

A Nomination to Controversy (B)

“Dr. Ahmed, thank you for being here. I would like to ask you to say a prayer to your God. Could you do that for us here?”¹ The crowd of more than a hundred reacted with surprise and dismay to Council Member Don Redman’s question. Parvez Ahmed recalled, “It was tense. The room was packed.”² His nomination to the city’s Human Rights Commission had long been controversial, but for many observers, this was its lowest point. Ahmed looked over to Council President Richard Clark, wordlessly wondering “...can he even ask me that question?” Throughout the process, Ahmed faced questions that he didn’t find relevant to his nomination. This one he would not answer.

As Ahmed stood silently at the podium, Redman continued above the din: “That’s all right. I have a reason that I would like for him to pray to his God. If you all will please be quiet?” Ahmed watched as the Council’s lawyer ran across the room to stand next to him at the podium. She addressed Redman: “If I may talk with you briefly and save your five minutes? I want him to have his five minutes.” Applause broke out from the audience, until Clark sharply interjected: “Guys, we’re going to have a very tight ship. Any clapping, anything at all tonight, we’re just going to clear the room. ...Too many people in the room tonight; we’re not going to have any display at all tonight. Thank you.”

Redman continued, “OK, let me just go directly to where I was going, and we’ll skip that. I don’t think he wants to do that anyway. Were you offended when I opened our meeting tonight, and prayed, in Jesus’ name? Did that offend you?” Ahmed paused, and said: “I’m not sure what has that got to do with the nomination?” Redman tried to reframe the question, and then said, “...Could you answer the question though, did I offend you when I prayed in Jesus’ name?” Ahmed replied: “I don’t think it is relevant to the work of the Commission.” Redman repeated, “Can you answer that question?” Ahmed said again, “I do not think it is relevant to the work of the Commission. People do have the right to pray according to their faith, and according to their beliefs.”

Redman responded, “I agree. And the reason I asked you to pray—if I ask you to pray, I don’t expect you to pray to my God, just like if you asked me to pray, I’m going to pray to my God. I’m going to pray in Jesus’ name. And you should not be offended for me to do that. And I feel, to serve on this Commission, I feel like you would be doing an injustice to serve and have that objection.” The conversation continued, awkwardly, with the city’s attorney trying to clarify what Redman did or did not intend: “...To clarify the record, you’re not saying it is a problem—he may or may not pray at all...”

As council members continued to make statements and ask questions, Clark suggested that Ahmed take a seat so he would be more comfortable. Clark’s decision to support the confirmation had been made long ago, after he met one on one with Ahmed. Now, he had to focus on keeping the meeting under control. Clark was relieved that he had closed public comment. The statements from the council members on either side were heated enough. As the exchange continued, Council Member Jack Webb was increasingly angry. “I was furious. I was mad because I knew what had happened. Our ability to engage any sort of intelligent, well-reasoned dialogue or debate was forever destroyed. It was over.”³ Webb jumped out of his seat, walked out of chambers into the green room, threw his pen across the room and used some colorful language. “I was hot.” Soon, it would come to a vote. Webb recalled, “Here’s the dilemma: if I vote yes, my feeling is that in the process I compromise myself simply out of political cowardice. Knowing full well that if I resist the urge to go

along... it could come back to haunt me.” Clark, Jones, and eleven other council members voted to confirm; Webb, Yarborough, and Redman, and three other council members voted against. The result was 13 votes in favor of confirming, 6 opposed. Ahmed would serve on the Human Rights Commission, effective May 11.

After the Vote

After the vote, former Mayor John Delaney observed, “I was in city hall for twelve years, and I’ve worked with the legislature for close to thirty years now, and I’ve never been as saddened by a proceeding that I watched, as I was when I heard the anti- people talking.”⁴ Yet, Delaney added, “He passed better than two to one. ... The positive comments from the people that voted yes would make you feel good about the country.”

Council Member Warren Jones later noted: “I was glad that he was confirmed; I was disappointed that it wasn’t unanimous. It just shows that despite the work we have done in our community on race, there are factors that contribute to not treating people equally. And we’ve still got a lot of work to do.”⁵

Webb recalled, “It was a horrible night. I remember coming away from that meeting feeling so empty. And so spent. I knew at that point I was going to have political problems.” Yet he held no anger towards Redman: “God love Don, I don’t fault him, because after the fact I figured out what he was trying to do.” Clark also understood that Redman “was upset by the way it all came out.” But after hearing him ask to pray: “...it defined -- perfectly defined -- what any real opposition was all about.”⁶ Clark continued:

The people will tell you, who voted against [confirming Ahmed], that it was about CAIR, and what they did. Clearly that statement right there; that was when you realized what the true argument was about; and it was about his faith and his beliefs. Not CAIR, not whether or not CAIR supported Hamas, not whether if they did he was aware of it and advocated for it. Because no one asked that question.

