

Religious Violence and Muslim youths reactions

In today's post 9/11 America everyone has heard of reports of racial stereotyping and acts of religious violence to individuals and mosques. In this case religious violence refers to any act, physical or verbal, that has religious undertones to it that causes harm to an individual. While attending a prestigious university it is easy to say that religious violence does not happen here, the people are educated and supposedly open minded, but the fact is that there are numerous acts of religious violence perpetrated every day. The question I wanted to know is what do the people who are the victims of religious violence do in response and if they have any prejudices against who they feel is most likely to perpetrate the violence. In order to do this I have interviewed five individuals, four of whom are practicing Muslims, and one will be an experience that a nonreligious individual had with religious violence. In the end These stories will show that both sides hold prejudices and that the victims would not be likely to fight back but would turn to their fellow Muslims for support.

For my first interview I talked to my old roommate Brian. We met at the Espresso Royal in the Undergrad library. We both ordered a coffee and sat down as I began to tell him about my project. After I was done explaining it to him he jumped right into a story he had where he witnessed a case of religious violence first hand. It happened two years ago when we had lived with each other during the fall. It was a nice weekend and Brian was riding his bike back home from watching a show at the Canopy club. He decided to ride past Kam's and C.O's to see if anything amusing was going on, such as some drunken people staggering home. It was around one thirty in the

morning as he got closer to the bars.

While still on the quad he spotted four clearly drunk guys outside being loud and having a cigarette, he thought they were probably some frat guys by the way they looked and talked. As he got closer an Indian student was walking past the drunk men when all of a sudden one of them shouted at the student that he looked at him weird. At this point Brian slows down as he gets closer to Wright street. As he crosses the street he could here the drunk men yelling racist things at the student such as raghead, terrorist and finally the “go home Muhammad.” At first the student tried to ignore the verbal abuse but when they shouted at him to go home he started to defend himself by yelling back at them something Brian could not make out. Brian is now off his bike across the street from this scene stopping because he thinks things will get much worse. The drunk men by now have surrounded the student and have started to shove him. Brian walks over to try to stop them but one of the drunks breaks from the circle and punches Brian in the face knocking him over. The drunk then returns to the circle where they have now started to punch the student, he falls over and then the drunks start kicking him. By now some of the people in the bars have noticed something going on outside and the cops and an ambulance is called for. When the drunks men hear that the cops have been called they run away leaving the beaten student still on the ground. When the cops arrive Brian gives a police report on the incident and then walks his bike the rest of the way home.

The next day he checks the newspaper to see what happened of the event. He flips to the page of the DI that has all of the police reports written up and spots a little article about the incident and when he gets to the end is disappointed to see that the four

drunks got away. The only consolation from the event was an article a week or two later about the growing rates of racial violence where that story was just one of many. After he finishes his story he remarks on how he simply can not believe that educated college students would be able to act in such a horrible way. Brian grew up in suburban Chicago so was accustomed to diversity but he could not see how anyone could be that mean and ignorant, the student they beat was not even Arab but Indian. It seemed that just because he had dark skin he was labeled a Muslim and therefore a target. Brian also again mentions that the drunk men that did it looked like they were in a frat and that this lowers his already low opinion of fraternities. Since that incident Brian has always avoided going past those bars at night. As we both finished up our drinks we talked about old times and said goodbye.

My next interview was with Nora, a twenty two year old Malaysian Muslim that I had known for about a year. She has been in the country for about three years now and has lived in Champaign most of that time except for the three months she stayed in New York city for an internship. We meet up at the Union courtyard café where I sit down with her and her friend Omar. I start out by asking her how she had felt about coming to the United States, whether she had been scared or not. She responds with a yes, she was afraid of how people would treat her since she always wears her hijab. She admits that she bought into all of the American stereotypes, and her mother even warned her about wearing her hijab in America and suggested that it might be better if she just did not wear it while living here.

