

ANNA CHALLET

Thinking Outside the Mosque

On learning to be Muslim in America

If the American Muslim community has a tendency to isolate itself, to retreat from the rest of American society, Zaytuna College is where that insularity comes to die. At the only accredited Muslim college in the United States, students spend a lot of time thinking about what it means to be American.

Zaytuna is located on “Holy Hill” in Berkeley, just around the corner from the Graduate Theological Union, a consortium of Christian seminaries affiliated with University of California, Berkeley. The college emerged from the Zaytuna Institute, an Islamic educational organization founded in nearby Hayward in 1996. The college admitted its first class in 2010 and was accredited by the Western Association of Schools and Colleges earlier this year.

The school has sixty students, split roughly equally between men and women. About half are from California, and the rest are from other parts of the United States. Students don’t take out loans and graduate debt-free, although most of them receive financial assistance from the school, which is supported by individual American Muslim donors.

Zaytuna offers only one bachelor’s degree, in Islamic law and theology, but the curriculum combines Islamic and Western teachings. If students are going to be Muslims in the United States, Zaytuna believes they need to understand the country’s history and founding principles.

Religious study isn’t enough at this college. Islam may be the world’s second-largest religion, but in the United States, it is the subject of much misunderstanding and even hatred, and its adherents are often maligned. At Zaytuna, young Muslims are asked to figure out the future of their faith in America.

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Dawood Yasin.

Nirav Bhardwaj

“I’m an American and I’m a Muslim and those things can go together,” says Nirav Bhardwaj, a twenty-five-year-old sophomore at Zaytuna. “Unfortunately, people think being Muslim means hiding in a little pocket,” says Bhardwaj. “That’s not what it’s about.”

Bhardwaj is a convert to Islam. He was raised Hindu. Both of his parents are from Rajasthan in northern India.

Bhardwaj says he was “Islamophobic” in college. But after graduating from University of California, Irvine, with a degree in business administration, Bhardwaj got what he describes as his “dream job,” working for a major league baseball team doing statistics for scouting and player

development. While traveling with the team, he became disillusioned. “We had players who were married,” he says, “and that just went out the window when they were out at the clubs. It was all about seeking immediate satisfaction. I started asking myself, ‘What are you doing? What benefit does baseball provide society anyway? What is the purpose of life?’”

Around that time, a Muslim friend shared some Islamic lectures with Bhardwaj. “I opened a Koran and started reading it, and it worked,” he says.

Bhardwaj decided to travel in the Muslim world and quit his job. He and his friend went to Egypt. It was there that Bhardwaj converted, while studying with a local sheik in 6th of October City outside Cairo.

There was tension when he returned home. “I don’t think I’ve ever made my mom cry except for two times,” he says, “and one of those times was when I told her I converted.”

Bhardwaj says his mother has become supportive after seeing how he has found his place at Zaytuna. Bhardwaj was drawn to the college to study Islamic principles of economics and transactional law.

“I think Muslims have a lot to offer in the field of finance,” he says, especially given “the corruption on Wall Street.”

Dawood Yasin

Zaytuna’s coordinator of learning outside the classroom, Dawood Yasin, says the college wants students “to think outside the *masjid*,” using the Arabic word for mosque.

“How are we going to engage the broader community if we’re only working within our own community?” he asks.

Yasin is also a convert. He was raised Catholic and is a fourth-generation native of Nantucket, Massachusetts. So it’s pretty ironic, he says, “when people give me the finger and say, ‘Go back to your country!’”

Yasin worked as a fashion model in the 1990s in New York, Paris, and South Africa. It was while working in South Africa that he converted.

“A lot of times conversion stories are about hitting rock bottom, but I was doing quite well in South Africa, doing TV, and print, and runway,” he says. “But I was asking myself, ‘What does this all mean?’”

After converting, Yasin backpacked around the Muslim world and studied at an Islamic seminary in Damascus, eventually coming back to the United States, working as an Arabic teaching assistant at Yale and later studying at Dartmouth.

At Zaytuna, he leads service education trips with students, in which they work with non-Muslims through organizations such as Habitat for Humanity and with state forestry departments. He also sets up volunteer experiences for students at places such as domestic violence shelters. Some students traveled to Ferguson, Missouri, last year after the death of Michael Brown, to work as community organizers.

Yasin’s focus with the students is not a “feel-good Islam,” he says. Yasin wants students to think about their faith in the context of issues such as poverty and the environment.

“How do I buy that pint of strawberries that I know is being picked by people who don’t have access to healthcare or education?” he asks students, when “the Koran is telling me to eat that which is pure.”

“The Koran talks to you through the natural world,” Yasin says. “It’s talking about the mountains and the sky and the rivers and the stars.”

He adds: “The Koran serves as a reminder to you to be mindful of your responsibility.”

Iman Hamze

Sophomore Iman Hamze is a nineteen-year-old Bay Area native. A first-generation American, her mother is South African and her father is Lebanese. She was raised Muslim.

Part of what attracted Hamze to Zaytuna was the chance to study Arabic intensively. She eventually wants to teach the language, “so that more people can know what the religion is really about. If you can read the Koran, you can figure out the religion for yourself, so it’s not just people feeding it to you.”

Hamze has three older sisters, but she’s the only one of the children in her family to wear the hijab, the head covering worn by some Muslim women, which is not required at Zaytuna. “My mom wore the hijab and really wanted me to,” she says. “And I never really cared what people thought.”

For Hamze, wearing the hijab hasn’t been isolating. On the contrary, it’s been a way for her to connect with non-Muslims.

“I guess people have this idea of women in Islam, that they’re oppressed,” Hamze says. “For me the hijab is empowering. I like that it makes me stand out. People ask me about it. Or they ask me about the way I live my life. And I can talk to them and they can see that we’re just like everyone else.”

Colleen Keyes

“Things are really bleak in the Muslim world,” says Colleen Keyes, the dean of students at Zaytuna. “There’s so much suffering.”

Keyes believes these “miserable conditions” draw people to extremist Islamic groups. But, she says, those radical views reflect ignorance of Muslim traditions, and “people around the world are hungry for solid scholarship and thought that makes sense.”



Colleen Keyes.

Originally from New Haven, Connecticut, Keyes was raised Catholic. She converted to Islam in the late 1980s. She was teaching English at a community college and had several Muslim students. She wanted to learn more about Islam and in the process realized that the religion resonated with her in ways that Catholicism hadn't.

Her family was taken aback, especially when she began praying five times a day and fasting during Ramadan. "My mom said, 'Can't you find an easier religion?'" says Keyes. "And my sister said, 'I give her six months.'"

Keyes taught at an Islamic university in the United Arab Emirates in the 1990s, before returning to the United States to work in community college administration.

Keyes is the first woman in administration at Zaytuna. "Some of the women wish there were more female scholars," she says. "I tell them that when they get their Ph.D. they can come back and be those female scholars. We're waiting."

She adds: "American Muslim women have high goals. As they pursue those goals, there will be change. Change has always been part of the Islamic tradition. Wherever it has gone, it has adapted to its environment. I don't know how there could be anything but change." **B**

Note

All photographs courtesy Zaytouna College.

