

# Muslim students find Catholic haven

BY KRISTEN WHITNEY DANIELS [KDANIELS@NCRONLINE.ORG](mailto:KDANIELS@NCRONLINE.ORG)



Hate

—Courtesy of Manhattan College Manhattan College students, faculty and alumni, including Mehnaaz Afridi (second from left) and Haris Ali (right), attend an event with New York Mayor Bill de Blasio and London's first Muslim mayor, Sadiq Khan in September in New York City.



—Courtesy of University of Dayton  
Tamer Almadani, right, a member of the University of Dayton Muslim Student Association, describes the Quran to faculty member Scott Schneider at the March 2015 University of Dayton International Festival.

—Courtesy of Amal Al-Rasheed  
Amal Al-Rasheed, center, practices the “dabbing” dance move with friends, following her performance in the University of Dayton’s Hijabi Monologues in spring 2016.

crimes against Muslim Americans have increased to a level unseen since the aftermath of the Sept. 11 attacks in 2001. According to a study by the Center for the Study of Hate and Extremism at California State University, San Bernardino, hate crimes in 2015 against American Muslims were up 78 percent since the previous year.

Though it is often difficult to avoid the rhetoric surrounding Islam, some Muslim students have found an unexpected haven in Catholic universities and colleges.

Manhattan College engineering student Haris Ali, 20, is no stranger to the Catholic faith. He has attended Catholic school almost his entire life, so when it came time to choose a college, the Catholic values of Manhattan College weighed heavily in his decision. Although the school in Riverdale, N.Y., was not Ali’s first choice — his exact response was “absolutely not” — his parents encouraged him to go there because of its reputation, scholarships and the “Catholic community, family lifestyle.”

“My mother kind of saw it as overlying principles. She knew that sending me there would be really good because it wouldn’t contradict the environment at home and the environment at school,” said Ali.

Ali is the current president of the Muslim Student Association at his college, and has found the Lasallian school to be a welcoming environment for himself and other Muslim students.

“I think they come here because they feel as if their beliefs might be more well-protected in a Catholic school, because at the core of this school is Lasallian Catholic principles,” he said. “Maybe they look for that brotherhood or sisterhood when they come, hoping not to be judged — whereas they might be in a non-Catholic university, non-Christian university.”

Ali knows judgment and discrimination firsthand. He hasn’t had any trouble at Manhattan College or any Catholic school, but he had difficulties during his enrollment in public school from fifth to ninth grade.

“I did face heavy scrutiny when I was in public school,” he said. “I was bullied and I was beaten up and I was attacked as being a ‘terrorist.’ ” When asked why he thought he didn’t have a similar experience at Catholic schools, he attributed it to a shared sense of community and principles.

Mehnaz Afridi, the Muslim Student Association adviser at Manhattan College and director of the school’s Holocaust, Genocide and Interfaith Education Center, agrees. As a Muslim,

she said Manhattan College has been a great place to work. "It really is one of those places you're accepted as equal," said Afridi.

"In the larger world, of course, you know being a Muslim and teaching Islam is very difficult," she said. "But I think here you're given a lot more comfort, a lot more support and you know if anything happens, people are always very concerned. So I think that it's a very welcoming community."

Amal Al-Rasheed, 20, a political science student at the University of Dayton in Ohio and the acting president of its Muslim Student Association, has also felt a similar sense of community.

Originally from Saudi Arabia, Al-Rasheed attends the university along with her four siblings. She initially had concerns about fitting into the campus culture, especially because she wears a hijab and abaya, leaving only her feet, hands, eyes and forehead exposed. However, she had very little trouble integrating.

"It was really weird at the beginning but then when I got into it and had conversations with friends and classmates, I felt like it was not a really big deal," she said. "They [the other students] do not really care about that."

Although making up a relatively small percentage of students at all schools, Muslim student enrollment at Catholic colleges has increased significantly since 2010, according to the annual reports on enrolling freshman from UCLA's Higher Education Research Institute.

In 2010, students who identified as Muslim only represented 0.6 percent of the entering freshman class at Catholic colleges. In 2015, this more than doubled to 1.4 percent of freshmen students identifying as Muslim.

At some Catholic colleges, the increase has been even more drastic.

According to Peter McHugh, communications director at Manhattan College, the number of students there identifying as Muslim has nearly doubled in the past three years.

Omer Mozaffar, an adjunct professor of theology and the Muslim chaplain at Loyola University Chicago, reports that there are 200 freshman students at Loyola this year who identify as Muslim and the number is "growing each year."

Officials at the University of Dayton said that the number of its students who list their religious preference as Muslim has steadily increased from 30 in 2010 to 193 in 2015.

For many of these schools, students are not required to disclose religious preferences, so numbers could be even higher.

Then there is Benedictine University in Lisle, Ill., where other schools' numbers look modest in comparison. Benedictine reports that out of all the students who indicate a religion, 20 percent identify as Muslim. This summer, the administration hired Ali Yurtsever as the

school's first Muslim faith adviser because of the burgeoning Muslim enrollment. Yurtsever, who previously worked at Jesuit-run Georgetown University, will serve as the adviser to staff, faculty and Muslim students.

Yurtsever sees his new employment as more than a Muslim chaplain, but as a bridge between the faiths.

"I believe that when people get together and share ideas, it changes thought, and [when people] come together for different events, they get to know each other and that increases respect in terms of different faiths," he said. "So this is what I'm going to do here. This is why they hired me here."

Ideas for the reasons behind the increased Muslim enrollment vary. Many faculty members cite location and reputation. Mozaffar explained that a lot of the Muslim enrollment has to do with Loyola University Chicago's location near predominantly Muslim suburbs.

Afridi feels that Manhattan College's promotion of service learning is a big draw for Muslim students, who see service as a pillar of their Islamic faith.

Amy Anderson, executive director of the Center for International Programs at the University of Dayton, sees the school's respect for all faiths as a comfort to families and students who wish to enroll.

"What I've heard from students, and some students' families, is that they can appreciate being here and faith is something that is cherished and honored and respected and something that you share and talk about," she said. "I think that part from what students have told me is that they feel very comfortable here as Muslims because they don't feel judged by their faith, and that's really an important thing — to feel comfortable and welcome."

Part of that respect includes prayer spaces and promotion of Muslim student groups. Many Catholic schools have active Muslim student associations that often serve a dual purpose of supportive space for Muslims as well as means to educate non-Muslims.

"I held an event last year and the majority that came weren't Muslim," said Ali, who oversees a core group of about 60 students in Manhattan College's Muslim Student Association. "A lot of the [campus] ministry comes. It's not like people don't want to know, they really want to know, and that's good to know."

Currently the only woman in the University of Dayton's Muslim Student Association, Al-Rasheed is working to creating a more inclusive group for both Muslims and non-Muslims. She has particularly seen success when embracing the similarities between Catholics and Muslims, like when the group held a discussion on Jesus and Islam.

What it really comes down to, for many of the staff members at these Catholic universities, is honoring their school's own Catholic tradition and values.

"We're a Lasallian Catholic college, so one of the things, part of our mission, is to welcome all faiths. Even if you're not Catholic, you're a Lasallian, which is very cool," Afridi said. "It's a very welcoming aspect in terms of the college itself."

At University of Dayton, "having Muslim students helps us to remember we created this environment because we're Catholic — that we're mutually enriched by our interactions and our understanding of our identity as Catholics and Muslims," Anderson said. "We're really called to do that, it's who we are. It's important to remind ourselves that there's a reason why we do this and it is because we're Catholic that we do."

**See this article in the e-Edition [Here](#)**