When she arrived in the United States the first thing she did was follow her mothers advice. She took off her hijab and bought a big snow hat that was able to cover

all of her hair. After a couple of weeks living in Champaign she felt comfortable enough to lose the snow hat and wear her black hijab again. Since Nora came over as a sponsored student she had to quickly look for a job to get some money to spend. Soon enough she got some work at the Union Rec. room. The job was simple enough hand out bowling shoes, collect money and clean up a little. One night there was a loud and annoying group bowling that gave everyone working that night a sense of trouble. After the group was done bowling they all returned their shoes without paying for the game. So Nora had to go over to them to collect it. However, when she approached the group and asked for the money a loud black girl responded in a rude way that she did not have to pay because she believed in Jesus as her savior. At first Nora was confused, she could not understand what Jesus had to do with paying for a bowling game. After a few seconds she realized that the woman was hassling her because she was wearing her black hijab. Nora, not afraid to back down from the group, despite being a rather tiny person, persisted until they finally paid. She then returned to behind the counter where she was still slightly confused about the whole incident. Her Co-workers, some of which that night were also Muslim, came to talk about her bravery to standing up to the loud group of mean customers. A few weeks after that incident her friend, who also wears hijab, was walking down a campus road when a car slowed down next to her. She stopped to turn to look and immediately got pelted with drinks and some racist profanity which Nora was too reluctant to share.

After those stories I asked her about her time in New York. She right away said that it was better there “more diversity and the people are more open minded.” Nora also said that there were some perks to being a Muslim in New York, she received quite a

few free cab rides and even got some free soda and food when she went out with her friends. After being in New York she notices a lot more little things when she goes out in Champaign. She receives comments about her hijab in the line for food in the dorms and she notices people staring when she goes out with friends at night. I then ask her if she could describe the person she felt would be more likely to abuse someone because they were Muslim. She responded by describing a young to middle age white uneducated male and added that he would probably be from the southern states and of course, half jokingly, loud black girls.

Nora then looked at a clock and realized she had to get to work so she left me sitting with Omar. Omar, like Nora, is also a sponsored Malaysian Muslim and also works at the Union Rec. room. He is twenty years old and has lived here for two. Unlike Nora, Omar has traveled to more than two states, including San Francisco California, Boulder Colorado, and Austin Texas. I asked him the same question I asked Nora, how he felt coming to America. He said that he too bought into the stereotypes of the American, loud, dumb and not religious. Unlike Nora, Omar does not have a single instance of religious violence that jumps to mind, he attributes this to the fact that he looks more “Chinese” and not at all what a typical person would think a Muslim would look like. He does say that when he is with a group of friends at night going out they receive some stares. I ask Omar to describe who he thinks would be most likely to harass Muslims and he describes the same person as Nora; white, young to middle age and probably not well educated, he also adds that he thinks frat guys would be more willing harass them too. I asked who he would turn to if he was ever harassed and he responded by adamantly saying his other Malaysian friends, “they just would be able to

understand better.” He ended our conversation by saying the way to stop religious violence would be to educate them about it is they don’t understand, “I try to present the good side of Islam, they see all of the bad things enough on the news. You need to break down the stereotype of the Muslim, show them the generous side that allows for social growth.” We then got up shook hands and left the Union.

A few days later I went to talk to my other friend Mary at the Union. Mary is a twenty one year of Muslim originally from Jordan but has spent the past nineteen years in the United States. She is very active in the Muslim and Arab student organizations, with a special interest in the Palestinian Israeli conflict, like many Arab college students here. When I explained my project to her she immediately overwhelmed me with tons of names places and events. I slowed her down and asked for her to start again. She began with saying that her cousins mosque had closed for two weeks after 9/11 due to vandalism. Some people thought best to take out their aggression on the mosque by throwing stones at it, breaking all the windows in the process. She then quickly starts another story of a friend who worked at a restaurant making food in the back. An elderly white man came in to pick up food, saw that there was a Muslim girl making the food and immediately started shouting that the food was not clean and spit on it then threw it at the girl making it. The man then shouted “How can you have one of them working here!” with his finger pointed straight at the Girl wearing the hijab making the food.

Again without hesitation she delves right into another story about her brother. He is twenty five and while riding the train to New York City was talking to his mother on his cell phone. He spoke in Arabic and noticed that the man next to him left rather

abruptly after he had started using Arabic. After a while the Man returns and the train comes to a stop. A few FBI agents board the train and take Mary's brother into interrogation. He spent over twenty four hours being held and was interrogated for much of it. The authorities did not believe his story but after a while reluctantly let him go. I barely have time to finish my notes on the last story when she begins another about her older sister who worked for Washington Mutual in New York. Mary's sister had been wearing the hijab for about a year when she started to get complaints from customers about it. None of her clients wanted to deal with her and asked for their accounts to be transferred to someone else, she promptly quit her job due to the harassment. In all of these cases those abused turned to their immediate family and close network of friends.

