [that] fall to read a book about the Quran, the holy book of Islam."

Terry Moffitt, Family Policy Network (FPN) Chairman and a UNC alumnus, argued in the same report that UNC's book selection "amounts to state support for one religion over another." Moffitt, who said he had not read the book, worried that "students will get an incomplete picture of Islam, a politically correct view formed by [reading] only part of the entire holy book." Moffitt indicated further that the school should drop its pro-Islam stance, saying that his group had sent a letter "asking the American Civil Liberties Union of North Carolina to help overturn the requirement."

Media attention grew exponentially after Fox's report, both in print and on television, and the FPN indicated that it would file a lawsuit. UNC's Summer Reading Program website was updated on July 19 to indicate that students could opt out of reading the book, and could use their one-page essay assignment to explain why they did so. In addition, UNC officials said that students who took issue with the assignment could be excused from attending the discussion sessions in August. Joe Glover, President of FPN, responded by saying "To force these students to study a perverted form of Islam is bad enough, but to force students who object on religious grounds to first identify themselves and secondly to have to defend their religious beliefs, it sounds like something you'd see in Nazi Germany."<sup>4</sup>

University officials defended their choice of the book for the Summer Reading Program, saying that "the book is an academic text rather than a religious one. It was chosen specifically to address issues related to the September 11 terrorist attacks and to educate students on Islam."<sup>5</sup> Sue Estroff, chairwoman of UNC's faculty, added "I think it was a terrific choice of topics for us to take up this year. To me, all the uproar bolsters the case of why we have to do this."<sup>6</sup>

### **Incoming student orientation**

"I was going into my sophomore year that summer when incoming students were reading Approaching the Qur'an," remembers UNC student orientation leader Amir Thomas.<sup>7</sup> "I spent the spring of '02 in training

so that I could work that summer as an orientation leader. When I first heard that the Qur'an book was chosen, I wasn't really surprised, especially in light of 9/11 and what was going on in the world. There was a lot of backlash or resistance toward the Muslim community because people didn't really understand or like this religion. I wasn't sure how [the book] was going to play with UNC students though, since many have such strong Christian identities. As a campus community we really didn't know what to expect since the Summer Reading Program was fairly new. In our training we were told that there might be some concerns about the book and some of our training involved conflict resolution. They gave us some specific discussion points that we could use in case we encountered students who were resistant, to try to encourage them to be more open to the book."Throughout the summer, Amir and other orientation leaders met with groups of first-year students who came for orientation. "We would talk about the book and give them more information about what to expect in the discussion sessions when they came to the campus in the fall. I was definitely aware of the growing media attention during the summer," said Amir, "but our staff was so busy with other issues like housing and registration, that we were kind of sheltered from all the craziness." Amir didn't hear many strong reactions from incoming students toward the reading, either positive or negative. "Mostly there were questions about whether or not students needed to read the whole thing, and some lighthearted joking about the assignment. They seemed to have a pretty good sense as to why it was assigned, with 9/11 and everything."

### **UNC and the Establishment Clause**

On Monday, July 22, a lawsuit was filed in the U.S. District Court in Greensboro on behalf of three unnamed incoming first year students. It also listed as plaintiffs James Yacovelli and Terry Moffit of the Family Policy Network. The lawsuit alleged that UNC's reading assignment violated the Establishment Clause ("Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof"), pointing to those portions of the clause which prohibit the government from giving precedence to one religion over another and from interfering with the free expression of an individual's religious beliefs. In a news release describing the action they had taken, FPN President Joe Glover summed up the complaint by restating his organization's stance: "At first, UNC wanted to force their students to read a pro-Islamic text, which is bad enough. But now they want those who object on religious grounds to step forward and defend their own beliefs. That's even worse."<sup>8</sup>

A few days later, attorneys for the plaintiffs also asked a judge to issue an order to halt the program. Named as one of the defendants in the case, UNC Chancellor James Moeser responded to the suit in a statement issued on Thursday, July 25: "There is no proselytizing here. We'll be leading our students into asking questions. We are being faithful to our motto—Lux, Libertas ["Light, Liberty"]. We are shedding light and we are defending freedom."<sup>9</sup>

Jen Daum, UNC's student body president, agreed: "What is a university if it is not a place where students can read about a largely foreign topic and engage in dialogue? For students who think they find the Quran offensive, I challenge you—at least read the book and make up your own mind."<sup>10</sup> Bashar Staitieh, UNC's Muslim Society President, was also very supportive of the book choice. "People just really need a different image of Islam and it's programs like this that are going to give it to them," he said.<sup>11</sup>

