

Understanding the Effects of Religious Violence and Acceptance on Milwaukee: Through the  
Lens of Islam and Sikhism

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My name is Aiden Woolsey and I am a student at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee double majoring in Religious Studies and Psychology. Today I am presenting a portion of my research project that I have been working on this academic year pertaining to religious violence and acceptance in the Milwaukee community. Before I explain further, I would like to describe an event that took place on August 5<sup>th</sup>, 2012 that was a motivator of mine to explore this topic.

All information taken from Yaccino, Schwartz, & Santora (2012):

On August 5<sup>th</sup>, 2012, a white man, went on a shooting rampage in the Sikh Temple of Wisconsin in Oak Creek while members were preparing for the morning service. Many of the members hid and protected themselves in the temple while making phone calls to police. Some members were notified of the shooting including Jatinder Mangat who tried calling a family member who had just been shot. One of the first officers was badly wounded by the assailant and another officer shot the shooter, which then killed him. Six members were killed, and three others were left wounded after the horrific event.

The reason I introduce this unfortunate event is because it exemplifies a piece of my research question for this project. I wanted to examine the occurrences of religious violence and acceptance in the Milwaukee community as well as their impact. I also investigated the roles and impact of religious tolerance and intolerance as I believed these to have significance on the community. I examined these four topics by using Islam and Sikhism as my focal points. I

looked at how these traditions experienced and were affected by these issues within the context of the Milwaukee community. Through the case studies, I expected to find a more insightful connection to bridge with my research and to learn how a solution may be implemented to stop religious violence and intolerances.

The two case studies I used were Dr. Masalkhi (Islam) and Dr. Arora (Sikhism). Dr. Masalkhi is a lecturer at UW-Milwaukee, a board member for the Arab and Muslim Women's Research and Resource Institute, and previously involved with Interfaith Conference. Dr. Arora is a Professor Emeritus in Economics at UW-Milwaukee, served in Interfaith Conference for the last 45 years, and was a board member of St. Robert School (Shorewood, WI). It is important to note that I interviewed both my case studies in 2018, so any following information from them occurred on this date.

I would first like to discuss how these traditions are affected by religious violence and intolerance starting with Islam beginning with the story of a woman.

Leila Hanichet is according to Luthern, "Nearly 12 weeks later, no arrests in beating of Milwaukee Muslim woman" (2017) and Luthern (2017) the woman that was attacked by a man for not taking her hijab off while she was walking home from her morning prayer. When she refused after being asked by the man, he attacked her and tried to rip her hijab off of her (Luthern, 2017). He continued to attack her and eventually pulled out a knife, which cut her clothing (Luthern, 2017). The man was not yet identified, but advocates expressed the motives of the man to be a hate crime (Luthern, 2017). In response, Janan Najeeb, the president of the *Milwaukee Muslim Women's Coalition*, expressed that many faiths use head coverings, but Muslims usually are targeted for this (Luthern, 2017). Najeeb also explained her belief that

people are learning this hate like the one against Hanichet from people in power or above (Luthern, 2017).

Hanichet's story especially with it still being so recent shows that these acts of hate against Muslims are still very present. This attacker clearly had very violent motives as well as zero disregard for her character. Hanichet was fifty-eight years old (Luthern, "Nearly 12 weeks later, no arrests in beating of Milwaukee Muslim woman", 2017) and suffered from seizures (Luthern, 2017). Dr. Masalhki stressed the vulnerable spot she was in and how feeble her character was. It is apparent that Hanichet's hijab, became a motive for the man's hate. This discrimination is a concern Najeeb expressed and is an issue that has been seen before. In 2016, a dental company in Fairfax, Virginia fired a Muslim woman for not taking off her hijab when asked to and *Abercrombie & Fitch* discriminated against women wearing hijabs on a few different occasions (Hasan, 2018).

This is important, because a pattern of discrimination of Muslim women wearing hijabs exists in our country today. Considering that this attack on Hanichet occurred two years ago raises concern over the continued discrimination occurring against Muslims. This attack like the shooting in Oak Creek continues to be relevant and this alone depicts the precedence of religious violence and intolerance in Milwaukee. Aside from the hijab, another example of intolerances against Muslims is how they are portrayed in the media, which Dr. Masalkhi explained to me from his perspective.

Dr. Masalkhi expressed that Muslims are not represented enough in the media and motivated bias taints the Muslim community. There is an intense amount of intolerance from the discourse and media along with a growing feeling among other minorities that there needs to be solidarity (unity) from the pressure.

What I interpret from Masalkhi's view is that all minorities experience discrimination and intolerance from media with Muslims being one. He feels that Muslims need to establish unity with one another to combat these problems faced from the media who does not portray them in an acceptable way.

These are just a few examples of the issues that Muslims face in Milwaukee and in the US still happen. In order to better understand religious violence and intolerance in the community its important to understand how the Sikh community has also been affected.

