# **Muslims among Mormons**

# Perspectives on Muslim Students Attending Brigham Young University

Shon D. Hopkin and Ray L. Huntington

Muslim parents in the Middle East who want their children to receive a Western college education may face a dilemma. While they may see benefits in Western education, they generally also want their children to maintain their adherence to Islam. These parents may worry that their children will be exposed to the antireligious sentiment prevalent in the West or that association with Christianity will negatively affect their commitment to Islam. Parents may also be concerned that their children will be exposed to alcohol, recreational drug use, and premarital sexual activities that are prevalent in Western culture. Muslim youth in the West may become resistant to parental influences, marital expectations, and socially acceptable behaviors for Muslims.

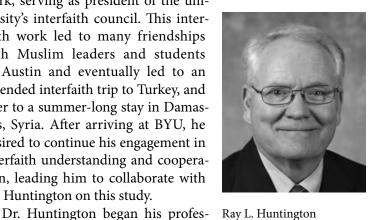
BYU has attracted a small Muslim population. This unique population is worthy of study because of the religious differences and similarities between Muslims and Mormons. The exploratory study described in this paper examined the reasons Muslim parents and their children selected Brigham Young University for the children's higher education. The study also focused on the influence that exposure to Western culture has had on the religious and cultural values of BYU's Muslim students. We first asked what factors influenced parents to send their youth to attend a Western university in general and Brigham Young University in particular. Second, we asked what impact attendance at BYU has had on the students' religious and cultural values. We sought to determine if exposure to Western values and lifestyle weakened the students' practice of Islam and its associated culture.

# Shon D. Hopkin and Ray L. Huntington

This study is the result of our academic backgrounds and interests in Islam. Dr. Hopkin's involvement in this study stems from a doctoral program that focused on medieval Hebrew, Arabic, and Spanish literature from the Iberian Peninsula, where Islam, Judaism, and Christianity had extensive contact over the course of several hundred years. While working on his graduate degree at the University of Texas at Austin, he was also heavily engaged in interfaith work, serving as president of the university's interfaith council. This interfaith work led to many friendships with Muslim leaders and students in Austin and eventually led to an extended interfaith trip to Turkey, and later to a summer-long stay in Damascus, Syria. After arriving at BYU, he desired to continue his engagement in interfaith understanding and cooperation, leading him to collaborate with Dr. Huntington on this study.



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sional career assessing the impact of Israeli occupation on the historic family roles of Palestinian refugee families living in the West Bank of Palestine and Gaza. He has taught undergraduate courses on Islam in Religious Education for the past fifteen years, which provided opportunities to associate with Muslim students attending BYU. Many of these students face unique challenges attending a private, predominantly LDS university. This research project explores those challenges and the impact of attending school in a religious environment. Further, our in-depth interviews with these students have given us insights on how BYU can better assist Muslim students to achieve their educational goals.

### Methodology

Because of the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act, the BYU Administration cannot release the names of Muslim students attending the university. We therefore used a snowball sampling technique. We knew several Muslim students, and when we interviewed each of them, we asked for the names of other Muslim students. The snowball grew to include thirty-seven students, whom we interviewed between June 2013 and November 2013. Based on information obtained from the Muslim students we interviewed, we estimate that approximately fifty Muslim students were enrolled at BYU at the time of the study. We thus obtained data from around 75 percent of the total population. Our failure to interview more students was primarily due to our inability to obtain their names and contact information from their Muslim acquaintances. Only three students for whom we had contact information did not return our emailed invitations to participate in the study.

Since this was an exploratory study, we utilized an in-depth interview method to obtain the desired information. The interview schedule asked general questions about why the students came to the United States to attend school and why they selected Brigham Young University. Questions also focused on their experiences at BYU, including their major area of study. We probed whether their acceptance and practice of Islam had changed during their time at BYU. We also inquired as to whether they had experienced any discrimination because of their religion and whether they had felt pressure to investigate the LDS Church.