### **The author joins the debate**

It wasn't long before Professor Michael Sells, author of *Approaching the Qur'an* and a highly regarded expert on Islamic literature and poetry, was brought into the fray. A devout Quaker, Sells was at that time a professor at Haverford College. He joined FPN President Joe Glover on Fox's Hannity & Colmes Show which was the first of many such appearances.<sup>12</sup>





"It seems like you are claiming that they're trying to proselytize and teach when what they [say they] are really trying to do [is] to offer and foster understanding," said host Alan Colmes addressing Glover. "Let's not talk about proselytizing," Glover responded, "Let's talk about indoctrination. This book is a very one-side presentation on Islam. It leaves out everything from suras four, five, and nine, which is where you are going to find most of the hate and vitriol towards Christians and Jews that precipitated 9/11. If the university wants students to understand Islam in light of recent events, they aren't going to be doing it as a result of reading this book."

"All right, Michael," Colmes asked, turning to Sells, "what about the charge that this is one-sided—you only pick out 35 suras, meditative passages, and you leave out the bad stuff?" "Well," responded Sells, "the point of this book was not to make a judgment about Islam, whether it's a religion of peace or a religion of violence. The point of this book is to introduce people to the key theological concepts that ground the Quran. And those [concepts] are most easily accessible in those early, short suras or passages that are the first step Muslim children learn and [are] memorized by Muslims around the world."

"OK," Sean Hannity interjected, "Do you agree with me that a kid shouldn't be forced into studying this and they shouldn't be forced to explain why they don't want to participate?" "I don't agree," retorted Sells, "because students are forced, required to write essays and explain their ideas and justify them in every course in college. That's the purpose of college. It's not intimidation." Glover countered by saying, "The Supreme Court precedent in 1992 in *Lee v. Weisman* [a major school prayer case] says that you cannot coerce people who disagree with the particular religious faith, to study it or any holy text of that particular religion . . . this is a very critical precedent that will be set whether UNC Chapel Hill gets away with this or whether they are stopped by the court."

### **Politicians take a stand**

The controversy continued to grow, especially within North Carolina. On August 7, as an amendment to the budget, the North Carolina House Appropriations Committee voted 64-10 to bar funding for UNC's Summer Reading Program.<sup>13</sup> One of the amendment's supporters, State Rep. Gene Arnold, R-Nash County, said that UNC Chancellor James Moeser "knew the general public had an attitude that is anti-Arabic because of the 9-11 incident, so the requirement was extraordinarily arrogant. I think the chancellor is totally, completely out of step with what the people of North Carolina want and expect out of its university."<sup>14</sup> Chancellor Moeser issued a statement that read, in part, "It's unfortunate that people have misinterpreted this reading assignment as a form of indoctrination. We are offering the summer reading program this year in the spirit of seeking understanding—not in advocacy of Islam over Christianity or Judaism or any other religion. We simply aim to give new students a chance to read the book, ask questions and discuss their views."<sup>15</sup>

One politician offered his interpretation of the motivations behind the controversy. State Rep. Joe Hackney, D-Orange, who voted against the amendment, said, "The Republicans ran the amendment in part to try to get people to vote against it for the fall campaigns, so they could run [political] advertisements. After political purposes are served, maybe it will get taken out."<sup>16</sup>

### **Academic freedom?**

Many members of the UNC faculty and the UNC Board of Governors were becoming increasingly concerned about efforts from outside the university to shape internal curricular choices. When the Board of Governors met on August 9, however, they failed to pass a resolution affirming the principles of academic freedom. Some members voting against the resolution said they "did so in order to avoid appearing adversarial in the eyes of the Legislature at a time when the politicians hold the university's budget in their hands."<sup>17</sup> Many UNC faculty members were frustrated not only by the lawsuit but by this "perceived waffling" by the Board of

Governors.<sup>18</sup> Meeting a few days after the Board, “the UNC Faculty Council resoundingly passed a motion in favor of academic freedom.” Later in the summer, after the students had returned to campus, the UNC Board of Governors met again to reconsider the issue, and this time unanimously passed a resolution similar to that of the faculty.<sup>19</sup>