There were some on the council, and in the press, who wondered if Redman was risking legal action against the city of Jacksonville. Jones noted, “We’ve confirmed hundreds of people to commissions and boards, we’ve never asked anyone in committee or in council to offer a prayer.” He added: “It was inappropriate, it was unfair, it was discriminatory.”

Rev. Steve Goyer recalled, “I was surprised, I was angry, it felt a grave injustice to him and his faith. I was really proud of Parvez because he was so steady and quiet and strong.”⁷ He added: “A prayer is a sacred thing and to ask someone to say it as a way to gauge their humanness or their faithfulness in a public setting was a complete de-sacralization of this powerful ritual. He damn well better not have said a prayer to any God in that place!” Goyer continued, “It cheapened the gospel, in my understanding of it, and turned God into a litmus test of something.” Looking back, Goyer said: “I didn’t realize we had so much work to do, really, until that moment.”

After the vote, Ahmed made a brief statement, but wouldn’t take any questions. He did not reference the prayer request. “I thought the conversation was heated enough. And the city needed time to regroup, and at that point, saying more things would be more hurtful.” He didn’t have any interest in responding to those council members who spoke, or voted, against him. Ahmed stated: “We need to move on. We need to learn our lessons and figure out how to build a better city.”

When the City Council meeting was over, Ahmed wanted to avoid the media, so he went out with a couple of friends rather than directly home. After a month Ahmed would often describe as “bizarre,” the mood was upbeat. One friend, a prominent lawyer active in the Jewish community, joked that when Redman asked him to pray, Ahmed should have said, “Which way is Mecca?” Ahmed was pleased with how it was resolved: “I felt it was a kind of a moment of triumph for the city. It was also a moment of triumph for good sound reasoning overcoming fear and paranoia and hype.” Ahmed didn’t seem to view the controversy as a personal battle; rather, it was a test for Jacksonville. He was pleased that “the city finally engaged in a difficult conversation that it was avoiding for a long period of time.”

A Formal Apology

Minutes after the meeting concluded, one citizen of Jacksonville emailed the president of the City Council and the mayor about what she felt was an “embarrassment to the entire community. ... I feel we all owe Dr. Ahmed an apology for the way he has been treated. And yet he stands there with his dignity and has to take it.”⁸

The following day, April 28, Redman called many of his fellow council members to apologize and sent a formal letter to Ahmed. Redman’s assistant hand-delivered the letter, bearing the seal of the City of Jacksonville, to Ahmed’s office.

Please allow me this opportunity to congratulate you on your confirmation to serve on the Jacksonville Human Rights Commission. Please allow me to express my apology for some of my questions and requests during the Council meeting last night. ... I understand that someone’s faith and beliefs are highly personal, individual and private matters, particularly when it comes to government service. On reflecting back, I should not have asked you to pray aloud publicly at the meeting. If I had it to do over again now, I would not do so. I was trying to explore a concern I had as to your ability to work regarding divergent faiths and viewpoints in serving on the Commission.⁹

Newspaper reports the next day noted that “Redman said Wednesday he was trying to make a point not because Ahmed is a Muslim, but because he is a board member for interfaith group OneJax, which in a 2007 letter asked the City Council to make its prayers inclusive, rather than sectarian.”¹⁰ Rabbi Joshua Lief, a supporter of Ahmed, agreed.

What he was really getting at, and poor Councilman Redman, I really do feel badly for him, he was really horribly pilloried for daring to ask the question, was actually not about Islam. It was about Parvez’s membership on the OneJax board, with me. Because OneJax has taken the issue that there shouldn’t be particularistic prayers at public settings.¹¹

Lief added:

I fully appreciate and support the rights of Christians to pray as they see fit. I understand, and have read many times in the New Testament, that none shall come to the Father but through me, therefore for some Christians all prayers have to be in Jesus’ name or they’re not valid: I get that. But I’ve asked Christians on occasion, if I say, ‘In Your Name we pray’, who’s the ‘you’? And they say ‘Jesus.’ Great. Cause when I hear it, I think God. So if we can hear it and think two different things, we can share the same prayer and that will be all the more meaningful. ... My biggest concern was when he

asked Parvez to ‘say a prayer to YOUR God.’ And to me that was the most troubling line because I believe there is only one God. I don’t think there is Parvez’s God, and my God, and Councilman Redman’s God. I think there’s just God.