Each respondent signed a "Consent to be Interviewed Form" that detailed the purpose of the study, the interview procedures, estimated length of the interview, and any risks or discomforts associated with the study. The most obvious risk for these respondents was that their individual comments could be publicly linked to them. To alleviate this concern, respondents were assured of interview confidentiality, with the promise that their name would never appear in any presentations based on this research. The students were also informed they did not have to answer questions they preferred to avoid and could terminate the interview at any time. Next, we asked their permission to digitally record the interview. Once a respondent had signed the consent form, he or she was interviewed. In order to combat the risk that students might avoid sharing negative experiences or perceptions because of the face-to-face interview, the interviewers stressed the importance of sharing both their positive and negative experiences at the university,

since their responses would be helpful in altering similar circumstances for future Muslim students. The average interview lasted approximately sixty minutes, with the shortest interview lasting forty-one minutes, and the longest interview spanning two different meetings of about seventy-five minutes each. The students seemed to enjoy the opportunity to share their feelings and experiences and often expressed the hope that doing so would not just be enjoyable for them but would be helpful for future Muslim students at BYU.

All the interviews were transcribed, and then their content was analyzed by the two researchers and by four student assistants in order to obtain data from the open-ended responses that could be evaluated. The reliability or consistency of data obtained between all analysts was over 95 percent.

### The Participants

We designed the initial portion of each interview to learn background and demographic information about the participants. Of the thirtyseven students, twenty-one (57%) were male, and sixteen (43%) were female. Nineteen (52%) were pursuing an undergraduate education. Eighteen (47%) were graduate students. Of the graduate students, about half were in the sciences, such as biochemistry and chemical engineering. One student was majoring in political science; a number of other graduate students were pursuing law degrees, and others were earning degrees in accounting. None of the students we interviewed were pursuing degrees in the fine arts or humanities. Twenty-five (68%) of the students were single; twelve (32%) were married. Twelve students interviewed were from Iran, nine from Palestine/Israel, eight from Jordan, four from Egypt, two from Pakistan, one from Oman, and one from Dubai. One of the Iranian students was born and raised in the United States but was raised in a home with close cultural connections to Iran. including frequent and lengthy visits to Iran to stay with family members and to learn about the cultural practices of Muslims in Iran.

# **Reasons for Attending BYU**

Table 1 lists several factors that influenced the students we interviewed to attend BYU. The categories in the chart overlap and affect each other. Many parents, for example, who expressed concern about having their child attend a Western university also had those concerns mitigated by their child's choice to attend BYU.

Factor	Number (n=37)	Percentage
Parental concern with attending a Western university	24	65
BYU Honor Code	21	57
Parental concern mitigated by choice to attend BYU	18	49
Parental encouragement to attend BYU	12	32
Academics/Field of study	11	30
Family member living in Utah	05	13

Table 1. Factors Influencing Decision to Attend BYU

Twenty-four of the students (65%) indicated their parents had significant concerns regarding their desire to attend a Western university. Some of these parents strongly desired their children to attend a school in the West but worried about the spiritual consequences of that choice. In other cases, the student rather than the parents desired a Western education, causing great concern among the parents that their child would abandon Islam and its moral standards. These concerns were the strongest factors that encouraged students and parents to look more closely at BYU, with twenty-one students (57%) stating that the BYU Honor Code affected their choice to attend BYU. In fact, the Honor Code was the strongest factor in the decision to attend school at BYU.

For eleven of the students we interviewed (30%), the reasons for attending BYU were almost exclusively academic. These students came to BYU because it had a certain program of study that fit their interests, and they had discovered the university as they were searching for Western programs that coincided with their educational pursuits. Of these eleven students, ten were graduate students who stated that they were looking for highly specialized programs and colleges that had demonstrated impressive success rates in placing graduates in the work force. They were found primarily in chemistry, chemical engineering, math, and law programs. For these students, BYU had been an attractive option without knowing anything else about the university, including knowledge about the Honor Code. Only one of the eleven students drawn to BYU for academic reasons was an undergraduate. As a younger population with less-specialized academic needs, Muslim undergraduate students could apparently meet their educational aspirations effectively elsewhere and were primarily drawn to BYU for reasons other than the school's academic value.

Five students (13%) indicated they were influenced to come to BYU because they already had a family member living there, which helped

them learn about the type of social atmosphere at the university and provided them with security and social connections as they left home and moved to Provo.