### Day in court

As August 19—the day that incoming students would meet in small groups—loomed large, it was still not clear to UNC faculty, administration, and staff whether or not the sessions would even be held. In the first phase of the lawsuit filed by the Family Policy Network, lawyers sought an injunction for discussions that focused on the Qur’an, basing their arguments on the same precedents that banned prayer and Bible readings in public schools. They told the judge that the Establishment Clause in the First Amendment should also apply to UNC’s summer book selection just as it did in cases involving school prayer.<sup>20</sup> They argued further that by requiring the book, *Approaching the Qur’an*, UNC, a public university, was indoctrinating students with deceptive claims about the peaceful nature of Islam. This, they said, was a clear violation of the Establishment Clause which prohibits government actions that might give precedence to one religion over another.

“The establishment clause doesn’t prevent teaching about religion,” said Celia Lata, associate attorney general representing UNC.<sup>21</sup> Noting that there were over 100 courses offered at UNC that dealt with religion in one way or another, Lata said that the plaintiffs “object to Dr. Sells’ book because it conflicts with their religious beliefs. They alleged that the assignment is pro-Islam because it isn’t sufficiently anti-Islam. This is really not about protecting religious freedom, it is about the censorship of ideas,” said Lata.<sup>22</sup> Attorneys for the university also pointed out that the reading program was not in fact mandatory since no grades would be given and attendance would not be recorded.

On August 15, the judge ruled in UNC’s favor, denying the request that was made by the plaintiffs to stop the upcoming discussion sessions.<sup>23</sup> FNP appealed this decision, so that by the morning of August 19, just hours before sessions were scheduled to take place, it was still not clear whether the discussion sessions would be held.

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<sup>1</sup> Mary Ellen Geiss, interview with the author, Feb. 2010.

<sup>2</sup> The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, “Carolina Summer Reading Program,” <http://www.unc.edu/srp/srp2002/>.

<sup>3</sup> Michael Park, “University’s Quran Reading Stirs Controversy: A Report with Shepard Smith,” Jul. 8, 2002, <http://www.foxnews.com/story/0,2933,57205,00.html>.

<sup>4</sup> Eric Ferreri, “Va. Group says UNC is forcing defense of religious beliefs,” *The Durham Herald-Sun*, Jul. 20, 2002.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> Amir Thomas, interview with the author, May 2010.

<sup>8</sup> News Release by Family Policy Network, “Lawsuit Filed against UNC in Federal Court,” Jul. 22, 2002, <http://familypolicy.net/us/?p=307>.

<sup>9</sup> Eric Ferreri, “UNC chancellor defends required Quran assignment,” *The Durham Herald-Sun*, Jul. 26, 2002, <http://www.heraldsun.com/pages/archives>.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> Lucy Severson and Deryl Davis, “Qu’ran at UNC,” *Religion & Ethics Newsweekly*, Aug. 23, 2002, <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/religionandethics/week551/news.html>.

<sup>12</sup> Sean Hannity and Alan Colmes, “Interview with Michael Sells, Joe Glover,” Transcript, Hannity & Colmes (FOX News), Jul. 26, 2002, <http://connection.ebscohost.com/>.

<sup>13</sup> Eric Ferreri, “Quran ban bid miffs some UNC officials,” *The Durham Herald-Sun*, Aug. 9, 2002, <http://www.heraldsun.com/pages/archives>.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> Eric Ferreri, “What price academic freedom?” *Chapel Hill Herald*, Aug. 18, 2002, <http://www.heraldsun.com/pages/archives>.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> Carl W. Ernst, “From the Heart of the Qur’an Belt,” *Religious Studies News*, May 2003, <http://www.unc.edu/~cernst/rsnews.htm>.

<sup>20</sup> Kirk Ross, “Making the case,” *The Chapel Hill News*, Aug. 18, 2002, <http://www.heraldsun.com/pages/archives>.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> Eric Ferreri, “Judge upholds readings at UNC,” *The Durham Herald-Sun*, Aug. 16, 2002, <http://www.heraldsun.com/pages/archives>.

<sup>23</sup> Eric Ferreri, “UNC students discuss Quran book,” *Chapel Hill Herald*, Aug. 20, 2002, <http://www.heraldsun.com/pages/archives>.

