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Youth Interfaith Movement Thrives in United States

University students discuss religious diversity in webchat

By Carolee Walker
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Washington -- At U.S. universities with religiously diverse student bodies, students of different faiths connect with each other because each has a strong belief in something, even if that something varies, say young people involved in interdenominational dialogue.

"Students who are not religious -- and this is a generalization -- might not find this immediate common ground," said Tyler Zoanni, a political science major at the University of Chicago, in a webchat October 26.

In the last five years, for example, there has been a growing interest in interfaith observations of Ramadan, a monthlong period of fasting and reflection by Muslims, throughout the United States and particularly on college campuses. At the University of Chicago, where Zoanni has founded the Interfaith Dialogue, interfaith *iftars* gather students of many faiths at the campus Christian center, where the participants serve food to the university and neighborhood community at the break of Ramadan fast after sunset.

Ramadan is a "time where students of all faiths, and of no faith at all, come together to learn more about Ramadan and campus Muslim life in general," said Zoanni, a peer minister with the Lutheran Campus Ministry at Augustana Lutheran Church in Chicago.

During the month of Ramadan, which in 2006 ended on October 22, Muslims refrain from eating or drinking during daylight hours and break their fast at nightly *iftar* dinners at sunset. *Iftar* dinners are intended to be community gatherings where Muslims invite family and friends to join. Student Muslim associations often co-sponsor

iftar dinners on U.S. campuses with other student groups, including Jewish and Christian groups. (See [related article](#).)

Zoanni joined Usra Ghazi, a religion major at DePaul University in Chicago, in the online discussion. Zoanni and Ghazi are members of the Interfaith Youth Core, a nonprofit organization preparing students to be leaders in the interfaith movement. The founder of the organization, Eboo Patel, is a Muslim committed to encouraging student leaders.

“What better way to promote understanding between faith communities than through coming together to eat and appreciate our blessings?” Ghazi said. “I see the month as a unique opportunity to nurture the identities of religiously diverse youth by practicing faith collectively.”

Ghazi said being an observant Muslim has taught her how to be “a strong Muslim in an increasingly pluralistic world.” Most of the interfaith work she participates in, Ghazi said, involves building bridges across religious boundaries rather than retreating into separate worlds.

Another important goal of the growing interfaith movement on university campuses, Zoanni said, is to help dispel myths or distorted views of any particular religion and to encourage the media to stress, for example, the rich traditions that constitute Islam. “It’s important for Muslims and non-Muslims alike to take a stand and say, ‘It’s simply not OK to be anything but respectful towards people of faith, including Muslims,’” he said.

“Imams are leaders and teachers,” Zoanni said, who should “seek non-Muslims out to talk about their faith. And they should encourage Muslims to do the same.”

The [transcript](#) of Zoanni’s and Ghazi’s discussion and information on upcoming webchats are available on USINFO’s [Webchat Station](#).

For more information on U.S. society, see [Population and Diversity](#) and [International Religious Freedom](#).

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