#### The Honor Code

As stated earlier, of the 37 students interviewed, twenty-one (57%) came to BYU primarily because of the Honor Code. As they learned more about BYU, they discovered that the university and the local communities have a reputation for being family-friendly environments with conservative moral values. One student expressed his appreciation for the Provo environment as follows:

Because LDS people are marrying at a younger age than the norm, it means that they're focusing on family, and family is a very critical and essential part in the [LDS] church, and I like that. Because that's how it is in my culture and in my religion. I like it when we do FHE [Family Home Evening] or when people call their families every day. The average American will see their family on Christmas and Thanksgiving, and that will be it. I don't like that at all and will never be able to accept it as part of me.

The ability to attend a Western university that fostered fairly strict standards of behavior and had a relatively high academic ranking was extremely attractive to these students. Indeed, aspects of the BYU environment that would be distasteful or detrimental in the eyes of some non-LDS students, such as abstinence from alcoholic beverages and dress and grooming standards, were assets to these Muslim students. They chose to attend BYU because many of the values expressed in the BYU Honor Code are in line with Islamic belief and practice. In answer to the question "What's been challenging about adapting and being a Muslim student at Brigham Young University?" one student responded:

I don't know if it's been challenging to adapt because the environment here is basically the same [as] back home. I'm Muslim, and we have the same traditions, the same rules about dress code, about alcohol, smoking, and all of these things. They were basically the same. The only difference probably is drinking tea and coffee. That's the one thing that's different, but we got used to it right away. Everything else was so easy. It hasn't been that challenging for me.

While a few students indicated their parents were not overly concerned about their children attending a Western university, as mentioned above, twenty-four students (65%) indicated their parents were highly

concerned about their children leaving their home environment and moving to a place that might have a negative impact upon their religious beliefs and behaviors. Thirty-one students (84%) stated that their parents were supportive of their choice to attend BYU after their child reported to them about the Honor Code and the religious environment at BYU. Interestingly, of the parents of eleven students who had actually visited BYU, all (100%) left feeling better about their child's place of study than before they came. A number of students stated that their parents love BYU and want all of their children to attend there. Many of the students who reported family influence on their decision have had multiple siblings or extended family members who attended BYU in the past.

The experience of one Muslim student is illustrative of many of the students we interviewed who were impressed by the Honor Code and the values espoused by BYU. This student was raised in the United States but has very strong ties to Iran, where she visits extended family members regularly and is familiar with Iranian culture. She recounted her humorous experience as follows:<sup>1</sup>

I actually discovered BYU when I was about sixteen. My parents, brother, grandparents, and I were on a road trip through Utah, going from Park City down to Moab, I think. We didn't have smart phones or a GPS; that's why we got lost. We were driving this big rental van and got lost, and we ended up just driving through the canyon. For some reason, we ended up in the parking lot of the Wilkinson Center, and we didn't even know what BYU was.

We got out of the car, and I remember seeing the sign on the mountains and said, "Oh, mom, I've actually heard of this school; they have a football team, like the Y. I know this is a school; this is a university."

"Oh cool, well, you'll be applying soon. We're already here, why not get out of the car and go explore the campus a little bit? It seems really pretty."

We all got out and walked around campus, and then went into the Wilk[inson Student Center]. My first thought was, "Wow, this is really cool. Everyone is so good looking here!"

My mom and everyone else were sitting in the Wilk while I walked around asking people questions. She picked up a bridal magazine and was looking through it when she called me over.

"Why are they all wearing capped sleeves? That's so weird. Look, they're dressed kind of conservative. This is weird."

<sup>1.</sup> All interview sections have been edited according to the official style guides of Baylor University, University of Illinois, and University of Oregon.

I flipped through it too. Bridal magazines aren't supposed to be like that, you know; bridal magazines are all like a fashion show. She put the magazine down and said, "Let's go talk to admissions and see what's up with this university. It seems a little different."

We went to the information desk in the Wilk, and this girl sold me on BYU. I had grown up in a household with no drinking, no smoking, certain lifestyle things, and when you think of college, what do you think of? You think of partying, you know, certain things that go along with college lifestyle. This girl was so well informed about BYU and started telling us when it was built, and that the majority of students here are LDS. We had heard of Mormons, but I had never met one before. I really liked that she let me know exactly what I was getting myself into. She told me about the Honor Code within the first few minutes. My mom started nodding and said, "This is the school." My dad came over to look at a copy of the Honor Code statement and he said, "Yeah, this is a really good school."