## Study or indoctrination? Reading the Qur'an at UNC, Part 2

### Students stream into Chapel Hill

Throughout the summer there wasn't a lot of opportunity for UNC students to weigh in on the debate because regular classes weren't in session. But as they arrived on campus in the days before the academic year started, they walked into a media frenzy. Mariah Hoffman, a first-year student, told the Durham Herald-Sun, "It was valuable to read about a religion I didn't know much about." But, she added, "The whole controversy seems a little silly to me. School is a place where you learn about the world; so if the purpose is for learning then I don't think [the book] is a bad thing."<sup>1</sup> Student Nadav Ariel agreed in part, saying, "Students should be ready to come to a university to learn about other cultures instead of being close-minded." But, he wondered, maybe "requiring all first-year students to read about the Qur'an and not about the culture is a bit too close to forcing religious values. It's not a good idea to force people to read something they're not ready for."<sup>2</sup>

Andrew Synn, another first-year student, thought that the Family Policy Network did have a case because "the [book has] sensitive material in it regarding religion. So if you're a religious person, you won't like it. But the book isn't trying to convert anyone."<sup>3</sup> In fact, Synn noticed similarities between Islam and his own religious tradition, Christianity. "The book reminds me a lot of the [Psalms] and Proverbs that the [Bible] had."

### Finally approaching the Qur'an

Early Monday morning, the Family Policy Network's final attempt to stop the discussion sessions from taking place was denied by a federal appeals court. Incoming first year and transfer students at UNC would have the opportunity to meet and talk about Approaching the Qur'an. "As orientation leaders we were encouraged to read the book so we could participate in the discussion groups," Amir Thomas recalls. "I was expecting to have to engage students more, to try to get them to speak or break the ice to help get the discussion going. But in my group, students asked questions, and they had thoughtful and insightful things to say. Everyone participated." Later, when Amir and his fellow orientation leaders talked about the discussions, the consensus was that they had gone well. "But we also had the sense that the whole thing had been over-hyped," added Amir.

"I enjoyed reading the book because I knew nothing about Islam," recalls Mary Ellen Geiss, the student who had been so shocked by the role religion played on the UNC campus. "I remember thinking, as I read it, '[author Michael Sells] just does this so well.' I got a sense of text in a way that I never had before. It was like understanding scripture for the first time, and how powerful it could be. It gave me a new perspective on scripture in general. Honestly, to an 18-year-old, the book was very readable and very understandable."<sup>4</sup> However, the discussion session was a let-down for Mary Ellen. "I think that it was partly because we were all freshmen. We had just gotten to campus two days before, and we were really nervous. We had no idea what we were doing." But, added Mary Ellen, "Part of it was not being pushed to engage at a deeper level." She had hoped for more. While the media, political and legal drama continued, the Summer Reading Program was over as far as UNC's incoming class of 2002 was concerned.

<sup>1</sup> Eric Ferreri, "Several incoming UNC students see book discussion as healthy," The Durham Herald-Sun, Aug. 12, 2002, <http://www.heraldsun.com/pages/archives>.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Mary Ellen Geiss, interview with the author, May 2010.

## Westboro is coming to town. What do you stand for? Part 1

### "My faith calls me to stand up"

"The interreligious encounter is woven into my spirit," said Stanford senior, Anand Venkatkrishnan in his sermon at the annual Interfaith Service at the campus's Memorial Church on January 24, 2010.<sup>1</sup> "It has been with me since I first set foot on the Stanford campus five years ago, in my senior year of high school. I came to this very church, to hear His Holiness the Dalai Lama speak about nonviolence and compassion. What has stood out to me is how [encounters like this] have strengthened and enriched my own Hindu identity. To me, the very measure of that identity is the extent to which I can connect with the suffering of people beyond my borders, and outside my tribe."

Anand's sermon took on special significance that day because the Jewish Student Association and Hillel at Stanford had just learned that members of Westboro Baptist Church (WBC) were planning to come to protest the Jewish and LGBT communities at the university. News of WBC's impending arrival was spreading quickly around campus. The Topeka, Kansas-based organization, which the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) characterizes as a hate group, travels all around the United States "picketing institutions and individuals they think support homosexuality or otherwise subvert what they believe is God's law."<sup>2</sup> WBC believes that "nearly all Americans and American institutions are sinful, so nearly any individual or organization can be targeted. In fact, WBC members say that "God's hatred is one of His holy attributes and that their picketing is a form of preaching to a 'doomed' country unable to hear their message in any other way."