I asked Mary if anything has happened to her personally and she says no. She has always felt comfortable living in Champaign, partly because she does not wear the hijab. She does, however say that there are quite a few ignorant people around that would harass Muslims and that she would stand up for herself and try to initiate a civil conversation to try to educate them about Islam. I asked her to describe who she thinks would harass Muslims and like both Nora and Omar she said young to middle aged white guy with little education, most likely from the south. I asked her if she feels uncomfortable anywhere in the U.S. and she just said one word, airports. As she was about to get up to leave she said "Whites are so secluded into themselves, they seclude themselves around their own concerns and don't care about any others." With that she walked out of the room.

My last interview was with another twenty two year old Malaysian Muslim

named Shams. He has been here for only about three years and in that time he has spent most of that time in Chicago and Champaign. I ask if he has ever been the victim of religious violence, he responds with a no, but he gets a lot of people that come up to him to ask questions about Muslims. When they do that he just tells them about all the good aspects of it and claims that most of the misunderstanding comes from the media, “the media fuels religious misunderstanding, I turn on fox news or CNN and I hear the same thing Islamic terrorists and misunderstood Qur’anic verses.” Media aside I ask him to describe who he thinks would perpetrate religious violence, his response was very different from all the others, “Its not a single kind of person, its not about race or that its about understanding.” When asked what he would do and who he would turn to after being the victim of religious violence he responded by saying that, “I would turn to the Malaysian community and then the police, but honestly I would try to keep it to myself.” And as for retaliation he would point out where the person is wrong and try to eliminate the misunderstanding. Although the closest thing he has experienced to being harassed is when he traveled to the south once and went to the bathroom, the stall door read “Go home Muslim!” He also says that if he cannot find an empty room to pray he does it out in the open where he receives plenty of stares. He gets up to leave and says that the only solution to end it is knowledge.

After having conducted the interviews there are some very interesting trends that have surfaced. The first is the glaring fact that race and gender are important factors of determining whether or not one will get harassed. It seems the majority of the cases have happened to females who can be easily identified by wearing the hijab. Another fact is that racism also seems to be a big factor here. The Indian student from Brian’s

story was singled out for his dark complexion and looking like he could be from the Middle Eastern Area. Whereas the Malaysian students don't get harassed that much because as Omar puts it they look "Chinese" and there is a large number of Asian students living on campus which would mean that the people in this area are used to being around Asian, they are all grouped into one category that is seen as not being Muslim. When I told them the story of the Indian student that Brian had told me earlier they all seemed shocked but admitted that it was not unlikely for that to happen here, after all we are basically in the south, Omar would say.

Another interesting point is that while American's stereotype Muslims they also stereotype us. All of the Malaysian students said that when they left home to come live here they were sort of afraid. Afraid of the young to middle aged white man. Anyone that travels abroad can tell you the locals generally have a low view of Americans. It has usually been that we are rude and loud but now its that we are rude, loud, stupid and violent, both Shams and Omar said they were surprised not everyone here owned guns, due to the constant news of murders and the fact that the U.S. has about three firearms per person in the United States. After they heard the Brian story many made an amendment to the description they gave me of who would perpetrate religious violence to include frat guys. Another point of interest is the support groups that these Muslims turn too. They just don't turn to any Muslim group or person but to the same ethnic group that they come from. While the Malaysian Muslims obviously knew other people and Muslims they all made a point to specifically emphasize that they would turn to other Malaysians for support. This could be due to the fact that they don't fit any specific stereotype of a Muslim and that they feel that other Malaysians would be better able to

empathize with them. While most said that they would try to engage in a discourse with the perpetrator none actually knows if when it comes down to it in real life that it would be of any use at all.

These interviews have given up lots of information about how Muslim youth would react to religious violence. While my first theory was correct in that they too hold us to unfair stereotypes the second one was not. Nora was the only one to find herself in a situation where she was harassed because of her religion and she did fight back. For anyone that has seen her, it would be a surprise that someone so small would have the courage to respond too and point out too a person much larger that they are wrong. It is also very interesting to find that race is a very important factor about how those view Muslims and how Muslims view us. While we try to claim that in today's modern world there is no such thing as race, these stories can clearly show that race is an important factor in how we see and interact with our surroundings.