

John Boccacino:

Hello, and welcome back to the 'Cuse Conversations podcast. I'm John Boccacino, senior internal communications specialist at Syracuse University.

Amir Durić:

For many students, Muslim campus community is home away from home. That community plays integral part in their college experience, and because of that, my focus always was on developing a vibrant community where students feel supported and understood. Having a such community contributes to a sense of belonging, but also confidence to be your whole self without any part of you being neglected. This is different from just congregating or coming to do a prayer together. That's why it requires full presence, it requires consistency in programming, care for each member of the community, and then support from our campus partners.

John Boccacino:

Our guest today on the 'Cuse Conversations podcast is Amir Durić, the Imam at Hendricks Chapel. Amir is responsible for fostering a sense of community and togetherness among Syracuse University's Muslim students who practice Islam. Since joining Hendricks Chapel in 2017, Amir has taken over the lead on improving the Muslim student experience not only here on campus, but across all institutions of higher education.

John Boccacino:

With the holy month of Ramadan underway, we wanted to have Amir on to share his thoughts on the role an Imam plays on campus and also discuss his groundbreaking and innovative research on the Muslim student experiences on college campuses across our country. Amir is also going to explain the core tenets of Islam, will address some of the biggest misconceptions people have about the religion, and will explain how an interfaith collaboration coordinated by himself and Rabbi Ethan Bair helped bring together Muslim and Jewish students to learn more about each other's beliefs and values. It's a valuable lesson on civil discourse, and I want to thank Amir for joining us here on the podcast.

John Boccacino:

Just how would you describe being the Imam of Hendricks Chapel? What is that role all about?

Amir Durić:

Well, the word Imam itself means that one who stands in front, and it is often referring to the one leading congregational prayer, but also, it really means being a leader or a role model in a general sense. So therefore, being an imam on campus is a great honor since these various areas of leadership are combined. So on one hand you are leading congregation, but then also you are often expected to step up and model what you would like to see. Then also having students from various backgrounds at Syracuse University makes it a special place to serve as a religious leader. I work with Muslim students from nearly 25 countries of the world, which gives that sense of the Ummah, or belonging, to broader global Muslim community.

John Boccacino:

How much did the fact that Hendricks is home to such a multi-denominational, multi-faith community, how did that really appeal to you?

Amir Durić:

It really appealed to me because we have our weekly meetings on Wednesday morning, our chaplain's council meetings, and sometimes we joke with that and say, we would like to just take this and put outside in the world. It's really the world in a small room, and being surrounded by people of different backgrounds is really a blessing. It certainly was one of the things that attracted me to come here.

John Boccacino:

When it comes to serving as our imam, what exactly was it about this community, and specifically what did you think you could offer up to our Muslim students here on campus who were looking to either continue their faith life or maybe to rediscover reconnect with their heritage and their faith?

Amir Durić:

Well, faith is integral part in the holistic development of many college students, as it helps them form as a whole person and keeping in mind that Islam is supposed to be a way of life and guide our decisions, words, and actions. For many students, it is the most salient identity or integral part of their identity formation and character development. So in particular, one part of Islam called ishan encourages excellence, excellence in everything we do. Being it in worship, academic or professional life or in our relationships with others.

Amir Durić:

So being in a position to facilitate or remind our students about that and motivate them to utilize that really feels good. Because if applied properly, this part of faith contributes to students thriving in all aspects of their lives, including their academic excellence and success. Then keeping in mind that these students will go and make impact around the world, it really then hits home because you know are being part of something bigger.

John Boccacino:

Yeah. When the student makes that connection from a worship service with you or an encounter with you leading, again as the imam here at Syracuse, for you as a spiritual leader, how satisfying is that when that connection happens?

Amir Durić:

Well, simply put, it is a manual for life. If you make that connection, you feel it is guiding you in your life. So at the outside, it helps develop a structure of my day, of my week, even if you want, month or a year, because having practices like five daily prayers spread throughout the day from dawn to sunset really helps you stay organized knowing that Jumu'ah, or Friday service, happens on Friday, and then having Ramadan once a year or taking part of your wealth once a year and giving it and contributing to social welfare. So really helps become more successful and have more self-discipline and better organization in your life. So that provides that satisfaction and helps with success in many other aspects of my life.