Anand concluded his sermon by stating that "when extremists attack others on the basis of their identity—like they may do outside of Hillel this upcoming Friday—my faith calls me to stand up, and respond to hate with solidarity and love." When the service was over, the time that was intended for dialogue and reflection quickly turned into a planning meeting about how Stanford students should respond to WBC. Anand, along with Ansaf Kareem, co-founders of the student group, F.A.I.T.H. (Faiths Acting In Togetherness and Hope), played a significant role in shaping the direction of the conversation that day, and in the events that unfolded over the next week.

### Creating F.A.I.T.H. at Stanford

Anand met Ansaf during the summer preceding the 2009-2010 school year after both learned that they had been chosen as Interfaith Youth Core (IFYC) Fellows. Charged with developing an interfaith project at their institution, they did some brainstorming and decided that the time was right at Stanford to set up a volunteer student organization dedicated to interfaith action and cooperation. The two started out by asking themselves questions like, "How do people talk about religion on campus?" and "How can we help change what may be either indifferent attitudes toward or superficial conversations about religion into more dynamic conversations of religious pluralism and what that means?" They thought they could go a long way toward achieving this goal by "organizing excellent events that bring young people of different backgrounds together both to work with each other and then to engage in dialogue about what in their respective traditions or perspectives motivated them to do that particular activity."<sup>3</sup>

Finally, Anand and Ansaf wanted to bring the issue of religious diversity to the forefront of student training and awareness in the same way that racial, ethnic, gender, or sexual orientation are. "For example," noted Anand, "when you have a roommate who goes and prays in a particular way five times a day and you don't understand what he's doing or even how to start a discussion about it, what does this mean for you—who are being trained as a global citizen and future leader—not to be able to have that discussion?" Summing up their goals, Anand and Ansaf decided that they wanted "to shape campus discourse, organize events, and influence campus policy by making discussion around religious diversity more present, more vital, and more visible."



By the time the students started arriving on campus that fall, they had a game plan. During the first week of class, when first-year students are settling in and learning about the wide variety of organizations on campus, Anand and Ansaif each visited a number of different religious communities. “We were fortunate to have two celebrations—the Jewish Rosh Hashanah and the end of Ramadan for Muslims—that week. Focusing on new incoming students, we were able to attend large gatherings of students at Iftars and a Rosh Hashanah dinner where we handed out lots of fliers with an invitation to attend our first meeting the following week.” While they met with leaders of many of the campus religious communities in advance, they decided that they would focus their energies on new students who are often the most active and engaged segment of the community.”

### **"Telling our stories"**

Growing up not far from Stanford in the South Bay area, Anand describes his family as one in which Hinduism played a very important role. “My parents were very instrumental in the Chinmaya Mission, and I basically did the whole Sunday school program beginning in kindergarten and going all the way through high school. My dad conducts a lot of the worship and does the festivals at the Center, and I’ve learned a lot from him.”<sup>4</sup> While there wasn’t much interaction between his Hindu community and other religious communities, Anand was brought up with the sense that “Hinduism shared many values with other traditions, and was taught to respect these other traditions.”

“It wasn’t until I came to college,” notes Anand, “that I really began to explore my own spirituality, and I spent a lot of time—generally in books—[with] figures from other traditions.” As a junior, he applied for a program called the Fellowship for Religious Encounter which was organized by the Office for Religious Life at Stanford, and was one of 16 students selected from different faith backgrounds. “Over dinner each week,” he remembers, “we got to know each other by telling each other our stories. It was very personal. Instead of talking about what we each believed, which is kind of what we expected, we talked about who we were. The rest of the year basically developed out of these stories. It was the first time that I got to speak with others about my own religious identity freely. And I did so with people from completely different backgrounds. This experience challenged me to move beyond thinking about my religious identity as a personal interest to something which could serve as a foundation for a larger social responsibility.”

### **The Hillel Sukkah**

Shortly after F.A.I.T.H.’s first meeting that fall, during the Jewish festival of Sukkot, the sukkah (a tent-like structure set up outdoors to celebrate the holiday) at Hillel was vandalized. Sukkot, one of three Jewish pilgrimage holidays, is a week-long holiday which takes place in the fall, and the sukkah, according to student Jon Canel, “is a sacred space for the length of the holiday.” So defacing a sukkah is “akin to going up to a church and spray-painting the walls.”<sup>5</sup> Another student, Amy Kroll, found the vandalism very unsettling. “I went over and looked,” she said, “and got really scared. I don’t understand who would do that.” While the police conducted their own investigation, Stanford’s President, John Hennessy, issued a statement in which he described the incident as “distressing and of deep concern. An incident that demonstrates such disrespect to any members of the Stanford community,” he said, “is not to be tolerated.