Rabbi Jonathan Lubliner believed that Redman’s request for Ahmed to pray grew out of the context of particularistic prayers that opened each meeting of City Council. From Lubliner’s perspective, “that whole piece isn’t Kosher to begin with. It’s the City Council.”¹² He continued, “I believe that God should exist in a public space, I’m just concerned about the tyranny of the majority.” As embarrassing as this moment was, Lubliner was concerned that, once again, the council was distracted from the core issues. “I wish there had been a better process to ask the questions that should’ve been asked, instead of the grandstanding we had.”

Ahmed explained, “[Redman] was trying to make an important point. Which was that nobody should be asked to engage in a prayer that is inauthentic to their own tradition.... He could have raised that before the meeting.” He added: “I believe in the separation of church and state. Prayer is between a person and God. It is not something that needs to be imposed upon people in a public meeting. I prefer a moment of silence before public meetings rather than public prayers. Those who want to pray can do choose to do so in silence. This way we also respect the wishes of those who do not want to pray.” While Ahmed was pleased that Redman apologized, he felt he did so under some pressure. He hoped Redman would agree to meet with him or apologize to the citizens of Jacksonville for “needlessly giving the city yet another black eye”, but neither would happen.

Delaney felt Redman’s apology was “very gracious” and cautioned against judging the Council Member’s actions too harshly. “This was someone expressing genuine remorse for causing pain, and where he was not just apologizing, but was in effect asking for forgiveness. That is a hard spot for any human to be in, and especially so for a public figure.”

May 10: An Explosion

“Who would have done it? Why would they do it? What was the motive behind it? It was disturbing, very disturbing.”¹³ As Muhammad Mansoori, a board member at Jacksonville’s Islamic Center of Northeast Florida, spoke with his wife about what happened at the mosque, his children overheard. Mansoori’s daughter asked: “‘Why would someone want to bomb the mosque?’”

On Monday, May 10, at 9:30 P.M., a bomb exploded at the back entrance of the Islamic Center of Northeast Florida. At the time, 60 people were gathered inside for the evening (‘Isha) prayer. The small pipe bomb scattered shrapnel 100 feet, but did only minor damage to the building, and no one was injured. Ahmed’s phone rang in the middle of the night. A reporter he knew well was calling: “I’m sorry to wake you up, but can you come in the morning to give us a comment about what just happened?” Ahmed asked, “...What happened? It’s 2:00 in the morning?” ... He said, “There was a bomb at the Islamic Center.” Ahmed explained that he wasn’t a member of the Islamic Center board and put the reporter in touch with a Center spokesperson.

Krueger received a phone call early on the morning of May 11. “We were all pretty tired by the time the news about the mosque happened.”¹⁴ While she was relieved to hear that no one was hurt, it was “very personally troubling.” She noted, “How do you measure, being an American child, an American Muslim, having that experience when it doesn’t feel safe anymore? Those are the invisible things.” Before 8:00 A.M., Krueger and the board were in conversation about how to respond. “Clergy wanted to respond with a common voice

through OneJax, with a sense of coalition and cohesion, hence the letter from the clergy. They didn't flinch. Their stance was: "Not on our watch." A few hours later, the statement went out through Twitter, Facebook, and other media, and clergy gathered at the Islamic Center for a press conference.

We are deeply saddened and disturbed by last night's act of violence at the Mosque of the Islamic Center of Northeast Florida. As clergy that represent a broad range of faith traditions, and as Board members of OneJax, we want to state unequivocally that we condemn any act of violence directed at any faith's place of worship in our community—or anywhere.

We know, on a very personal level, of the basic goodness, kindness and tolerance of the people of Jacksonville. It is all the more unfortunate that an irrational and extreme act of an individual or small group should reflect on the values that most of us hold dear in Northeast Florida. We encourage other faith leaders and the citizens of our community to assert that there is no room for this behavior here. We urge all to reach out to our local Muslim community in peace and support and help us to reinforce that we are a city with appreciation, respect and understanding for all religions, cultures and beliefs.¹⁵

Lief and Goyer were among the OneJax faith leaders -- Catholic, Baptist, Greek Orthodox, Reform Jewish, and Presbyterian -- to sign the letter.

