Islamophobia, or Misinformed?

This week’s dialogue was a well thought out, well planned, and well facilitated discussion. Some of the methods used by the facilitators were quite innovative. The first thing they did was passed out papers on which the participants were asked to answer the question, what is Islam? Next they shuffled the papers and asked us to read the response and to give their perspective on how the other group member answered the question. When my response was read I realized that the person who read it had a different take on it then I did. Let me explain; I answered the question saying, “Islam is just another religion, an Abrahamic religion”. I guess I have bias toward religion, while I’m all for spirituality I know the damage caused by religion and in it’s name. The important thing to note here is that my classmate who read my response didn’t take it that way. Here we see how one’s past experiences or understanding shapes perception. There is a caveat, one of the facilitators tried to explain what I meant as well. I do not believe that a facilitator should interpret information. This differs greatly from reframing or summarizing, which might be necessary during dialogue.

Another tool that lead to good discussion was the hand out prepared by the facilitators. A Sikh American was mistaken for a Muslim, or follower of Islam, and was the victim of verbal, and physical abuse. We also were made privy to another incident in which a U.S. Army veteran burst into a Sikh temple in Wisconsin and shot six people to death. It is obvious that Sihks are often mistaken for Muslims. Our group also saw themes of white supremacy, overt racism, and out right hatred on the part of the perpetrators. Being a victim of abuse, it is easy for me to empathize with the victims, and question what leads people to act with such violence? From what I have learned through Buddhism, “you will not be punished for your anger, you will be punished by your anger”(Buddha). Many people never get to experience other cultures because of this. I am grateful that I have emerged myself in conversation with people from different cultures, as well as being able to experience diversity by returning to school.

One of the critiques given by our Professor was that the dialogue that that transpired might have been too ‘safe’, I tend to agree. On September 11, 2001 I reported to my job site in Brooklyn. My co-workers and I heard the news on the radio when the first plane crashed into the world trade center. We all ran to the roof-top and saw the second plane hit the towers. There was no doubt in any of our minds that this was an act of terrorism and the first thing that came to mind was to find some Muslims and seek some form of revenge. Fortunately, I had time to gather my thoughts and realize this was not the right course of action. Sheepshead Bay Brooklyn, has a large community of Muslims, there had not been any acts of terrorism on their part. This was something I could have brought up, especially the original feelings I had linking these same Muslims to the radicals that brought down the World Trade Center.

Another thought that comes to me after reflecting is how I perpetuated racism, or hatred to Muslims was by standing by while many of my friends and co-workers used epithets such as: camel jockeys, diaper heads, sand n word, and others to describe Muslims. This might have lead to some good dialogue. Another reflection I had was that I was always uncomfortable mentioning my background (Jewish), when I was around Muslims. This is due to the fact that for quite a while I supported Israel’s position in dealing with the Palestinians. I was tired of hearing about why the Palestinians had a right to be angry and how Israel was violating their human rights. I saw the suicide bombings, and attacks on innocent Israelis on buses and in the streets. Naturally being Jewish I couldn’t see what part Israel was playing in all of this. Today, I am able to see the objectification and mistreatment of the Palestinian people by the government of Israel.

Another topic that I could have brought up was how I felt when I was referred to as an infidel by Muslims. Many Muslim students at Northern Virginian Community College are Muslim. Many of them were out to convert students of other faiths to Islam and believed that those who did not believe in the prophet Mohammed were in fact infidels, and in some way inferior. This is not different from many evangelical Christian groups telling me that I’m going to hell because I don't accept Christ as my savior. There was also a lot of power struggles in regards to what would be served in the cafeteria. This may sound trivial, but I like Bacon. I couldn't get Bacon for breakfast at Nova because the Muslim students threatened to boycott the cafeteria if they served it. This really annoyed me and I held this resentment, not because I couldn't get Bacon, but because I felt they were imposing their beliefs on others. In hind site I wish I had brought this up during the dialogue.

While I thought these feelings had passed, they are still in my memory. Today I would not allow my friends or co-workers to objectify Muslims, nor would I allow my past experiences to dictate my behavior. I don't allow media to tell me how I should feel, nor do I trust reporting from biased sources of news. If I want to know about Islam, or how Muslims feel about certain issues, I ask them. This is one of the advantages of attending diverse schools like George Mason University. I hope that I can be more open in future dialogues.