“When Anand woke up to the report of the incident in the Monday morning issue of the Stanford Daily, he knew that he had to say something. “I came up with a few paragraphs and I sent it out to student leaders as well as the religious communities on the Stanford mailing list.” As part of this letter, Anand told his fellow students that “the vandalism of a holy structure is unacceptable to me as a person of faith. I am personally hurt when mosques are razed, churches are burned, synagogues are broken,” he said.<sup>6</sup> “I cannot stand silently when the sanctity of another is at stake.” He concluded by saying, “I hope many of you will, today, articulate to your own communities why such an act of vandalism is an affront to us all.” Shortly after the incident, Anand

and Ansaf announced that F.A.I.T.H. would sponsor a day of interfaith service as a way to demonstrate how members of the Stanford community could work together on issues that were significant to the Stanford community.<sup>7</sup>

### **"I remember the exact moment"**

Ansaf remembers the defining moment in his own life when the importance of interfaith engagement became clear to him. "I was in 8th grade," he recalls, "and I was walking to the mosque with my parents, and my mom was wearing a head scarf, when a group of teenagers pulled up and rolled down their window and started yelling profanities and saying, 'Get out of here. Go home to your own country.' It wasn't until that moment that I realized that some people saw me like this. Before that, I just saw myself as a regular American: I listened to rap, I went to school, etc. I was born in America and lived just eight blocks away. That moment changed the way I started seeing my own identity as well as what I needed to do. That's really what happened with Hillel right here at Stanford. It made us think about how we can tell a different story when things like this happen."<sup>8</sup>

Growing up in Beaverton, Oregon, Ansaf and his family were very involved with the Muslim community. "It was a staple while I was growing up and all the way through high school," he notes. "My parents helped start the first mosque in Beaverton. We started out in the home of a family friend and eventually moved into a mosque." He also remembers attending Sunday school at the mosque and being involved in youth activities. "The Muslim population in the greater Portland area," said Ansaf, "has grown significantly over the last two decades, due in large part to the high tech boom and an influx in refugees. My mother, who along with my father came to the United States from Pakistan, has worked to help settle the refugees as well as deal with the issues that they encounter as Muslim minorities in this culture."

Against this backdrop, Ansaf attended private Christian schools. "In terms of my interfaith understanding, my passion for it really stems from the intersection of my involvement in the Muslim community and my Christian education. Because of the way I was brought up—with a strong Muslim tradition and education in Christian contexts—I was automatically attuned to appreciating religion and spirituality in all its forms. It was after 9-11, though, when I started to get more actively involved in interfaith work, in part because as a Muslim I found myself in awkward situations and faced forms of subtle and sometimes not-so-subtle discrimination. I attended a Catholic high school that was easily 90% white and 90% Catholic, and I really wanted to provide a different view of Muslim-Americans. It seemed like the best way to do this was through taking on a leadership role. Starting freshman year, I was in student government and by my senior year, I was student body president. I used those platforms to engage the idea of religious diversity. Looking back, it seems like I had two options: I could bow down, go with the flow and laugh at the jokes, and just wait until things got better, or I could stand up and do something about it."

### **Ignore or engage Westboro?**

Westboro Baptist Church says that it has "conducted over 40,000 protests since 1991, all in an effort to warn Americans against accepting gay rights and to fight the 'modern militant homosexual movement.'"<sup>9</sup> For the most part, WBC has carried out these demonstrations in front of government buildings, on college campuses, and even at the funerals of American soldiers. But since early 2009, the group began to select targets in the American Jewish community as well, showing up at synagogues, Jewish community centers, and Hillels on college campuses, carrying signs reading, "Rabbis Rape Kids," "God Hates Jews," and "Jews Killed Jesus." In 2009 alone, WBC protested at more than 200 Jewish institutions and sent thousands of anti-Semitic faxes to American Jewish officials.

On campuses throughout the country, students have tried to determine the best way to respond to WBC's presence. At Rutgers University, which has the third largest Jewish population of any campus in the United



States, more than 650 students turned out early one morning to protest WBC's planned protest in front of Rutgers Hillel. "We're so happy that all of these people came out to stand with us against hate," said Hillel Student Board President, Hillary Neher.<sup>10</sup> The counter protest included performances by student a cappella groups, joint interfaith statements, and singing the university's fight song. "[The counter protest] was peaceful and it was tasteful," said Neher. "Nobody was looking at them, nobody was acknowledging them, everyone was focused on [Rutgers Hillel] and that's exactly what we wanted."

