

Art and Religion: A Muslim's Story

When I was seventeen, I started wearing the hijab. In a world where I constantly fretted about my looks, choosing modesty in the form of the hijab gave me freedom. To me, the hijab is a feminist protest that encapsulates the idea that women should be judged based on their words and not their bodies. But it was also a decision that thrust me in the public eye. People stared, quite openly, questioning my age. No one wanted to sit next me on the train. It was a difficult decision, but after two months I decided to take off my hijab. I was tired of the weight of being visibly Muslim, especially after my family had still experienced Islamophobic hate crimes.

In January, the university I attend launched an art gallery called Taravat. An Iranian-American artist had created this exhibit to protest against the Iranian government's crimes against women and the lack of free expression there. I came into the gallery hoping to learn more about the issue. But what I saw shocked me: there were depictions of nude women with hijabs. Growing up within a Muslim ethnic enclave, I had never seen such artwork in a society that valued modesty.

I wasn't the only one. Our school's Muslim Student Association had a townhall and we all agreed: artwork like this would only fetishize students who wore the hijabs and disrespect the meaning of a sacred religious symbol. I even started seeing the figurines and paintings in my nightmares. Within the chorus of Muslim students discussing their hurt and making pleas for the artwork to be taken down, there was one voice of support for the artwork.

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It was an international student from Iran. She discussed her experiences growing up in the oppressive regime. While the hijab was a choice for me, it was forced upon her. The student was so excited for this exhibit that would bring awareness to her community's pain in this campus that she felt like didn't care for Iran. And how because the Iranian state was using Islam as a tool to quash free expression, it only made sense that the artist used Islamic symbols to dissent.

It didn't click right away. In fact, I was quite angry with her, as I felt that she was preventing our student group from presenting a united front to the administration. I meditated on the incident in a Quaker meeting and sought the guidance of tarot cards. Ironically, these were all acts associated with non-Muslim religions that are forbidden in Iran. Even to sort out my feelings about free speech required me to exercise my free speech.

I realized that the two of our communities were navigating hurt: the Iranian artist was trying to process her grief about the extremist regime, and Muslim students facing a post-9/11 world in Christian America. On the Iranian end, there were valid reasons for the offensive imagery. To protest against a country where there is silence, why not curse? It was clear that it was not only Islamophobia that my fellow dissenters were navigating— it was the weight of the intersections that could not be separated from our Muslim identity. I also understood that the art is an expression of the pain felt by Iranians.

Free expression is valuable to allow people to tell their stories and to go beyond the shallow confines of our identities. This way, the dichotomy between oppressed and oppressor is broken, ending the cycle of hate and resentment that takes too much out of both parties.

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Allowing for free speech isn't an easy process, especially in an online world where there's always the block button. Early on in my college experience, a white student accused me of stealing from her. I could have sought disciplinary action, which would have prevented her from ever being able to speak to me again. But within my decision to uphold free speech, I heard an apology from her and a genuine desire to be better. She told me about her experience growing up in a predominantly white community and how the recent loss of her grandfather had made her stressed and paranoid. This information that was provided to me from her right to free expression was what allowed me to forgive her as well as to absolve myself of all the anger and sadness I had been holding on to. This person is now my best friend, all because I decided that one mistake should not take away someone's right to free expression.

It is impossible to interact with others from different backgrounds without clashing or disagreement. We can't help the situation we were born into. As a marginalized student, it is so easy to distrust the "other." Similarly, those from more privileged walks of life are subconsciously ingrained with biases. But having space for people to express their thoughts and opinions, allows for renewal and reeducation. Shutting down the art exhibit would have only affirmed the Muslim students' right to free speech, not the much smaller Iranian community on campus.

Inherent in free expression is the idea of exchange, or recognizing that your one perspective on an issue is not the only one that should be heard. Within this country, divides are everywhere, such as the urban-rural split, blue collar-white collar, old versus young. One might not appreciate

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a different opinion, but blocking the dissenter's right to free speech also devalues the experiences that led them to their conclusion. That is the denial of humanity that drives hate.

The Muslim students association was concerned that this artwork would be perceived in a majority non-Muslim campus, where the same explicit Iranian restrictions on free speech did not exist. Yet we failed to acknowledge that because of those restrictions, this artwork could not have been shown in Iran. We failed to realize that perhaps it was meaningful for Iranian voices to be heard no matter the context.

Free expression is more than just a rule, it is a state of mind. It is allowing for people to openly share their opinions, and responding with empathy. Participating in the discourse surrounding the artwork has allowed me to see the world beyond myself and my identities and gain nuance. I still dislike the gallery, but I have empathy for the Iranian community that wishes for it to stay at my school.

This world needs more space for disagreement and conflict, instead of suppression of dissent. Because Iranians could not publicly disagree with their government, that is why the exhibit exists: an intense rebellion for the regime's rules so much so that Muslims like me feel offended. This in turn caused more fighting amongst my campus community that shares the same respect for free expression and stands against the Iranian government.

Free expression is not just rolling your eyes at an art gallery that you disagree with. It is accepting and welcoming what seems offensive to dig deeper into conflicts that underpin our society today.