To better understand how Sikhs in the Milwaukee community are affected by these topics it is essential to know about these on a national scale. I found in my research that Sikhs are often discriminated against based on the Five Ks. They consist of five significant items (*Kesh*, *Kara*, *Kanga*, *Kachha*, and *Kirpan*) that represent devotion, submission, and identify membership in the *Khalsa* or community according to BBC, "Religions - Sikhism: The Five Ks" (2009). I will discuss only discrimination against the kirpan, facial hair, and turban (relates to the Five Ks).

All following information taken on the kirpan from The Pluralism Project (1997-2019).

The *Livingston Union District in California* went to court with the Cheema family regarding not allowing their children to carry *kirpans* at school over safety concerns. The district offered an alternative solution for the children to wear a *kirpan medallion* instead. The children left school after the court overruled the family's want to not associate the school's no knife policy with the *kirpan*. The *U.S. Court of Appeals* later ruled that the district would have to allow the children to carry their *kirpans* on the basis of their religion and beliefs. As was also argued that a medallion would erase the significance of the *kirpan* by a Sikh scholar.

This legal case highlights the important debate of whether an institution should be allowed to restrict the Sikh religious beliefs for their own interests. I can draw from the evidence that the school district may not have wanted to undermine the Sikh family's beliefs, however they still minimized the significance of the kirpan by not understanding it. I found that Sikhs have faced similar discrimination with facial hair and the turban as with the kirpan.

Sikhs have markers like the turban that are associated with Muslims, and Sikhs are often mistaken for them by many people in the United States. Interestingly, the turban or head coverings worn by Sikhs represent values (e.g. honesty and humility) and devotion (Green, 2017). The turban has powerful meaning for the Sikhs and as Green (2015) shows that people in the United States likely don't have much knowledge of Sikhs. I will discuss this point later, but before I do I would like to describe a few other examples of discrimination against Sikhs in the United States that I found to tie in with lack of knowledge. Green (2015) explains two studies that found that 1/3-2/3 of Sikh students were bullied by other students who thought they were terrorists. Another study done in New York in 2012 found that 66% of their Sikh respondents recorded to have been asked about their religious affiliation by law enforcement (Green, 2015).

Furthermore, The Pluralism Project (1997-2019) describes a Sikh machinist in California that was required to shave his facial hair to follow a new safety protocol by *Chevron*. When he explained he could not do this due to his religious beliefs he was offered lower paying jobs instead (The Pluralism Project, 1997-2019).

These events all took place outside of Milwaukee however, Dr. Arora described an event when a man held a gun to his head and threatened to kill him, because he was wearing his turban. Arora explained that the man asked where he was from and Arora answered him that he was

from India. The man expressed that he would have shot Arora if he said he was from Iran. Arora explained that the man thought he was a Muslim.

To point out, Dr. Arora is not suggesting approval of violence against Muslims rather he is merely pointing out that an association exists based on lack of understanding. This is a conclusion I make along with other parallels from his experience and the evidence. In the United States as well as in Milwaukee, there is evidence of people who discriminate against Sikhs based on their appearance and it can be drawn that these rhetorics about Sikhs comes from a lack of understanding. What I find most profound from these examples is that discrimination against Muslims also becomes apparent here. Even though Sikhs and Muslims come from different traditions and regions the discrimination they face is often bridged by the associations and misconceptions of Americans. Understanding the significance of this is important to better end these issues that affect the Milwaukee community. As Green (2015) describes a study found that 20%-28% of their subjects confused images of Sikhs as being from the Middle East and Green suggested that due to a low population of Sikhs in the US could be a factor in many Americans lack of knowledge. This provides possible insight into why these associations are made between Muslims and Sikhs.

I will come back to this concept of education and understanding when discussing about possible solutions. Before I do I would like to briefly introduce my case studies' perspectives on the terms I used for my research discussing both their similarities and differences.

### **Intolerance and Violence**

Masalkhi mentioned that Muslims are an equal opportunity for bigotry. Masalkhi views that there is a large public momentum against Muslims and other communities do need to take a

stand. He finds that any violence described as religious is under political examples and does not believe in thinking in pure religious violence. It is more so a marketing tool for those who want to perpetrate a target. He puts stress on the political side to religious violence.

Arora views that economics play a huge role in religious intolerance and violence. He feels that religious people have held views of not wanting to mix with other religious groups to maintain a sense of “purity”. This in return creates ignorance toward one another. Arora maintained the view that economics, ethnicity, and culture are at the backbone of these cultural and religious conflicts. As well, he believes that a lack of understanding leads to these issues.

### **Tolerance and Acceptance**

Masalkhi discussed the importance of learning to help others and being in the service of others. He brought up the example of many Christian hospitals and institutions taking care of people. He believes there needs to be more focus on providing social services to Muslims and having inclusive institutions for them as well. Interestingly, Arora also holds similar views on helping others who are in need. Arora says his wife works with a church, serving traditional Indian vegetarian dishes to the homeless whom they refer to as “guests” each month. Arora says they refer to the homeless as “guests”, because it is an opportunity to know yourself by understanding others. Even among some differences in who Masalkhi and Arora are referring to does not eliminate the importance of how we can be accepting of others. They both share a perspective on building connections with others that I found to be a crucial point in being accepting.