All signs pointed to yes. Everything pointed to yes. I think the girl we talked to was some sort of Middle Eastern Studies major. She thought it was really cool that I'm from the Middle East, and [she] was learning Arabic or something. Then she told me the one thing that sold me on BYU. I'm super social, and I really like to have fun and go out to crowded places. She told me that a lot of people come to BYU and don't have a good experience because they don't know what to do or who to hang out with.

"But let me tell you something about my experience and my friends," she said. "Every other weekend, we drive down to St. George, and we drive down to Las Vegas, and we do everything fun, but don't break the Honor Code."

"How do you even do that in Vegas?"

"We love to dance, and we love music, but we don't indulge in certain things. We don't step past that line. And I have a great group of friends, and we all believe the same thing."

I thought to myself, "I need to find more friends like her! Maybe I'll find them here!"

My mom kept telling me the whole way back to the car, "You need to apply to this school. You need to apply."

Although this student was the only one of those we interviewed who was able to learn about BYU's environment in such a personal way, her experience illustrates the attraction BYU has for these Muslim students and their parents, who see the religious environment at BYU as a buffer against the worldly values and lifestyles seen on many campuses across the United States.

Perspective	Number (n=37)	Percentage
Highly positive	33	89
Concerns about prohibition of coffee and tea	07	19
Concerns about religious prohibitions in general	03	08
Concerns about prohibition of facial hair or traditional Islamic attire	02	05

Table 2. Student Perspectives about BYU Honor Code

We asked each of the students we interviewed about their experience with BYU's Honor Code and how they felt about it after attending BYU. The response to the Honor Code was overwhelmingly positive, with thirty-three students (89%) stating that they supported the Honor Code and appreciated attending a Western university that had a strict code of ethical behavior. To these students, the Honor Code meant they were not confronted with many of the worldly behaviors they anticipated finding in a Western culture, or with behaviors their friends or relatives who were attending other Western universities described to them (alcoholic consumption, illicit sexual behavior, and so forth). One student said, "When my father read the Honor Code, he told me, 'This is the right university for you.'"

In their responses, many of the married students connected the family-friendly environment they were experiencing at BYU (along with living in Provo, Utah) with the Honor Code, making it difficult to separate their feelings regarding the Honor Code from their feelings about the general community of Latter-day Saints not attending BYU. It is also important to remember that Muslim students who are less favorably inclined to live the Honor Code would likely choose to attend school elsewhere. This choice and these students' overwhelming support of the Honor Code indicates that most of them knew something about the Honor Code before attending BYU and were comfortable with the lifestyle it dictated. In short, the majority of Muslim students we interviewed at BYU appeared to be more comfortable and supportive of the Honor Code than we had anticipated.

There were, however, some exceptions to these positive feelings. Four students (11%) stated they had reservations about the Honor Code, and of the eighty-nine percent who were highly positive about the Honor Code some mentioned aspects of it that were challenging for them (as seen in table 2). Of the four students who were not highly positive about the Honor Code, two were still supportive of it in general but felt dissatisfied

with certain aspects when it conflicted with their own cultural expectations or religious views. The other two students viewed the Honor Code in generally negative terms. These two students mentioned the adverse effects they experienced from religious coercion in their country's interpretation and governmental enforcement of Islamic practices, and they stated that they had come to the West in part to escape restrictive rules regarding dress and behavior. They expressed frustration that they had encountered a modified, although less restrictive, version of those rules through the BYU Honor Code.

Several students made statements about how challenging it was to avoid coffee and tea when these drinks had been such a central part of their diet back home. A student who is highly positive about the Honor Code but who has found certain aspects of it challenging made the comment below:

I guess the only thing that I feel over here that's difficult for me is not drinking coffee and tea. I have never drunk them over here, and it's so hard for me, just because I used to drink so much coffee, like three cups a day. My mom made me abstain from drinking coffee and tea before I came here. She said, "Don't do it." She wanted to make sure that I tried not to drink them so that I would be prepared when I came here. I've found other things that help me compensate for it in the morning, like a cold shower.

