At Public Universities, Muslim Students Search for a Place to Pray

By Ellen Wexler | OCTOBER 26, 2015

Most of the time, Maira Salim prayed in the library.

She prayed with other members of the Muslim Student Association, in a study room that the organization tried to reserve every week at Wichita State University. When a room was not available — during finals season, or when the library was unusually crowded — they prayed out in the aisles, between the bookshelves.

Ms. Salim, a senior, is president of the association's chapter at Wichita State, and she prays five times a day. But on a college campus where nearly every space is public, finding a quiet space to do so can be challenging.

"There is a mosque nearby," she says. "Maybe a 10-minute walk. It's across one of the main roads near campus. We have some students who go down there, but it's kind of difficult when you have class in 30 minutes."

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She has seen students praying in offices, or in the back of empty classrooms. Sometimes, she says, other students think something is wrong. They approach the Muslim students and ask, "Are you OK over there?"

Across the country, on campuses without large Muslim communities, Muslim student leaders end up facing a similar challenge: how to ask their colleges for a space on the campus — not necessarily a space of their own, but a quiet place to pray in private.

Often college officials don’t know quite how to respond. At public institutions, they know they must balance the needs of their Muslim students with their responsibilities under the First Amendment, which bars the government from promoting religion. They’re not sure how far they can go, and they’re wary of crossing a line.

Wichita State’s response started with a Methodist minister on the campus, the Rev. Christopher Eshelman, who suggested that the university remove the pews from a campus chapel to make the space more flexible. Last year the Student Government Association took up the issue, intending to turn the chapel into an interfaith prayer space.

Matthew Conklin, student-government president at the time, submitted a proposal to the university’s president, John W. Bardo, in March. Along with the proposal, he attached the will of Mrs. Harvey D. Grace, who donated the money to build the chapel and instructed that it was to be "open to all creeds and all races of people."

Mr. Bardo approved the proposal that month. By the end of the semester, the university had removed the pews from the chapel and put carpets and folding chairs in their place. Muslim students began praying at the chapel, conveniently located in the campus’s center.
But in early October, nearly six months later, a Facebook post written by a Wichita State alumnus sparked a viral backlash against the renovations.

"I heard about this last night -we need to be checking with the WSU admin on this for sure -u in?" one commenter wrote.

"I'm going to see if I can nullify my aunts donation," wrote another.

Now the university is revisiting its decision. A committee on the chapel's use will study interfaith spaces on other American campuses, Mr. Bardo wrote this month on Wichita State's website. Based on its research and discussions with the community, the committee will recommend changes.

"Because these issues have been unfolding over millennia," Mr. Bardo wrote, "we can invest a few more months to develop wise solutions."

'A Little Bit Unique'

MSA National, an organization that supports individual chapters of Muslim Student Associations, has a guide on its website called "How to Establish a Prayer Room on Campus."

The guide includes step-by-step instructions on how to submit a proposal for a prayer room. "Since we know of over 120 campuses with prayer rooms," it suggests, "consider highlighting rival campuses or ones similar to yours to show how all of them have already met this basic need."

A campus prayer room, it says, should be centrally located, accessible to students, and clean. It should be able to accommodate as many students as will show up for the largest prayer of the day. Bookshelves, shoe racks, and bulletin boards, it notes, are useful but not required.
"The issue of prayer for Muslim students is a little bit unique in that Muslims have to pray at set times of the day," says Hadia Mubarak, an adjunct professor of religious studies at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte and at Davidson College. "When they are on campus, it’s very likely — if they’re there for an extended period of time — that they will need to pray at some point."

Ms. Mubarak served as president of MSA National in 2004-5. In 2007 she published a paper on how Muslim undergraduates in the United States and Canada navigate university life. Before that, as president of the Muslim Student Association at Florida State University, she submitted a request for a prayer room to the student government. It was denied, on the grounds that the room would have violated the separation of church and state.

**Accommodating Religion**

At public universities, those concerns are pervasive. Private colleges, which don’t face the same legal restrictions, tend to have more leeway. At Georgetown University, for example, 50 to 60 students gather every day in an on-campus Muslim prayer room.

"It’s such a misreading of the First Amendment to say that a public university can’t accommodate religion," says Charles Haynes, vice president of the Newseum Institute and founder of its Religious Freedom Center. Public institutions can accommodate students’ religious needs, he says, "in a way that doesn’t take the university to the level of promoting one or more religions over other religions."
Douglas Laycock, a law professor at the University of Virginia who studies religious-liberty law, says he doesn’t know if Muslim students are entitled to an exclusive space. But colleges are not barred from taking action altogether, he argues. "They can certainly accommodate the needs of their students. And for Muslim students, that often means a prayer room."

At the University of Colorado at Boulder, Muslim students in the college of engineering pray under a set of stairs. Recently about 400 students submitted a petition asking for a prayer room. Administrators are in the process of selecting a space to designate as a quiet zone that is religion-neutral.

"We’re not labeling it a prayer room," says Bronson R. Hilliard, a university spokesman. "We’re calling it a quiet room, because prayer would be one of the many functions that would go on in the room."

The process has been friendly and cordial, he says, and the university hopes to select a room by the end of the semester.

At Wichita State, discussions among students have been similarly cordial. But leaders of the Muslim Student Association feel threatened by the off-campus backlash, which they say is coming mostly from alumni.

"A lot of Muslims — given the hate speech that’s been going on — are a little reluctant to start praying in the chapel again," says Taben Azad, the association’s vice president. Especially at night, he says, when they’re praying in the chapel or walking back to their cars, they don’t feel safe.

Wichita State posted a fact sheet on the university’s website this month. The chapel was never an exclusively Christian space, it notes, adding, "The chapel hasn’t been turned into a mosque. Muslim students haven’t ‘taken over’ the chapel."
Eric Sexton, vice president for student affairs, says he doesn’t know why the controversy has centered on Muslim students. Maybe someone went into the chapel and saw a prayer rug instead of pews, he says, and maybe that person felt uncomfortable.

"Clearly something happened that caused people to believe this facility was not what we intended for it to be," he says. "Whatever it is, it clearly was valid for folks. That’s why we’re re-engaging in a discussion."

Mr. Azad says the university and the Student Government Association discussed the issue extensively last year. Many people, he says, misunderstand what it means to have an interfaith prayer space.

"Online they’re all like, 'Why would WSU change the chapel into a mosque?'" he says. "But that’s not what’s going on. It’s an accommodation for all. I think a significant portion of the students on campus are OK with that concept."