

For Muslim Students, a Debate on Inclusion



Heidi Schumann for The New York Times

At a session of the Muslim Students Association West Conference last weekend in San Jose, Calif., men and women sat opposite each other.

By NEIL MacFARQUHAR
Published: February 21, 2008

SAN JOSE — Amir Mertaban vividly recalls sitting at his university's recruitment table for the Muslim Students Association a few years ago when an attractive undergraduate flounced up in a decidedly un-Islamic miniskirt, saying "Salamu aleykum," or "Peace be upon you," a standard Arabic greeting, and asked to sign up.

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Amir Mertaban has pointed out that hypocrisy can factor into some conservative responses by association members.

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Khalida Fazel, center, a chapter president, said she received complaints after an event with unmarried men and women.

Mr. Mertaban also recalls that his fellow recruiter surveyed the young woman with disdain, arguing later that she should not be admitted because her skirt clearly signaled that she would corrupt the Islamic values of the other members.

"I knew that brother, I knew him very well; he used to smoke weed on a regular basis," said Mr. Mertaban, now 25, who was president of the Muslim student group at California State Polytechnic University, Pomona, from 2003 to 2005.

Pointing out the hypocrisy, Mr. Mertaban won the argument that the group could no longer reject potential members based on rigid standards of Islamic practice.

The intense debate over whether organizations for Muslim students should be inclusive or strict is playing out on college campuses across the United States, where there are now more than 200 Muslim Students Association chapters.

Gender issues, specifically the extent to which men and women should mingle, are the most fraught topic as Muslim students wrestle with the yawning gap between American college traditions and those of Islam.

"There is this constant tension between becoming a mainstream student organization

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versus appealing to students who have a more conservative or stricter interpretation of Islam,” said Hadia Mubarak, the first woman to serve as president of the national association, from 2004 to 2005.

Each chapter enjoys relative autonomy in setting its rules. Broadly, those at private colleges tend to be more liberal because they draw from a more geographically dispersed population, and the smaller numbers prompt Muslim students to play down their differences.

Chapters at state colleges, on the other hand, often pull from the community, attracting students from conservative families who do not want their children too far afield.

At [Yale](#), for example, Sunnis and Shiites mix easily and male and female students shocked parents in the audience by kissing during the annual awards ceremony. Contrast that with the University of California, Irvine, which has the reputation for being the most conservative chapter in the country, its president saying that to an outsider its ranks of bearded young men and veiled women might come across as “way Muslim” or even extremist.

But arguments erupt virtually everywhere. At the University of California, Davis, last year, in their effort to make the Muslim association more “cool,” board members organized a large alcohol-free barbecue. Men and women ate separately, but mingled in a mock jail for a charity drive.

The next day the chapter president, Khalida Fazel, said she fielded complaints that unmarried men and women were physically bumping into one other. Ms. Fazel now calls the event a mistake.

At [George Washington University](#), a dodge ball game pitting men against women after Friday prayers drew such protests from Muslim alumni and a few members that the board felt compelled to seek a religious ruling stating that Islamic traditions accept such an event.

Members acknowledge that the tone of the Muslim associations often drives away students. Several presidents said that if they thought members were being too lax, guest imams would deliver prayer sermons about the evils of alcohol or premarital sex.

Judgment can also come swiftly. Ghayth Adhami, a graduate of the University of California, Los Angeles, recalled how a young student who showed up at a university recruitment meeting in a Budweiser T-shirt faced a few comments about un-Islamic dress. The student never came back.

Some members push against the rigidity. Fatima Hassan, 22, a senior at the Davis campus, organized a coed road trip to Reno, Nev., two hours away, to play the slot machines last Halloween. In Islam, Ms. Hassan concedes, gambling is “really bad,” but it was men and women sharing the same car that shocked some fellow association members.

“We didn’t do anything wrong,” Ms. Hassan said. “I am chill about that whole coed thing. I understand that in a Muslim context we are not supposed to hang out with the opposite sex, but it just happens and there is nothing you can do.”

But as Saif Inam, the vice president of the chapter at George Washington put it, “At the end of the day, I don’t want God asking me, ‘O.K. Saif, why did you organize events in which people could do un-Islamic things in big numbers?’”

The debate boils down to whether upholding gender segregation is forcing something artificial and vaguely hypocritical in an American context.

“As American Islam gets its own identity, it is going to have to shed some of these notions that are distant from American culture,” said Rafia Zakaria, a student at [Indiana University](#). “The tension is between what forms of tradition are essential and what forms

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American law says men and women are equal, whereas Muslim religious texts say they “complement” each other, Ms. Zakaria said. “If the law says they are equal, it’s hard to see how in their spiritual lives they will accept a whole different identity.”

The entire shift of the association from a foreign-run organization to an American one took place over arguments like this.

The Americans won out partly because the number of Muslim American college students hit a critical mass in the late 1990s, and then, after the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks, foreign students, fearful of their visas being revoked, started avoiding a group that was increasingly political.

Some critics view strict interpretation of the faith as part of the association’s DNA. Organized in the 1960s by foreign students who wanted collective prayers where there were no mosques, the associations were basically little slices of Saudi Arabia. Women were banned. Only Muslim men who prayed, fasted and avoided alcohol and dating were welcomed. Meetings, even idle conversations, were in Arabic.

Donations from Saudi Arabia largely financed the group, and its leaders pushed the kingdom’s puritan, Wahhabi strain of Islam. Prof. Hamid Algar of the University of California, Berkeley, said that in the 1960s and 1970s, chapters advocated theological and political positions derived from radical Islamist organizations and would brook no criticism of Saudi Arabia.

That past has given the associations a reputation in some official quarters as a possible font of extremism, but experts in American Islam believe college campuses have become too diverse and are under too much scrutiny for the groups to foster radicals.

Zareena Grewal, a professor of religion and American studies at Yale, pointed to several things that would repel extremists. Members are trying to become more involved in the American political system, Professor Grewal said, and the heavy presence of women in the leadership would also deter them. Members “are not sitting around reading ‘How to Bomb Your Campus for Dummies,’” she said.

Its leaders think the organization is gradually relaxing a bit as it seeks to maintain its status as the main player for Muslim students.

“There were drunkards in the Prophet Muhammad’s community; there were fornicators and people who committed adultery in his community, and he didn’t reject them,” Mr. Mertaban said. “I think M.S.A.’s are beginning to understand this point that every person has ups and downs.”

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