Even though the prohibition of tea and coffee is difficult for some Muslim students, most of the students have not had trouble transitioning to BYU's culture. One student put it this way: "If I were to be at any other university, it would be more of a culture shock than here. Despite no coffee and tea, nothing has really changed in how I live."

Two male students expressed dissatisfaction with the Honor Code because it prohibited beards. (In 2015, BYU refined its policy and now allows an exception to the beard ban based on religion.)2 In Islamic culture, beards are considered an important aspect of male appearance, since the Prophet Muhammad wore a beard and considered it a distinguishing mark of masculinity. Men who wear beards are also viewed as more mature or wise than those who are clean-shaven. These two students had a difficult time reconciling the prohibition of beards at BYU with their

<sup>2.</sup> See Amy McDonald, "Muslims Celebrate BYU Beard Policy Exemption," Daily Herald, January 17, 2015, http://www.heraldextra.com/news/local/education/ college/byu/muslims-celebrate-byu-beard-policy-exemption/article\_ed90845c-677a-5ade-9e24-9350ba33e68f.html.

own cultural expectations regarding facial hair but still followed the rules and were clean-shaven. A few of the other male students who did not complain about the beard prohibition did wear some facial hair (resulting from not shaving for a day or two), choosing to live the rules in a modified way that was more in line with their own cultural and religious views.

## **LDS Religious Pressure**

We suspected that Muslim students at BYU would have experienced a significant amount of religious pressure while attending the Provo school, with "religious pressure" defined as unwelcome encouragement to accept LDS religious viewpoints or to alter the interviewee's religious viewpoints regarding Islam. Data from this study, however, indicated that Muslim students for the most part felt that they had been treated respectfully and had not received undue harassment or pressure to abandon Islam or modify their religious views.

Table 3. Religious Pressure at BYU

Pressure	Number (n=37)	Percentage
None	28	76
Some religious pressure, but not negative to Islam	07	19
Strong religious pressure, but not negative to Islam	01	03
Strong religious pressure, including negativity toward Islam	01	03

As seen in table 3, only one student (3%) had experience with any type of religious pressure that included the devaluation of Islam as a persuasive tool. Of the seven students (19%) who said they had received some religious pressure and the one student who said he had received strong religious pressure (3%), none sensed any derogatory sentiment toward Islam but rather saw the religious pressure coming from the LDS students' love of and commitment to their LDS faith. Twenty-eight students (76%) indicated that they had received no religious pressure whatsoever. This lack of pressure, of course, does not mean that LDS students had not shared any of their religious viewpoints or encouraged the Muslim students to learn more about the LDS faith. Rather, it seems to indicate that when religious viewpoints were shared, it was perceived as an open and friendly conversation, free of any unwelcome persuasion.

#### **Anti-Islam Discrimination**

Twenty-nine students (78%) stated that they had experienced no type of cultural or religious discrimination, including when seen wearing traditional clothing, like the hijab for women, or offering their daily prayers. The other nine students indicated that they felt either very little or considerable prejudice.

Prejudice	Number (n=37)	Percentage
None	29	78
Very little	08	22
Considerable	01	03

The feelings expressed by one student seem to be typical of the majority of the group. When asked if she had ever experienced any kind of racial or religious prejudice at BYU, she remarked:

No, I actually never have. I feel like here at BYU, every time I say I'm from Iran, people want to know me or they want to know where I'm from, what it's like living in Iran, or being a Muslim. My friends in other states might not feel as comfortable, but I feel like I was the luckiest because I came to Utah and people are so nice and kind.

In general, the eight students (22%) who had experienced "very little" discrimination said that the negative interactions did not occur with BYU students, but rather with older individuals they met outside of the BYU community. One female student described a negative experience that occurred off campus. According to her account, an older woman she bumped into while shopping looked angrily at her and then told her that she should return to her own country. Others recounted that at times they interacted with students or others who expressed pro-Israeli sentiments without seeming to be aware of the historical or contemporary variables that mark the Arab-Israeli conflict.