The independent evangelical church across the street, New Covenant Ministries, contributed \$5,000 to the reward for identifying the perpetrator. Mansoori described them as good neighbors: in the years before the Islamic Center expanded its parking, New Covenant invited the Muslim community to use the church parking lot on Friday afternoons at no cost. The men's group of the Jacksonville Jewish Center (JJC) offered to come to help clean up; Rabbi Lubliner of the JJC wrote a letter of support, which he published in the community newsletter. It read, in part:

As the Senior Rabbi of the Jacksonville Jewish Center, I am writing to express my sorrow at the hateful act of intolerance directed this past week against the Islamic Center. As victims of prejudice ourselves over the centuries, Jews understand only too well what it means to experience prejudice simply because one is different. This act of mindless violence, perpetrated by a twisted individual, has diminished the fabric of community for all who embrace tolerance and the right to worship in freedom. I pray this incident may serve as a wake-up call to our city's residents, the majority of whom truly believe that religious diversity can only enhance and add beauty to the rich tapestry of life here in Jacksonville. Whatever our differences, we are all God's children; those who cannot accept this fundamental truth do nothing but demonstrate disrespect to the One who is Supreme Ruler and Creator of all humanity.¹⁶

Lubliner closed his letter "Shalom ... Salaam."¹⁷

The Muslim community, while shaken, was impressed by the strong support from the local community, and the response of police and FBI. Mansoori recalled that law enforcement arrived at the scene in minutes and collected evidence until the early morning. Cameras at the back of the building recorded grainy footage. Cameras were installed as a "precaution," Mansoori explained, given the fact that, "in South Florida, several mosques have been vandalized, some many times."

While the bombing made headlines locally, for some in the Muslim community, there was a sense not so much

of fear but of hurt. Najmah Shabazz, an African American woman who came to Islam as an adult, said the impact of Redman asking Ahmed to pray hit her much harder than the bombing. Shabazz, whose own daily prayers still include the Lord's Prayer from her Christian youth, stated: "How could they not understand that we have the same God?"¹⁸

A Connection or a Coincidence?

Some wondered if it was a mere coincidence that the bomb was placed at the Islamic Center the day before Ahmed was to begin his position on the JHRC. Ahmed felt that, until there were facts to support it, there was no reason to speculate; this view was shared by Shabazz, Mansoori, and many others in the Muslim community. In the larger Jacksonville community, some didn't hesitate to make a connection: Clark stated simply, "There is no doubt." Delaney went one step further: "Oh, clearly. I was a lawyer, and I was a prosecutor for a while. I would go through the list of that ACT group and-- it's a bit of a blurry picture, but I think they could work out who it was." Goyer said it was a matter of "definite cause and effect. I couldn't help but think it was someone from ACT." Council Member Jones wasn't sure if the events were linked. "I don't know. I would hope it wasn't." But, he added, "You've got extremists in every area. I guess I should have been surprised but I wasn't."

Webb thought it was unwise to assume that an opponent of Ahmed's nomination left the bomb at the mosque. "I think it is linked one way or another. I don't know who did it or why they did it." He explained: "But I think before we come to that conclusion we need to let the Full-Blooded Irish, as I call them, that is the FBI...do their jobs to figure out what is going on."

Just three days after the bombing, OneJax held their annual Humanitarian Awards dinner; Rabbi Joshua Lief offered the invocation. For many in the room, the events of the past month had left them raw. Lief took the opportunity to speak out against the bombing. He referenced the sense of collective hurt, using one word that resonated for many that night. Lief said, "*Our* mosque was bombed." He would later offer a sermon at The Temple on the dangers of extremism and "our need not for tolerance, but rather acceptance." He explained that the bombing offered a reminder: "...this is the cost of hating people." He continued:

Yes, most of us engaged in the debate with our words, but there's going to be some crazy person out there who engages with violence. And that's why we can't behave that way with our words, because it might lead to people taking crazy actions. ... You can't say things like 'Muslims shouldn't be allowed to participate in society,' or 'they're not good citizens.' That's dangerous to say because someone might take you up on it.

Ahmed recalled, "He captured that moment to say that it is our shared destiny." He explained, "So Rabbi Lief's Temple is *our* synagogue."