Amir Durić:

Inwardly, my faith helps me find that inner satisfaction, peace, tranquility, and empathy that all help with character development and traits like kindness, patience, truthfulness, compassion, trustworthiness, generosity. So it is also a reminder that I don't fully belong to this world and that a part of me, my soul that is invisible, plays a crucial role in my happiness or my sadness, my satisfaction or dissatisfaction. Thus I need to nourish that heavily part of who I am, like I invest and nourish my body with food on daily basis.

Amir Durić:

So in short, I wouldn't be who I am without faith, and I feel that without faith I wouldn't be able to find a purpose in this life. With faith, I am on the receiving end of timeless and divine wisdom that really broadens my horizons beyond this temporarily world and interests. Then in return, my faith motivates me to be a better citizen of this world, because I have a role to play. I have a role to play in it, and that role is not just about me, but around those around me as well.

John Boccacino:

Do you recall when exactly you realized that there was a calling for this line of work you were drawn to being a faith leader?

Amir Durić:

It goes back to my childhood. So I give all credits for that to my grandfather who had that wisdom to ask me to do call to pray and then to lead prayer for our family during the month of Ramadan. So as a child, it was a huge deal for me. So he would appoint me to do that. Now thinking about that, I don't know how I was brave enough and able to do that, but I accepted that responsibility and then it developed love in my heart towards this calling. I started sharing that and saying, I'm going to be an imam. My family thought I would change my mind, but I never did. So my educational route was really following that, and here I am.

John Boccacino:

How do you go about building up that faith with the students who are coming to worship at Hendricks?

Amir Durić:

Well, it's really connecting with them first on that level of being equal human being. So we are equal in that sense. So yes, I have responsibility and a role to play, but in the same time, I am another human being. I'm also a graduate student, and I am just a follower of this faith and trying to perfect and be better myself. So if you break it down that way, then it's really easier to connect with students as well who may be searching or who are always questioning, am I good enough, what can I do better, or should I do this or that?

Amir Durić:

So being able to critically think and ask questions and have that room for exploration is really critical and important, and I am type of person that give that space. So I am trying to listen and I prefer listening over talking. I prefer learning over educating and I prefer actions over words. So being that way really helps me hear where students are coming from and what their expectations are and to meet them where they are on their journey and then we journey together. So I accompany them on their journey and we journey together in whatever direction we should go.

John Boccacino:

In your estimation, what are the core tenants that define Islam?

Amir Durić:

There are three main aspects that I usually, when I'm asked this question, that I usually cover. One is that practical aspect of Islam, which is often defined as five pillars of Islam. So it is testimony of faith, five daily prayers, fasting in the month of Ramadan, and then giving zakat, or almsgiving, and then pilgrimage once in your life if you're able to do that. So it is something that is tangible people can see and that is for them, but it's not all about that.

Amir Durić:

So then there are articles of faith, six articles of faith, which are known as iman, or faith or trusting God. They're invisible, so they're between you and God, and it entails developing that relationship with God. Trusting and believing God, God's angels, God's books, messengers, believing that this world will come to an end last day, and then accepting God's destiny in our life as something that comes with free will, but in the same time, God from his wisdom knows what our choices will be.

Amir Durić:

So it is something that people cannot really see, but it is relationship that we keep developing and then combining Islam and Iman, practical aspect, and then this inner aspect of our faith really leads towards the third one, which is Ihsan. That means excellence, beauty, perfection, or that higher awareness of God. That we worship God as we can see him, because even if we don't see God, he always sees us. So it helps us strive to be better and perform better in all areas of our life. So it really directly helps our character building and developing who we are as a whole person.

John Boccacino:

I appreciated the explanations you gave of, again, the core tenets of Islam. Conversely, would you mind sharing maybe some of what you feel are some of the misconceptions that might be out there about Muslims of Islam?

Amir Durić:

As you hear me sharing, there is really so much focus on character development, on values. It's interesting that Islam then is attached or often the misconception is connecting it to violence or being violent religion or that invites to violence, and then connecting to terrorism or organizations that are doing horrible things around the world. Where really main tenants and teachings of Islam are not at all about that, so there are something completely different.

Amir Durić:

Then you have this small percentage of people who take something and then act based on that or label it as something Islamic and then entire religion and its followers sometimes get pulled into it and then have to become apologetic or explain yourself. So really I think the main one or one of the major ones is that connection between violence and Islam. While it is religion that provides guidelines and guidance for life.

