

Dear Taj and Zakir Syed Family Charitable Foundation,

I decided to take Intro to the Middle East to correct the gaps in my knowledge left by my high school history education. Along the way, I learned specific knowledge of Islamic history and religion that I have used to challenge prejudice and hatred in my community. Although I don't feel qualified to speak about the Muslim experience or Islamic theology on a large scale, there are many things I can do in my immediate community to make change. I can start by confronting misconceptions about Islam being a violent or oppressive religion. I can talk about the Islamic tenant of zakat and the importance Islam places on generosity, as well as justice and peace. I can speak about practices like wearing a hijab or observing Ramadan and the values of modesty, charity, and prayer that underlie these traditions.

Much of the prejudice against Muslims in my community also comes from biased information about historical wars and violence in the Middle East. My knowledge of Middle Eastern history has allowed me to speak confidently about circumstances that lead to instability in countries like Afghanistan, Palestine, Iraq, and other Muslim-majority regions. When discussing these topics, I am able to educate the people around me about the United States' long history of mistakes and damaging interventions in the Middle East that lead to greater instability and violence. I can make it clear that this instability has nothing to do with the religions or cultures of the people in the area. Instead, it is the product of a long history of destabilizing and inhumane treatment. I can also educate my community on Islamic civilization, its Golden Ages of science and art, and its long centuries of stability and prosperity. Lots of hatred is born of ignorance, and for those willing to listen, I believe that the valuable information I have gained from my history course can go a long way towards confronting these prejudices.

Finding common ground is another way to overcome prejudice that could be effective in my majority Christian community. In my Intro to the Middle East class, I learned a lot about Muslims and Christians' shared history and values. For instance, many Christians don't know that Muslims and Christians worship the same God or that Muslims believe in Jesus as a prophet. Also, many Christians may not know that Muslims share much of the same scripture, including the Gospel, Psalms, and Torah/Old Testament. These commonalities can help people remember that we as humans share more in common than we have differences between us. With my improved knowledge of Islamic theology, I feel more prepared to facilitate discussions that can bridge the gaps between people of different religions.

In the end, no matter our religion or culture, we're all human beings trying to understand the world around us and learn to be good people. I will continue to defend my Muslim friends whenever necessary and ensure they feel safe and welcomed in our community. I'm honored to be considered for this scholarship. Thank you for your time.

Sincerely,
Rowan Glenn