Almost one year after the explosion at the Islamic Center, no arrests had been made; no one knows for sure what motivated the attack. Ahmed noted, "It does present a period of uncertainty, so people are still worried about it. But people move on, and nobody wants to live in fear."

Two Articles

On May 13, “A Tale of Two Terrors: Times Square vs. Jacksonville” would appear on the Huffington Post. The piece, written by Ahmed Rehab from the Chicago office of CAIR, noted that the bombing in Jacksonville received no national media coverage while the failed bombing in Times Square was covered widely. He wrote: “Failure to take this incident seriously by our national press, elected officials, and community organizations sends the message that a bomb attack in this country is not such an alarming prospect as long as the target is ‘them.’”¹⁹ This view was echoed by another national Muslim organization, the Muslim Public Affairs Council, which stated “The attack happened at a mosque in Jacksonville, FL, and has received little to no attention from national media outlets. Had the firebombing taken place against a church or a synagogue, it’s no stretch of the imagination to think it would have made national headlines within hours.”²⁰

Ahmed offered his own perspective a few days later:

Decrying the national media’s silence as bias solidifies the misperception that the Muslim community is perpetually playing the victim card. In reality the Muslim community in Jacksonville feels anything but victims. The community faced formidable challenges but respond with positivity -- with timely help from public officials, faith leaders, and law enforcement professionals.²¹

His article concluded, “The Jacksonville saga shows that getting the appropriate media attention and support from religious/civic organizations is much easier when the community has taken the time to build such relationships well in advance of a crisis. This more than anything else is the path to empowerment that American Muslims rightfully seek.”²²

Ahmed felt that while the observation about the lack of national media coverage was correct, the criticism was not. Throughout the controversy, he felt local media acted responsibly and with restraint. Ahmed later explained, “I like things to be more at a factual level, even in a difficult situation, I don’t like to react emotionally to things out there, because all it does it fans the flames. It never brings clarity to the situation.” Once again, Ahmed was playing the role he chose for himself in the American Muslim community: to serve as “an independent, critical but constructive voice.”

New Leadership, New Procedure, and Perhaps, a New Church

On July 1, Jack Webb was sworn in as the new President of the City Council for a one-year term. Webb was expected to easily take on the role, moving from Vice President. He narrowly won the vote, meeting an unexpected challenge in the final days; some believed the late opposition was prompted, in part, by his position on the Ahmed nomination. As the new President, prayer at City Council meetings would be one of the first issues Webb would address. “I think that we are all entitled to pray in any way that we are comfortable with. I think that, however, we need to remain inclusive and respectful of all faith traditions. ... That’s a challenge.”

The week prior, the mayor and then-President Clark received a letter from the ACLU threatening a lawsuit if the prayers that opened City Council meetings continued to be said “In Jesus’ name.”

As you know, the Jacksonville City Council opens each of its sessions with a sectarian prayer given by Councilman Don Redman, who is the chaplain for the Council during the current fiscal year. All of

his prayers at these bi-weekly meetings are Christian-specific. For example, each prayer ends with "In Jesus' name, I pray." The two Council Chaplains prior to Councilman Redman also opened each Council meeting with Christian-specific prayers. This practice violates the Establishment Clause of the U.S. Constitution, and we ask that you discontinue it immediately. ... Apart from its unlawfulness, we ask that you consider the divisive and intolerant effect of the Council's current practice, by which government officials recognize only one faith. In a religiously diverse democracy, citizens of all faiths (or no faith at all) should not be subjected to officially sponsored religious practices before participating in the affairs of local government. Accordingly, we ask you to give serious consideration to how the practices of the Jacksonville City Council can, and should, be revised to reflect the diversity of the community. The council's current practice is contrary to law, divisive within the community it is supposed to be serving, and subjects the city to liability for violation of the law and attorneys' fees if it is challenged. Please let me know within 30 days whether the City Council will be continuing its current practice described above.²³

Webb decided that each week, a different faith leader would offer opening prayers, although the council would retain the position of Chaplain. He selected Clay Yarborough to serve in that role, and the first minister selected to open City Council was from the First Baptist Church.