Amir Durić:

Another one is accepting that wearing heads curve or hijab is oppression to women. Well, most of them would willingly choose to do that and accept this as part of their life, and indeed as expression of their feminism too or their free will, because it's their choice. Sometimes we don't see it that way. Then also people sometimes say, okay, is Allah different god from God Christians may believe in or Jews may believe in. It's just Arabic word for God. Then if we see it that way, then there is more connection and more common ground.

Amir Durić:

Then also one of misconceptions is that all Muslims are the same and that they speak Arabic while you have under 20% of Muslims who are from Arabic speaking areas and Middle East. So actually majority of Muslims are not Arabs and don't speak Arabic.

John Boccacino:

Before we get to your role with Maxwell as a researcher, as an educator, you have some pretty groundbreaking research on the Muslim student experiences in higher education here in America. Can you explain a little bit at the foundation of that research and how it's being practiced here at Syracuse?

Amir Durić:

Well, being in the role of Muslim chaplain of college campus last seven years motivated me to think in this direction as I felt that having more research on Muslim students would really help me do my job better. I often struggle to provide enough data when advocating for needs of Muslim students and Muslim community, and sometimes struggle how to translate those specific needs into academic language that would resonate and align with broader campus discourse.

Amir Durić:

So while there is a broad body of literature that focuses on minority groups, there are many gaps in research when it comes to Muslim student experiences in higher education. Some of these gaps are around that diversity within Muslim communities that is often overlooked. Some of that is around lived experiences of minority groups among Muslims and dynamics within Muslim student groups on college campuses, and then intersectionality of different identities.

Amir Durić:

So I recognize that this is not an easy task, and I am still in phase of juggling that ball and really seeing what would be best contribution. I hope that my work will contribute to the existing literature and help me and others involved in shaping that student experience, do a better job in serving and accommodating a growing number of Muslim college students in America.

John Boccacino:

When you look back on the role here at Hendricks, what are some specific ways you feel in the seven plus years you've been here that you've been able to embrace the leadership role of enhancing that student experience for the Muslim students here on campus?

Amir Durić:

Well, for many students, Muslim campus community is home away from home, because we have students from all over the world and then from most states in America. So that community plays an integral part in their college experience, and because of that, my focus always was on developing a vibrant community where students feel supported and understood. So having such community contributes to a sense of belonging, but also confidence to be your whole self without any part of you being neglected.

Amir Durić:

This is different from just congregating or coming to do a prayer together, and that's why it requires full presence. It requires consistency in programming, care for each member of the community, and then support from our campus partners. Then need of college students are specific and often go beyond the programming of local congregations. So having a strong support system on campus, while building relationships and collaborating with local congregations, I recognize to be the one of best approaches toward improving that Muslim student experience. In that way, students feel supported on and off campus and then they can count on multiple resources.

Amir Durić:

So in short, my work findings and recommendation, these are that investment of time, effort, and resources into building a strong campus community for Muslim students and providing an adequate space for them improves their overall student experience. Here at Syracuse and Hendricks Chapel, in my time here I know I'm building on some strong foundations as well, because people planted seeds decades ago here at Syracuse University for this work. In my seven years here, we really increased engagement of Muslim students who participate and engage without our programming. So from small number Noble Room when I started, we now have private services in the main chapel with significant number of Muslim students participating and being part of that.

Amir Durić:

We worked with our campus partners to add additional prayer rooms because daily prayers are really important part of daily life of practicing Muslims. So we had prayer room at the chapel, but then also we were able to open additional spaces in Bird Library, in Schine Student Center, in some of residence halls, which made life easier for those who are practicing their daily prayers.

Amir Durić:

Also, we have full support in the month of Ramadan. We started doing each celebrations. We started doing pre-welcome programming for our Muslim students, and all of this really made difference. So we feel vibrancy in that community. We feel that growth and then also we see already that there is increase in enrollment of Muslim students to Syracuse University. I would like to believe that we had some role in that, but also it is many other factors as well.

John Boccacino:

When it comes to the reasons for the growth in attendance and people that are practicing and benefiting from attending Hendricks Chapel services, what are some of the initiatives that you've implemented during your time that you really want to credit for fostering that community on campus?

Amir Durić:

Well, as I said, some seeds were planted decades ago, and then it is always easier to build on those strong foundations. Something that we did is really providing space with support from Hendricks Chapel with our on and off-campus partners, providing that space to build community. On Fridays, we were able to put in place open house for prayer room and then coffee hour with People's Place and then provide some food after prayer. So when I just started, I remember that in five minutes after Friday service, people would be gone.