# **Impact of Religion Classes**

BYU requires all undergraduate students to take fourteen credit hours of religion classes during their four years of study. One religion course required for non-LDS students introduces LDS beliefs and behaviors to help them better understand the religious environment at BYU. Most religion classes, such as Book of Mormon, Pearl of Great Price, Doctrine

and Covenants, LDS Church History, and Sharing the Gospel are clearly LDS in perspective. Even classes that focus on more widely accepted religious texts and topics, such as the Old and New Testament, are taught from an LDS perspective.

Because of the LDS perspectives taught in the religion classes, we wondered whether Muslim undergraduate students would be offended by or concerned about the fourteen-hour requirement. More importantly, we wondered what impact these required religion classes would have on the Muslim students' religious identity. We anticipated the students we interviewed would be less positive about the required religion classes, since they might be viewed as a form of proselytization or as time wasted that could have been used to study for classes in their major. Surprisingly, the data indicated otherwise. The total number interviewed in table 5 differs from that in other tables since only undergraduate students are required to take religion classes at BYU. We were surprised that the religion classes, taught from an LDS perspective, both improved an appreciation for the LDS faith while also strengthening the Muslim students' appreciation for their own religious traditions.

Table 5. Perceptions of Religious Classes

Perception	Number (n=19)	Percentage
Interesting/helpful	18	94
Improved appreciation for Mormonism	18	94
Improved appreciation for Islam	17	89
No impact on views of Islam	02	11
An annoyance	01	05

When we asked the interviewees to account for these viewpoints, they responded with a number of possible reasons. First, many indicated the instructors were respectful to them as non-LDS students and, more importantly, as Muslim students. They did not denigrate or criticize Islamic beliefs, nor did they emphasize the positives of LDS theology at the expense of Islam. Second, the majority of students stated they noticed strong similarities between LDS and Islamic practices and beliefs. In general, members of the LDS Church, like Muslims, embrace a strict moral code, emphasize the importance of families, pay tithes (similar to charitable donations required in Islam), avoid consumption of alcohol and drugs, believe in submitting their wills to God—and make these choices without coercion.

Some of those we interviewed indicated that prior to coming to BYU they had not taken time to seriously think about their own faith traditions. As they observed (at least from their own perspectives) how the majority of LDS students at BYU actively lived their religion as a matter of personal choice, they were motivated to reassess their own faith, looking for the positive things they found to be of value to them as Muslims, such as reassessing the value of prayer or seeking to feel God's influence in their day-to-day lives. As one male student said, "When I saw [BYU] students taking their religion classes seriously, paying attention, reading their scriptures, and making comments, it encouraged me to be a better person—a person who was in touch with God."

We also found others who did not feel a need to reassess their own faith but simply found that the concepts discussed in BYU religion classes (like prayer, reading the scriptures, or cultivating family unity) strengthened their existing viewpoints and behaviors.

## Changes in Islamic Religious Behavior

During our interviews, we asked each student to describe the challenges of practicing Islam at a predominantly LDS university. Some aspects of Islam are often practiced communally, such as salat, or prayer five times a day, which is often done in a group setting at a mosque or in the home with family. Being removed from one's faith community can present challenges for adherents of any religion to continue practicing prescribed religious behavior, and we were interested in knowing if any of our Muslim students had experienced this challenge.3

We learned that many of our respondents found it more challenging to practice outward religious behaviors at BYU, such as praying five times a day or fasting during the month of Ramadan. The two primary reasons cited were (1) the busy schedule of a college student, and (2) the lack of a community to remind and assist in such behaviors as prayer or fasting.

Even with those challenges, over half of the students, twenty-one (57%), stated that studying at BYU did not seriously impact their religious practices. Most of these students said that Islam was designed to

<sup>3.</sup> We made a distinction between Islamic religious behavior and spirituality. Religious behavior is defined as participating in outward religious acts, such as praying five times a day. Spirituality is defined as a feeling of closeness toward Allah (God), thinking about him regularly, and seeking personal direction from him frequently.

be practiced anywhere and that living away from a supportive community did not impact them one way or the other. In fact, several of the students we interviewed indicated that the prayers offered at the beginning of their classes at BYU were extremely important to them, since they viewed them as fulfilling one of their duties to pray five times a day. Of the sixteen students (43%) who found it more difficult to practice their religion at BYU, ten said that the busy life of a student caused the difficulty. This was especially true when attending a Western university with a class schedule that was not designed to accommodate Muslim practices, such as daily prayer obligations or the month of fasting called Ramadan. The other six students said that it was more difficult to practice Islam at BYU, since they were living away from the family and community support that could be found in the Middle East. There were no students who believed that it was easier to practice Islam while attending BYU when compared to living in their home country.