At the University of California-Davis, many members of the campus as well as the broader community decided not to react to WBC's arrival on the University campus to protest both at Hillel as well as another Jewish group, Chabad of Davis. "I don't see the value or point in protesting these people," said Chabad's Rabbi Shmary Brownstein.<sup>11</sup> "It makes them more significant than they really are." The FBI, the Davis Police Department and the Jewish Federation of the Sacramento Region all advised communities against counter protests. "The reason we're [saying this] is that a counter protest is exactly what this group wants," said Davis Police Lt. Tom Waltz. "They'll do anything they can to evoke a response from counter protesters. What we don't want is for someone to get in a situation where they can get sued, since that is what keeps [WBC] going."

When WBC came to the University of Chicago, over 100 members of the University community used WBC's presence as a reason to have a party. They carried signs with slogans such as "God hates the new Facebook," "God <3s Internet porn," and "God hates dial-up" in an effort to mock WBC's trademark "God Hates Fags" poster.<sup>12</sup> Anticipating WBC's arrival, Alpha Delta Phi fraternity brothers lined their porch in bathrobes. The Chicago Maroon reported that when WBC appeared, the frat brothers took off their robes and began dancing to Diana Ross & the Supremes' 'I'm Coming Out.' According to third-year student, Iah Pillsbury, "When we got down to the Seminary Co-op and Alpha Delt was dancing around in their underwear, me and Rabbi Ruthie [Goldfarb] and this priest started dancing and we got like 30 people to come over and dance." David Klein, another University of Chicago student, explained that there were many different "ideas about how to respond. There had to be a response because a lot of people were mobilizing around the issue. We came up with this idea of having a party, to turn it into a ... celebration of diversity." The festivities raised over \$500 for a local charity, Broadway Youth Center, which provides health services for the LGBTQ community.

For their part, Westboro members seemed undaunted by the variety of responses. In fact, they "were delighted" with what had taken place at the University of Chicago. "I truly and dearly love it," said the group's spokeswoman, Shirley Phelps-Roper. "It is so awesome when you juxtapose this little group of servants of God with this restless mob of humanity. These people think that they have the power ... to change God. The little girly boys up there with their clothes half off gyrating around—they might as well flip off their god."

At Stanford, email messages began circulating around campus as soon as Hillel and the Jewish Student Association (JSA) learned that Westboro was planning to picket on their campus. Joe Gettinger, JSA President and a member of one the targeted groups, wasn't certain as to the best course of action, noting that "sometimes a rally is the right response to groups like Westboro, but it's not always the best option."<sup>13</sup> At the meeting after the interfaith service on January 24, Ansaf recalled that "a lot of people had different ideas about what we should do. Some thought we should hold a very aggressive protest-rally type of thing, and others thought we should just ignore WBC and not show up at all. But Anand and I wanted to engage both of these conversations and frame the response in a way that would tell a different or alternative story, focusing specifically on the Stanford community and what we stand for."

<sup>1</sup> Anand Venkatkrishnan, "Why We Can't Wait: The Legacy and Promise of Interfaith Leadership," sermon at Stanford Memorial Church, Jan. 24, 2010.

<sup>2</sup> Anti-Defamation League, "Westboro Baptist Church," <http://www.adl.org/>.

<sup>3</sup> Anand Venkatkrishnan and Ansaf Kareem, interview with the author, Feb. 2010.

<sup>4</sup> Anand Venkatkrishnan, interview with the author, Jan. 2010.

<sup>5</sup> Eric Messenger, "Jewish Religious Structure Vandalized," Stanford Daily, Oct. 5, 2009, <http://www.stanforddaily.com/2009/10/05/jewish-religious-structure-at-hillel-house-vandalized/>.