Amir Durić:

Then once we started doing coffee hour, open house, having some food, people would stay around. Then even if you come 30 minutes later or one hour later, there'll be connecting with each other, talking to each other. I think it really made that difference. Then after that connection, because our Friday service is largest weekly gathering of Muslim campus community, so after making those connections there, it really reflects in everything else. It reflected in attendance in our classes, in our other programming that we did, and it is now visible in almost all areas of our work.

John Boccacino:

You referenced earlier the really beneficial experiences with Maxwell School's interdisciplinary social science doctoral program. Just how did those experiences really benefit your leadership and how have they helped enhance your understanding of the needs that are facing our Muslim students here on campus?

Amir Durić:

Yeah. So this Maxwell's interdisciplinary social science doctoral program was answer to my vision around the next steps in my graduate studies path. So I always felt that my work is not only bound in one discipline and discovering this program motivated me to put my vision into reality. The program is unique in sense that it allows you to be creative around your research interests while requiring a strict methodological and theoretical grounding.

Amir Durić:

So working with experienced Maxwell faculty who are well-known experts in their fields, certainly help and enhanced my leadership skills as I learned from their experience, research recommendations, and their own leadership skills. I couldn't honestly imagine better mentors to provide me with needed tools and direction in shaping my research questions and methodology around understanding the needs of Muslim students. At the end of the day, you have to go and do the groundwork, but these tools and experience that they provided, they are key in shaping those next steps.

John Boccacino:

I really want to shine a light on what I think is an incredible interfaith collaboration taking place at Hendricks. These happen all the time, but this one in particular I think really needs to have some attention paid towards it. Because under the watch and leadership of both yourself and Rabbi Ethan Bair, we've had our Muslim and our Jewish students come together to really learn more about each other's beliefs and core values. How can you describe just how beneficial these encounters, these collaborations have been to bring together two segments that on the surface don't seem to have a lot in common theologically with their religious beliefs?

Amir Durić:

First, it started with relationship that we built over last two years. So an interesting part is that we planned actually this dialogue fellowship in June last year. So we wanted to create something where we can bring in our students and our communities to learn more about each other. Because if we really pay attention and analyze things around us, we see that many issues are product of not knowing enough or not knowing each other or just assumptions or having lack of information. Then people don't even try to learn more or to get to know someone, but they jump in conclusions.

Amir Durić:

So it was a group of 10 Jewish and 10 Muslim students, and it was four weeks dialogue fellowship where they really had opportunity to get to know each other, to have to share how they experience their faith traditions, how they experience living those traditions on college campus like Syracuse University, and then also they had opportunity to tackle some more challenging topics as well towards the end.

Amir Durić:

So in our third session, it was about antisemitism and Islamophobia. Then our fourth session, we provided space for them to discuss conflict happening in the Middle East. So we didn't explicitly plan for it, but we anticipated that that conversation will happen after building some trust among participants. So it was very engaging, very respectful, and I think based on that and based on everything happening, that dialogue really has no alternative that it's place where we all need to start in order to understand each other better and to make meaningful impact and difference in the world.

John Boccacino:

Were there any powerful anecdotes that came out from the students themselves of that realization that, okay, we might have different religions and faiths that we believe in, but deep down we're all citizens of this society and we're all students here at Syracuse? What kind of aha or light bulb moments do you think your students went through?

Amir Durić:

Well, as simple as it may sound, some of them for the first time met a Muslim or a Jewish student, or a Jew or Muslim, in their life. So it's hard to imagine that, but actually some of them said, this is my first time meeting actually someone who is Jewish or who is Muslim. Then that realization, that yes, our experience are overlapping. They're very similar. Different but similar in a way, and we have so much in common. We have so much to share and so much that we can share that can help navigate things that are happening.

Amir Durić:

Then one really phrase that stuck with me, and it was shared by a guest speaker who came. So he mentioned how important it is to build bridges, to bring people together, but in the same time how bridges are to be walked on. In other words, yes, you build bridge and it's important. It's meaningful. We recognize that, but in the same time, it's challenging. If you want to be bridge and work on understanding and building bridges, you have to be ready also to take criticism. That people will be probably attacking that as well or that not everyone is ready to engage in conversation at this moment.