#### Muslim Student Spirituality and Religious Identity

Besides learning about the impact of their school experience on outward religious behaviors, we also wanted to assess the influence of BYU on the religious identity and spirituality of these Muslim students.

Of those interviewed, twenty-six (70%) reported that they felt an increased loyalty and commitment to Islam and had experienced an increase in their personal spirituality since coming to BYU. Ten students (27%) indicated that they were neither more nor less loyal to Islam due to their experience at BYU and that they felt a similar level of spirituality when compared with their lives before coming to BYU. Only one Muslim student (3%) expressed a decrease in loyalty to Islam; this student did express feelings of increased spirituality. None expressed a decrease in spirituality. Table 6 provides the reasons students provided for their increased feelings of spirituality and loyalty to Islam. Only those students who reported an increase in these feelings are represented in the table.

Table 6. Reasons for Increased Loyalty to Islam

Perception	Number (n=26)	Percentage
Positive influence of BYU students	24	92
Need for Allah in a foreign environment	19	73
Desire to be a good representative of Islam	08	31
Increased personal freedom	08	31

The largest factor for the students' increased spirituality and loyalty was the positive influence of LDS religious behavior and spirituality, expressed by twenty-four (92%) of the students. For instance, when they watched LDS students offering public prayers at the beginning of their classes, listened to the discussions between students and professors in their religion classes, and observed LDS students affirming their commitments to the Church, they assessed their own religious devotion and were motivated to improve their spiritual connection to God and their commitments to Islam.

Of the twenty-six students who indicated an increased spirituality, nineteen (73%) said that being away from their families and communities made them feel an increased need for Allah in their lives. In a situation where they sometimes felt lonely and isolated, they found that their relationship with God was a key factor in overcoming these feelings. Eight students (31%) mentioned that as a religious minority at BYU they felt a desire to live their religion in a positive way since they believed there were some students who did not have a favorable view of Islam. In short, they wanted to be good representatives and ambassadors for their faith.

Another eight students (31%) reported that the increased freedom at BYU helped them feel more connected to the religious choices they made, rather than making those choices due to external religious pressures (such as government-enforced religious policies), to please parents, or to fit in better with their community. According to many of the students, the freedom to choose how to live their religion at BYU contributed to their spirituality and closeness to God. These eight students were unanimous in their belief that instead of abandoning their faith, attending BYU had actually helped them appreciate Islam more than they had done before coming to BYU. A few of these eight students also mentioned that the absence of constraints on how they worshipped allowed them to personalize Islamic practices and create ways to achieve greater spirituality that were less orthodox than more rigid interpretations of Islam. Indeed, for many of these students separated from parents, family, and community support, most chose to find unique ways to increase their feelings for God (such as reading poetry, offering quiet personal prayers during the day, or softly repeating the Islamic names of God in quiet moments). Moreover, they mentioned how impressed they were with the LDS students, who were not coerced to practice their religion at BYU but chose to do so. A number of the students we interviewed

indicated this was a model they desired to follow in their own religious practices at BYU and when they returned home.

The following student interview demonstrates the influence that religious freedom and the religious behaviors of LDS students at BYU had on many of the Muslim students. This response is representative of others given during our interviews:

Interviewer: Do you think you are more or less spiritual here at

BYU than you were when you were living at home? Would you say you feel less connected or more con-

nected to Islam since coming here to BYU?

Student: I feel more spiritual here because in my country you

> have people who tell you that you should pray, pray, pray. Back home, I said, "Okay, they will tell me, then I will pray." So here, there is no one who tells me to pray, so I should pray for myself, because I want to and

because I believe it is a good thing.

Interviewer: Has the LDS environment and seeing other people

praying and being religious influenced you one way or

the other?

Yeah, they are good people. They practice their reli-Student:

> gion very well, very freely. I've seen that on Sunday they are always dressed nicely, and the families go to their church to pray. They have a strong community, a strong bond. Their influence has been good, and it has helped me to want to be a better person and to be more

religious and spiritual in my life.

