

My Experience

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At my South London Grammar School, I was often made to feel as if my belief in God somehow compromised my intellectual integrity. There was a strain of condescending superiority to discussions about religion, and a blind arrogance I sometimes found ludicrous. I remember clearly in a Religious Studies lesson, someone standing up and saying that if you looked around the room, the people who didn't believe in God, had a better quality of life than those who did. This same pupil, whilst we were studying Islam, asked incredulously how one was meant to fit Islam around your life. 14 year old me then proudly acclaimed that I don't try and fit Islam around my life, I fit my life around Islam.

Coming to university, I've had the chance to put such a sentiment into practice. At home, with my parents, three brothers, and maternal grandparents all sharing in my religion, practicing Islam as a way of life is easy. We pray in congregation, we say Bismillah before we start dinner, and I never have to worry that my seafood pasta has a white wine sauce. I've enjoyed being my own Muslim, proving to myself that I can do it, and questioning whether it was really what I wanted and believed. The diversity of opinions and attitudes I've found here, all the ways of seeing the world, have, whilst encouraging me to be critical of my own faith, served more to reinforce the importance I place on my religion. Mixing with people from different backgrounds and different beliefs is good for everyone; my experience has taught me that exposure is the best way to deal with prejudice, and that those who hold prejudiced views often have little experience of the group they discriminate against. My Indo-Caribbean heritage inherently entrenches multiculturalism in my outlook. It's for this reason I spend a lot of my time doing access work at university. I think making Cambridge a more diverse place will help it to grow as an institution. On a structural level, dealing with students from different backgrounds exposes the assumptions of inherent privilege that permeate the Cambridge system, and on an inter-personal level, an increasingly diverse student population would, in my opinion, produce graduates who were more respectful and appreciative of issues across class, culture and faith boundaries.

Trying to find my place at university has involved a fusing of all the different parts of my personality. Like everyone moving away from home and starting somewhere new, I had the chance to decide what kind of person I wanted to be, and discover who I might become. I've tried lots of different sports, and play a lot of lacrosse and netball now, I'm part of the Ancient Literature Society, and I do Access work for the university. Defining myself through my actions, my religion remains at the forefront. It means I'll never take my top off to change at a sports practice, because Islamic ideals of modesty mean that I find that inappropriate. It means my essay on death in Catullus started with a Qur'anic quote which summed up the universalising of mortality as the lens through which I focused my argument.

I've found I have many friends here who do believe in God; there is a commonality to our way of seeing the world, our shared perspective, which makes it easy to get on. It's always an undemanding path to gravitate to those who share your views, and I avoid conflict as a matter of course. But that doesn't mean I don't have friends who have radically different views to me, and with whom I am happy to debate everything from my ridiculous optimism to my socialist tendencies, and my love of Classical mythology to my faith. Moving from London, Cambridge came as a slight culture shock to me, when for many of my university friends, I was the only Muslim they knew. I find this both a burden and a blessing; it means I have the opportunity to shape what Islam means to them, which is part of my religious duty, but it also means that all my actions become representative

of a religion one person can only be hopelessly underqualified to represent. Trying to become more informed about my religion is pivotal to how well I can portray and articulate my faith with others as well as to my own development as a Muslim.

My friends would probably describe me as quite a happy person; I tend not to get stressed (just tired), I work things through, and try and plan my time well. Cambridge can be a very full-on experience, and trying to find the peace of mind to stay in control of your life can be difficult. I've found religion to be the structure on which I hang the rest of my life; I recognise the privilege I enjoy of a supportive family, and the amazing people around me, but I do think that my faith is the bedrock on which I try and build my life, and that it would be infinitely harder without it. At university, as elsewhere, it's very easy to get trapped in a cycle of looking to the next deadline, just trying to get something done. It becomes all about the *telos*, and not about the doing. The fact that every week you get a new essay, new tasks to do, means that such an outlook can become demoralising. I try and enjoy the things I am doing whilst I am doing them, and the struggle every day to give everything your all, to keep trying, this is what I understand by my personal Jihad. Trying every day to be a better person, a better human and a better Muslim, and the struggle to not take the easy way out, this is how my religion shapes my outlook on life. In the grand scheme of things, individual attainments on the path of life are merely intermittent steps to the ultimate end; which holds us accountable for everything we do.

"In the name of Allah, the Beneficent, the Merciful

By Time, (1) Verily Man is in eternal loss, (2) Except those who have Faith, and do righteous deeds, and exhort one another to Truth, with Patience and Perseverance. (3)"

Surah-Al-Asr, Qur'an (103)