Amir Durić:

Overall, I really think it was powerful just to have 10 Jewish and 10 Muslim students spend this time together and have that time to be with each other, to get to know each other better. Some of them became friends. We created a group chat, and then likely down the road, they will follow up with some additional initiatives. Some will just remain friends.

John Boccacino:

The students aren't just building the bridges. They're walking across the bridge together by testing the strength of the foundation of what they've put together. I think it's a really valuable lesson. Speaking of the lessons out there, what else do you think are some of the important lessons of bringing people together from these different upbringings and backgrounds to really learn about each other through, again, civil discourse?

Amir Durić:

Again, going back to relationship building. So just seeing each other as equal human being. There is so much dehumanization or assumptions about other or someone who is different. So starting in that place, okay, we are peers. We are colleagues. We are neighbors. Let's have that conversation. Then bringing in our faith traditions, not to misuse them or to blame them for anything negative, but to draw strength from them because they're beautiful. They have so much to offer. They have divine wisdom. They're manuals, and unfortunately, sometimes they're misused.

Amir Durić:

I think it's more important to go back to our faith traditions and really see, okay, what are the values? How I can use those practices as coping strategies and mechanisms in my life to really navigate and process everything that is happening? How it can help me with what I'm going through? So if we approach things that way, then we'll see that it'll make a difference.



Amir Durić:

It takes time, but starting with one friend, starting in your little friend circles, starting in bigger circles where we are in our communities, so it really adds up when it comes to deepening that understanding. Again, the key is that we never should forget. We are just human beings and let's start there, and then we will build on that. Rather than starting, okay, I'm this and you are that. No, we are human beings, and let's have that civic conversation about that and then see how we can use what we have in our toolbox to make our relationship better.

John Boccacino:

When it comes to those faith traditions that you mentioned earlier, the holy month of Ramadan is upon us. For our audience who is not of the faith, how could you describe the significance of Ramadan, both to Muslims and to our campus community, and what do you think we can expect for our students, faculty, and staff over the course of the next month of Ramadan?

Amir Durić:

Yeah, so it is around the corner, as you said, and the first full day of Ramadan is on Monday, March 11th. So Ramadan is ninth month of Islamic calendar. It's usually known as the month of the Quran, as the revelation of the Quran started in Ramadan 14th centuries ago. As the month of fasting, it's known as amount of fasting as well. Since Muslims observing Ramadan abstain from food, drink, and more desires from dawn to sunset 29 or 30 days.

Amir Durić:

Among objectives of Ramadan are increasing gut consciousness, self-awareness, and empathy through a consistent discipline of fasting and practices that elevate one's spirituality. So as a result, most observing Muslims become more generous in this month. They develop patience and deeper feelings for those in need and those who are deprived from necessities like food and water. So in short, Ramadan really helps Muslims to become the best version of themselves.

Amir Durić:

So since the beginning of Ramadan overlaps with spring break, we'll start our services on campus on Sunday, March 17th. So Muslim Association in partnership with Muslim Chaplaincy and Hendricks Chapel, and other on and off campus partners, will be really providing iftars, or sunset meals, to break the fast every night from March 17th through April 9th. So there is limited number, but we'll still be able to accommodate our campus community.

Amir Durić:

So we'll also be holding Taraweeh Prayer, special night prayer specific to Ramadan in the main chapel every night at 9:00 PM, again starting on March 17th. So for students with the meal plans, prepackaged morning meals will be available in Ernie Davis Dining Hall for the next morning and the private dining area will be reserved throughout Ramadan for students to break their fast together in one place. Because Ramadan is the season when family and community comes together, so we hope these accommodations will help Muslim students who are away from families feel supported on campus. Then finally, we'll conclude Ramadan with an Eid service and Eid celebration on Wednesday, April 10th at 9:30 AM in Hendricks Chapel.

John Boccacino:

You have heard a masterclass from Imam Amir Durić on why Hendricks Chapel is really the spiritual heart of Syracuse University, and especially for the many Muslim students, faculty, and staff here on campus. Amir, I can't thank you enough. This has been a powerful, impactful conversation. It's been insightful, and I really thank you so much for making the time today.

Amir Durić:

Well, thank you for having me. It's my pleasure.

John Boccacino:

Thanks for checking out the latest installment of the 'Cuse Conversations podcast. My name is John Boccacino, signing off for the 'Cuse Conversations podcast.