

"Are you converting to Islam?"

This question was addressed to me multiple times during my freshman year at Georgetown University, and I wouldn't be surprised if people still asked it now, three years later -- given that I've been a board member of Georgetown's Muslim Students Association (MSA), lived a Muslim living-learning community, and worked at an Islamic advocacy organization.

In reality, however, I'm far from converting, and feel more rooted in my own tradition, Catholicism, than ever before. And, that's not in spite of my engagement with the Muslim community, but because of it. Rather than pulling me away from my Catholic faith, interreligious dialogue with Muslims has deepened my faith, enriched it. Dialogue -- which isn't only formal discussions, but also lived engagement with those different from oneself -- helped me fall back in love with the Catholic tradition in which I grew up.

At the beginning of college, while struggling with my Catholic identity and wondering if another religion like Islam might provide me with the connection to God that I was missing, I formed a close friendship with a Muslim girl in my dorm, Wardah. She taught me more about Islam than books ever could, because she simply lived her religion. When we roomed together as sophomores, she woke up early in the morning to pray and often stopped in the middle of homework assignments to pull out her prayer rug. Lacking commitment in my relationship with God, I wanted that kind of consistency in my own prayer life.

Wardah brought me to Muslim students' events, like an iftar, the fast-breaking meal during the Islamic holy month of Ramadan (which this year is being celebrated from mid-July to mid-August.) I was struck by the sense of community and solidarity I saw among my new Muslim friends, and realized how much I craved that, too.

Finding these things in Islam -- prayer and community -- reminded me that they also existed in my own Church, and I wanted to find them again. I signed up for a Catholic retreat with the intent of improving my daily prayer habits, and I joined a small Catholic bible study that provided me with a community with whom I could reflect on scripture. My relationship with God began improving, and my appreciation for my Catholic tradition increased.

My re-embracing of Catholicism would not have been possible without my exposure to Islam and my immersion into the Muslim community. But this process occurred differently than many might expect. People may assume that, after being exposed to Islam's beliefs and practices and not liking them, I ran for the hills--the familiarity of Catholicism. Instead, Islam provided me with a critical reference point from which I could see my own tradition more clearly. Before, I had been too close to really notice the beauty of Catholicism.

That's why I continue to stay involved in the Muslim community. Not only are they good friends, but their devotion to their religion constantly motivates me to re-examine the way I live out my Catholicism. And, it's why I've led efforts at Georgetown to provide religiously-diverse students with opportunities to dialogue with one another. Students find that their stereotypes of others are shattered, and they identify similarities and crucial differences, which I would argue, are a positive thing worth discussing. Differences in creed and ritual show us the diversity of forms in which believers understand their relationship with God, and help us identify the unique position espoused by our own tradition.

This kind of dialogue challenges the assumption held by many believers who feel that engaging with people of other faiths forces us to sideline aspects of our practice, water down our doctrines, and drop our distinct identities. But the dialogue in which I participate and promote doesn't ask us to compromise on or abandon our differences; it thrives on the sharing of them.

I often say that I have Islam to thank for helping me reclaim my faith -- and for making me a better Catholic. I hope others can say this about their experience of dialogue, too.

This article was published in the Indy Star on August 11, 2012. Jordan Denari, an Indianapolis native, is a senior at Georgetown University. She has been published in America, a Jesuit magazine, and her efforts at building interfaith relationships have been featured in other Catholic news outlets. She writes about Muslim-Christian relations on her blog, Witness (jordandenari.com).