- <sup>6</sup> Anand Venkatkrishnan, letter, Oct. 5, 2009.
- <sup>7</sup> Eboo Patel and Cassie Meyer, "Engaging Religious Diversity on Campus: The Role of Interfaith Leadership," *Journal of College & Character*, Vol. X, No. 7, Nov. 2009, p. 4.
- <sup>8</sup> Ansaf Kareem, interview with the author, Feb. 2010.
- <sup>9</sup> Matthew Berger, "Anti-gay church sets its sights on Jews," *USA Today*, Nov. 13, 2009, [http://www.usatoday.com/news/religion/2009-11-13-westboro-gay-jewish\\_N.htm](http://www.usatoday.com/news/religion/2009-11-13-westboro-gay-jewish_N.htm).
- <sup>10</sup> John S. Clyde, "Hundreds counter Westboro Baptist Church protest," *Daily Targum*, Oct. 28, 2009, <http://www.dailytargum.com/news/hundreds-counter-westboro-baptist-church-protest-1.2040953>.
- <sup>11</sup> Lauren Steussy, "Westboro Baptist Church to protest non campus tomorrow," *The California Aggie*, Feb. 4, 2010, <http://theaggie.org/article/2010/02/04/westboro-baptist-church-to-protest-on-campus-tomorrow>.
- <sup>12</sup> Nathalie Gorman, "Westboro Church protest meets students' mocking," *Chicago Maroon*, Mar. 10, 2009, <http://www.chicagomaroon.com/2009/3/10/westboro-church-protest-meets-students-mocking>.
- <sup>13</sup> Joe Gettinger, interview with the author, Mar. 2010.





## Westboro is coming to town. What do you stand for? Part 2

Joe Gettinger was at first hesitant about responding to WBC, worrying about attracting attention for the group. But as student response grew on campus, he became convinced that some type of rally was the way to go. "There was so much energy on campus around this and it seemed better to channel it into something rather than bottle it up."<sup>1</sup> Referring to F.A.I.T.H.'s involvement in the October incident at Hillel, Gettinger asked Anand and Ansaf to get involved. "This is something that I think you guys should be at the forefront of ... I don't want this to be just Hillel and the GLBT community." Collaborating with event organizers, particularly the Jewish Student Association and Hillel, Gettinger said that F.A.I.T.H. contacted all the different religious communities on campus. They also attached a letter to the emails that organizers were sending out to all Stanford students emphasizing the importance of campus involvement. In its message, F.A.I.T.H. stated that "If we did not stand alongside Jews, gays and lesbians, or any other group that may be maligned this Friday, we would not be the Hindus and Muslims we strive to be. This isn't a call to protest against Westboro, it's rather a call to stand together to show who we are as a community and what we stand for."<sup>2</sup>

Police estimated that between 800-1000 members of the Stanford community attended the early morning rally. According to the Stanford Daily, students began to appear more than an hour ahead of the Kansas group's 8:10 a.m. arrival time. "By the time the five Westboro members arrived on the corner of Campus Drive and Mayfield Avenue, Hillel's front lawn was full and people were standing five deep on the other side of the road."<sup>3</sup> Ansaf was both pleased with and surprised at the turnout for the Westboro event. "We haven't had that kind of rally with these numbers before. It was a very good day for us." He added that "it's pretty unusual at Stanford to get so many students to show up, especially at 8 a.m. in the morning. We want to get involved in things, but in general, we're not a very activist campus in the sense of going to rallies or protests."

"We really built the event as a celebration of our own unity as a community, or our pluralism, and

### Stanford United: Our Purpose and Pledge

**We stand united**, affirming that the Westboro Baptist Church group, itself, is inconsequential.

**We stand united**, because the hate represented by this group, nonetheless, exists in our country and our world.

**We stand united**, because that hate causes pain and injustices that affect our lives and our communities.

**We stand united**, because widespread hate begins with targeted hate.

**We stand united** at Hillel, because today Hillel was targeted, and we know that tomorrow it will be another's home.

**We stand united, and we pledge:** When we are no longer at Stanford, we will go to the home of those who are unjustly targeted— whoever they may be. We will speak out with them. We will act, united with them, and together, we will create a better world.

**I stand today, and I pledge:** I will join with those who are like me and those who are different from me in speaking out against hate. I pledge to wake up when hate arrives at my neighbor's door, and to fight hate, at my doorstep and yours.

**We stand united**, from diverse secular cultures and religious traditions.

**We stand united**, gay and straight, bisexual and transgendered.

**We stand united**, from diverse ethnic and racial backgrounds.

**We stand united**, and with the power of our bodies and our voices, we overcome the ugliness of hate.

**We stand united**, affirming acceptance and inclusiveness.

**We stand united**, affirming respect and diversity.

**We are STANFORD UNITED.**

