

Pluralism Project and Andover Newton Theological School Co-Host Interfaith
Leadership Seminar, June 2012 | Site Visits

Student Reflection: Islamic Society of Boston Cultural Center



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Mark Kharas recently received a Masters in Theological Studies from Harvard Divinity School where he specialized in Hindu Studies and was a resident at the Center for the Study of World Religions. A lifelong Quaker, he also represents the Quakers on the Interfaith Relations of the National Council of Churches.

In this piece Mark reflects on three aspects of visiting the Islamic Society of Boston Cultural Center that impacted him: the content and role of the khutbah (sermon), the term “orthodox progressive,” and the political dimension of being a Muslim community presence post-September 11th, 2001. Excerpts from his thoughts on the final topic are posted below.

During the service there was a brief mention of Palestine and a more substantial reference to Syria. But the topic was quickly brought back to individual experience and responsibility. In our conversation with the Imam after the service [the political] was closer to the surface. When I asked a question concerning the relationship of American Islam to other forms of Islam I was hoping for an answer that touched on religious/ritual differences, about different experiences of Islam as a lived religion, or discussions of scholarly meetings of different schools of thought. The answer provided dealt more with apologizing for radical clerics who might espouse terrorism or denigrate Israel. I was interested in religious contours, not political activity, and I certainly didn't feel that the Imam had to apologize for Muslim leaders with whom he disagreed and had little, if any, influence over. International politics and terrorism came up several other times in that discussion. The fact that it came up when it did suggests to me that Imam Webb, as a representative of Islam meeting with Western Christians, expected to have to address these political situations. I find it sad that such expectations are the norm. There are always leaders in every religious tradition that advocate horrible activities, which are sometimes carried out. Yet with these other traditions we don't automatically assume that the rest of the tradition has to answer for them. All Jews are not responsible for the occupation of the West Bank and isolation of Gaza. All Hindus were not responsible for the destruction of the Ayodhya Mosque. All Christians were not responsible for the Holocaust. However, in post-9/11 America it sometimes seems as if many Americans think that all Muslims are responsible for al-Qaeda. Christians especially must challenge these assumptions. We need to make it such that dialogue with Muslims doesn't have to include suspicion.