

I was standing in the Powdermaker lobby distributing pamphlets that explain misconceptions about Islam along with some of my peers. I was excited to have an opportunity to answer any questions students would have. During the last half an hour, I saw a girl standing trying to get participants for a survey. Foot traffic was pretty slow and I can remember the young lady asking me to complete her survey. I immediately accepted, happy to help and then asked her if she would be so kind to take one flyer. She refused. When I asked why she explained to me that she “was very aware” of Islam. I was confused. I pressed on, curious to know how “aware” she was, only for her to reveal that she went on the Ibrahim Program herself. I had heard about the Ibrahim program that year but learned about it too late to apply, so I was quite shocked that she refused a flyer.

Although she didn’t mean to talk to me for too long, my questions soon got to her and before long we were talking about fundamental questions of religion. Instead of me telling her about Islam found myself asking questions about Judaism, which she answered to the best of her ability. The conversation must have lasted for at least half-an-hour after which I asked for her name (Yvette) and thanked her for talking to me.

Unfortunately, this was not the first time I encountered an evasive attitude when trying to talk about religion. As a matter of fact, Judaism was the only Abrahamic faith in which I had the most basic rudimentary knowledge of specifically for this reason. I remember feeling very frustrated at how difficult it was to ask questions about Judaism, especially from a young lady who had participated in a dialogue program. I turned my frustration into positive action by finally taking an Intro to Judaism class this semester, even though it was a tight fit into my schedule and not part of my academic plan. If people around me were not going to answer my questions for whatever reason, it was my responsibility to seek out answers myself. Several weeks into the course, I am amazed at the new things I am learning and am ever more curious to ask more questions.

I recently received a taxi license in the summer and have countless experiences with people from all walks of life. One of the most common questions I get from passengers is “Where are you from?” Inevitably, the conversation shifts into a political one as people offer condolences to my family who left Syria. Last month, I recall picking up an Israeli girl who asked me the all-to-common question. I remember explaining my personal viewpoints on the Middle Eastern conflict and we had a healthy conversation. Before she left, she seemed lost for words, sad to end the conversation so quickly. She said her goodbyes and said to me that she thinks one day I would make a positive difference in the face of the Middle Eastern conflict. I still remember those kinds words and pray that one day I can enact them.

I have always loved dialogue in the past as it serves primarily to eradicate fear and misconceptions that stem out of ignorance. I don’t see myself changing my willingness to talk with others. I hope that this program will give me new experiences to learn from and share while providing me with a more optimistic view of the future.

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