

## **Ronnie Scalo Taj and Zakir Syed Scholarship Letter**

American attitudes towards Islam and Islamic civilizations are warped by a notion of ownership over world politics. Internationally, the people who practice Islam and live in Islamic societies are a vast and diverse group and should not be reduced to the object of American arguments. The subject of Islam has been simultaneously demeaned and mystified, creating a false idea in the American consciousness that paints Islam as both outdated and simplistic as well as radical and dangerous. In truth Islam is a religion that contains multitudes, contradictions, and complexities, in the same way Christianity does, but it has come to represent a political other. Learning about Islam and Islamic civilization is the best way to demystify Islam and to deconstruct the bias political view of the religion that most Americans have been fed.

I have taken two classes which provided significant insight into Islam. The first was Abrahamic Religions which focused solely on the early religious practice, the second was Into to The Middle East which followed Islam's development as not only a religion but a political foundation for a society which still exists today. Americans have a lot of what they see as righteous objections to what they have been taught are the ideals of Islam. The issues many progressive Americans take with Muslim majority nations are things like lack of women's rights and separation of religion and politics. My Intro to the Middle East class forced us to confront these notions and think about how they reflected on ourselves.

The issues we take with others are frequently the reflection of our own insecurities. As someone who was born and raised in California, my liberal parents always held the American south in contempt as a backward place. The issues they had with the south were the misogyny and overt Christian influence on government. The very same issues so many have with what they imagine Islamic society to be. This is not to say that Islam and Islamic society are utopian and above the issues Americans project onto them. Islam has been forced into the role of the canvas on which we paint the darkest parts of ourselves, not because it is particularly suited for it but because by putting these issues onto the other, we can distance ourselves from them. Education can close this gap. Many Americans live in areas with very few Muslim people and see Islam as a distant menacing force, but when we sit down with open minds and learn about Islam it is demystified, a real tangible thing instead of an ominous threat.

Islam is also not cordoned off on the other side of the globe, millions of Americans are Muslim, and these two things should not feel as irreconcilable as they do. Unfortunately, America is a culturally Christian nation that is hostile to other faiths. This is another issue that I believe can be remedied with education. If Islam and to a lesser extent my own faith of Judaism were simply as familiar to students in America as Christianity is, there would not be so much fear. Fear of Islam is fear of the unknown, but Islam does not have to be unknown, it is made that way by the neglect of our current education system.

The heart of the issue is that we are the same, Islam is not the other, it is a system of belief with the same strengths and flaws we find in Christianity and Judaism. Where we slight Muslim majority countries for their lack of separation of Church and state we can say the very same thing about the undue influence of Christianity on legislation in America, where we worry about human rights issues inmates in our prisons perform legal slave labor. The flaws that we see in Islamic society are not unique, they are the flaws we would see in ourselves if we didn't constantly turn a blind eye, they are flaws that plague society as a whole and we find them in Islam because are looking for someone to blame.