#### Conclusion

In conducting this study, we aimed to answer the questions, "Why would a Muslim student choose to attend Brigham Young University?" and "What impact does BYU's environment have on its Muslim students?" On the whole, the data obtained indicate that Muslim students appreciated the religious environment at BYU and discovered that their experiences at BYU support their religious identity rather than conflicting with or marginalizing it. The number of positive responses was surprising to us at first since we had anticipated that many of the Muslim students would feel out of place at a religious school where the overwhelming majority of students were practicing Latter-day Saints. If

anything, just the opposite has taken place. For the majority of those we interviewed, attending BYU has been a positive experience and has not created conflicts with their own belief systems. Rather, it has strengthened the majority of them.

What factors led to the positive experiences for the majority of the Muslim students we interviewed? First, it appears the environment created by the standards lived by BYU students and reflected in the Honor Code were a significant factor in helping these students feel comfortable and fairly secure about their college experience while living in a foreign country. Second, it appears the LDS students' religious behaviors were not viewed as threatening to the Muslim students, but rather as supportive of their identity as practicing Muslims. The data we collected seem to imply that, along with the strong training provided by their own Muslim background, the religious environment at BYU as well as the positive interactions that the Muslim students have had with their LDS counterparts encouraged these students to see their religion as an asset rather than a detriment, particularly at a time when there is clearly some negative media bias toward Islam and Muslims.4

One of the more significant purposes of this study was to see what BYU can do to help minority students adjust and acclimate to a new environment and culture and, more particularly, what university professors can do to better deal with the cultural differences that impact the learning and well-being of Muslim minority students. Of the thirtyseven students interviewed, thirty-one (84%) said that BYU had made sufficient efforts to support their religious activities. For example, many of those we interviewed commented about the room BYU has designated in the Wilkinson Center to be used as a mosque for Friday prayers. Many were impressed that BYU would dedicate a space for the religious needs of such a small minority. Further, one graduate student who was attending BYU during the 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center mentioned that the BYU administration had called each Muslim student to make sure they were safe, to counsel with them, and to give them a personal phone number if they felt threatened or needed help in any way.

<sup>4.</sup> See, for example, Rasha A. Abdulla and Mervat Abou Oaf, "Collective Guilt as a Response to Evil: The Case of Arabs and Muslims in the Western Media," The Handbook of Global Communication and Media Ethics, ed. Robert S. Fortner and P. Mark Fackler, 2 vols. (Hoboken, N.J.: Blackwell Publishing, 2011), 2:735-51.

While these efforts are admirable, there is more that can be done to help Muslim students feel welcome at BYU.

A number of the students we interviewed felt that BYU should devote more time in promoting its religious and cultural environment to non-LDS students looking for a unique place to study. They believed that if more Muslim students were aware of the uncommon educational and religious atmosphere at BYU, the numbers of Muslim students attending BYU would increase dramatically. Many of the students we interviewed believed that a larger Muslim student population would make it easier for them to practice the communal aspects of Islam. In their view, a larger Muslim population would allow them to more fully enjoy the benefits a religious community offers its members, which they perceived to be happening among the LDS student population. While we realize there are constraints to the number of students who can attend Brigham Young University, it is nevertheless a compliment to the unique religious environment of the campus that so many of the students we interviewed believed that other Muslim students would benefit from attending BYU. These students also gave other practical suggestions that would benefit the Muslim minority at BYU, like holding an orientation meeting for new Muslim students at the beginning of each semester, labeling foods at the Cannon Center that contain pork, and advertising the location of the Wilkinson Center room used for Friday prayers.

Finally, an important question that remains unanswered is, how does the experience of Muslim students at BYU compare with the experience of other Muslim students attending nonreligious universities in the United States? In order to answer this question, a comparative study is required in a variety of other settings, including secular educational environments and environments in which other religious viewpoints predominate. Consequently, a qualitative study of Muslim students is currently underway at a university in New York City, which will allow us to compare the findings of our BYU study with the data from interviews at the New York university. We anticipate there will be differences in the experiences of Muslim students at the two institutions. We believe the Muslim students at BYU will be more robust in their religious behavior, given the distinctive environment at BYU.

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