In September 2010, Rabbi Lubliner was the first non-Christian to offer prayers at City Council. Lubliner noted that while he was happy that the Council was taking a more "expansive" position, he added: "...only time will tell whether or not it's truly committed to a wide range of faith representation. How disappointing if it turns out that I was only a spoonful of chocolate in the sea of vanilla."²⁴

As for Clark, while he enjoyed his role as President of the Council, he was happy to move on. A few months after the Ahmed controversy, Clark considered moving on from the First Baptist Church as well. He was disappointed that all of the other First Baptist members on the Council opposed Ahmed. "That's what does damage. And it does irreparable damage. I can't imagine it brings people to the church; it's gotta drive people away."

After the Confirmation

After Parvez Ahmed's confirmation, the Jacksonville Human Relations Commission (JHRC) continued its low-profile work, including a new community survey on attitudes towards religion and national origin. The JHRC, and the issue of Ahmed's appointment, faded from the headlines. ACT! for America (ACT) continued their grassroots efforts, with the local chapter hosting a "Jihad in Jacksonville" workshop in the summer of 2010. The event was advertised as an opportunity to "[l]earn about the Islamic enemies already here and what you can do about it."²⁵ Free tickets were offered for elected officials and law enforcement; discounts were available for Tea Party members.²⁶

In late November, the appointment controversy resurfaced, with new allegations and a call from ACT to remove Ahmed from the volunteer post. A December 1, 2010, article in the *Times-Union* reported that Randy McDaniels, the chapter leader for Jacksonville ACT, claimed he had evidence of Ahmed's "extremist views"²⁷ recorded on videotape from a recent presentation, "Is Islam Compatible with American Values?" given at an area library. The article stated that McDaniels, who played a key role in opposing Ahmed, would soon be releasing the video. City Council President Jack Webb was quoted as saying he would look into the new allegations.²⁸

The sponsor of the event, Americans United for the Separation of Church and State, indicated that Ahmed had not made any extremist statements; their only concerns that evening were related to the tone and tactics of ACT members who angrily questioned, and aggressively videotaped Ahmed. Organizers reported that they walked Ahmed to his car afterwards, concerned for his safety.²⁹ Before the video was released, Ahmed provided a copy of his speech to the newspaper, in the spirit of transparency. Upon reading the speech, many criticized the newspaper for running the initial story about McDaniels' allegations.

On December 9, 2010, McDaniels released the video, which opened with the question: "Parvez Ahmed: Human Rights Commissioner, or, Hamas operative?"³⁰ Later that day, the *Times-Union* reported that the video did not include extremist statements from Ahmed; it did, however, feature a conversation with a former FBI agent with a "checkered past."³¹ Two days later, a follow-up story focused on McDaniels: "His record with state licensing boards show that he owes more than \$500,000 in fines to the state for contracting jobs he botched or, in some cases, took money for but never performed."³² The article continued: "McDaniels also has a criminal arrest record in Jacksonville that shows a DUI, a domestic battery and a charge of passing worthless checks. The domestic battery and worthless checks offenses were later dropped; McDaniels pleaded no contest to the DUI last year and received probation."³³ When asked to comment on the charges against McDaniels, Ahmed declined.

Shortly thereafter, Ahmed was named "Person of the Year" by the North Florida newsmagazine, *Folio Weekly*: "He didn't flinch when some Jacksonville City Councilmembers mirrored the intolerance of extremists. He didn't rage when the daily paper repeated attacks on him without verifying them. He didn't allow the controversy to disable his cause."³⁴ The piece continued:

Parvez Ahmed isn't being recognized for what he endured, but because of what he represents. Namely, that Jacksonville can move beyond the rhetoric of hate and religious inflexibility, and embrace a multicultural, well-educated future. He offers hope that diversity is an achievable aim, and that the truth about all of us — good or ill — will come out in the end.³⁵

Looking Forward

Krueger reflected, "If there has been complacency, there is an alertness now that is far more sensitive." She hoped that the community would "change a crisis into a meaningful opportunity." One result of the crisis was a new Adult Sunday School class co-taught by Goyer and Ahmed at Riverside Presbyterian Church, "What Christians want to know about Muslims and what Muslims want to know about Christians." Goyer explained, "The Sunday School class is a pretty big investment." Congregants ask, "How come we're not studying Jesus? How come we're studying Islam?" He explained, "We're doing this because I think this is how Jesus would be doing it, this is what I think Jesus would be doing. This is our call." As Goyer considered the impact of the nomination controversy, he said: "I think it has hopefully revealed what we can be, and what we shouldn't be." Lubliner reflected, "I wish I had a fuller understanding of what led to this decision [to sever his ties to CAIR] – perhaps it would have changed my mind about his candidacy." He added, "Perhaps one day I will."³⁶

Delaney believed that most of those who opposed Ahmed did so out of real concern about CAIR, or were misled; he felt that only a few were "classic religious bigots." Looking back at the controversy, Delaney recalled a story: a farmer, tired from incessant croaking of frogs on his pond, offered to sell 500 frog legs per

night to a local restaurant. But the first night, he showed up with just two frogs. The farmer apologized to the chef, saying, “It turns out a couple of frogs can make a lot of noise.” Delaney believed that the majority of the noise about the Ahmed nomination was coming from “a couple of frogs.” He emphasized that the majority of people in Jacksonville responded with reason.