Masalkhi and Arora also explained their perspectives on the differences between my topic’s terms. Arora views tolerance and acceptance as degrees of one another as well as that



understanding plays a role in their differences. Arora agreed with the parallel I suggested between the degrees of tolerance and acceptance to that of sympathy, empathy, and compassion.

Masalkhi talked about where there is an adjective there is a difference in response to whether there is a difference between religious violence and intolerance. He views tolerance or being tolerant as not really liking someone, not being very generous, and it is a very weak concept. He believes people need to think more about tolerance and revisit it. Masalkhi believes that acceptance is stronger than tolerance, but not necessarily the only way to have stronger commitment of human quality. He views that a sense of obligation needs to form, because it allows to view one as another.

With their perspectives and previous exploration of the topics in mind this brings me to my proposition of a solution to these issues of religious violence and intolerance in our community through understanding. It is hoped that the focus of solutions in our community can then inspire change in other communities.

Through my research I learned that there are many great examples of organizations and people who have shown dedication to promoting acceptance and ending ignorance for the Milwaukee community. I believe that these groups and individuals provide an excellent example of what we can achieve together to solve adversity within our community for religious and spiritual groups. Furthermore, I hope that these solutions can be used to better combat these issues beyond the Milwaukee community as well as be ways to inspire us to help other groups of people. As I found in my research, violence, ignorance, and intolerance effects many groups of people and often these issues are connected. Interfaith Conference of Greater Milwaukee is an organization that is dedicated to bringing together different religious groups in the Milwaukee

community to solve social and *interfaith* issues (Interfaith Conference of Greater Milwaukee, 2018).

Interfaith is on the premise of helping (Masalkhi, 2018). Masalkhi views involvement in Interfaith as being neutral, a group that is met to be cooperative, and carry an open-hand concept. Arora said that he has been a member of the Interfaith conference for the last 45 years. Arora said that through Interfaith he has given many presentations on Sikhism to different groups of people and religions. He says he has been opened with welcoming arms to talk about these topics to various groups. Similar to Interfaith Conference is Scaling Wellness In Milwaukee also known as *SWIM*.

According to Scaling Wellness In Milwaukee & Marquette University, “About SWIM”, *SWIM*’s vision and mission are to be “A connected trauma responsive community where all can thrive.” and “To inspire a dynamic collaboration that heals trauma and creates a resilient community.” The purpose of SWIM is to work alongside various groups and organizations in the fields of healthcare, education, criminal justice, and other related fields (Scaling Wellness In Milwaukee & Marquette University, “About SWIM”). I gather that SWIM’s goals and methods to combat violence, drugs, and related issues in the Milwaukee community can connect back to the how religious groups experience these problems. In other words, while helping the Milwaukee community as a whole should help solve the intolerances that religious groups face in Milwaukee. Briefly, I would like to acknowledge the support that leaders in Milwaukee and the US gave to the victims of Oak Creek. I find that these examples show how powerful our impact has on others by serving and supporting.

Support from leaders in our community and country provide great examples of those who are trying to give support to those who are hurt. They also show ways that we can take action and create change in our communities to better the lives of those that are marginalized.

Obama expressed his support to the victims of Oak Creek stating, “ ‘At this difficult time, the people of Oak Creek must know that the American people have them in our thoughts and prayers, and our hearts go out to the families and friends of those who were killed and wounded’ ” (Yaccino, Schwartz, & Santora, 2012). Here a connection is made between the greater US to the Milwaukee community. It shows that a local event made a greater impact than just the surrounding community. Showing support and recognizing different people’s challenges may be essential in initiating change.

Arora also mentioned Michael Lovell, the previous UWM Chancellor, who hosted a remembrance event for those who were killed in the shooting. He explained that one of the victims had two children who went to UWM. This event was meant to allow people to discuss the event among one another. Creating safe spaces where people can support each other and discuss difficult subjects is a way to promote change. How can change happen if we don’t create the time to understand by talking to others and learning from different perspectives. Both SWIM and Interfaith Conference are doing this, so it appears to be very important step for change.

Arora also exhibited leadership through speaking with the assailant’s mother to tell her it was not her fault and that bad things happen. He explained that Sikhs do not show hatred, and this goes for those involved in the shooting. He believes if the shooter had known who the Sikh community actually were he might have not committed the act. Regardless of the effect that the shooting left on Arora’s life did not stop him from empathizing with someone who related to the shooter. This sounds like a challenging thing to do, but the fact that he took time to speak with

the assailant's mother and not blame her shows how we can be a leader for others through empathy.

In conclusion, religious violence and intolerance effects the Milwaukee community as well as the United States on many levels. I believe that examining these issues through how they effect Sikhs and Muslims in the Milwaukee community provides an insightful and focused example. Through my research and evidence, I conclude that by understanding, learning, accepting, and serving others will bring about change bettering how we treat others and in ending religious violence.

Note: For future research, I would suggest studying the same religious groups in different communities presented here to learn more about the dynamics of the topics. I would also encourage researchers to consider looking at how various religious groups are affected by these topics and what ways those communities are reacting to issues like intolerance. Looking at these topics from different angles could provide better insight into the complexity of the topics helping us to better understand what to do.

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