Months after the Ahmed controversy was resolved, one citizen of Jacksonville chose a different frog analogy. After an article detailed the changes to prayer at City Council Meetings, one reader commented: “Why don’t they just go ahead and cave to the Muslims and invoke [Shari’ah] law instead of doing it [piecemeal]. I guess it’s like boiling a frog. A little at a time and the frog’s cooked before he knows what’s going on.”³⁷

When Parvez Ahmed reflected back on the “saga” of his nomination, he acknowledged that “misunderstanding about Islam and Muslims [is] increasing, and probably some of the opinions and views on the fringes are being hardened,” but added: “on the other hand more and more Muslims are being active in public life. If you look at it, I did win the nomination. So, as difficult as the situation was, the outcome is still good.” He emphasized that Muslims are winning public offices and are more engaged in public life than ever before. “Rather than silencing American Muslims, it has energized them.”

Endnotes

¹ City Council Meeting, April 27, 2010,” Jacksonville City Council, 2010 Council Video Archive, video file, 4/27/2010, http://media.coj.net/City_Council/Council%204-27-10.wmv, accessed July 2010.

² All quotes from Parvez Ahmed, unless otherwise noted: Parvez Ahmed, interview by author, Jacksonville, Florida, June 13, 2010.

³ All quotes from Jack Webb: Jack Webb, interview by author, Jacksonville, Florida, June 14, 2010.

⁴ All quotes from John Delaney: John Delaney, interview by author, Jacksonville, Florida, June 15, 2010.

⁵ All quotes from Warren Jones: Warren Jones, interview by author, Jacksonville, Florida, June 15, 2010.

⁶ All quotes from Richard Clark: Richard Clark, interview by author, Jacksonville, Florida, June 15, 2010.

⁷ All quotes from Rev. Steve Goyer: Rev. Steve Goyer, interview by author, Jacksonville, Florida, October 25, 2010.

⁸ [Name removed] “Dr. Ahmed,” e-mail to Mayor John Peyton, April 27, 2010, from Misty Skipper, June 14, 2010.

⁹ Don Redman to Parvez Ahmed, letter regarding prayer request, April 28, 2010, City of Jacksonville, from Parvez Ahmed blog: http://drparvezahmed.blogspot.com/2010_04_01_archive.html

¹⁰ Tia Mitchell, “Councilman Don Redman’s use of ‘Jesus’ in prayer leads to legal questions” *The Florida Times-Union*, April 28, 2010, <http://jacksonville.com/news/metro/2010-04-28/story/councilman-don-redmans-use-‘jesus’-prayer-leads-legal-questions>, accessed July 2010.

- ¹¹ All quotes from Rabbi Joshua Lief: Rabbi Joshua Lief, interview by author, Jacksonville, Florida, June 14, 2010.
- ¹² All quotes from Rabbi Jonathan Lubliner: Rabbi Jonathan Lubliner, interview by author, Jacksonville, Florida, June 14, 2010.
- ¹³ All quotes from Muhammad Mansoori: Muhammad Mansoori, interview by author, Jacksonville, Florida, June 13, 2010.
- ¹⁴ All quotes from Celeste Krueger: Celeste Krueger, interview by author, Jacksonville, Florida, June 15, 2010.
- ¹⁵ “OneJax Clergy Letter,” OneJax press release, May 11, 2010, <http://onejax.org/news/documents/OneJaxCkergyLettertoMedia.pdf>, accessed August 2010.
- ¹⁶ Rabbi Lubliner to Mr. Ashraf Sheikh, letter regarding offer of assistance from the JJC, May 12, 2010, from Cassie Vichozsky.
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- ¹⁸ All quotes from Najmah Shabazz: Najmah Shabazz, interview by author, Jacksonville, Florida, June 13, 2010.
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