

Making Space for Muslims in the University—And America



HDS alumna Celene Ibrahim

Celene Ibrahim, MDiv '11, is one of a growing number of HDS alumni who pursue religious leadership in a tradition other than Christianity—and in a setting other than a house of worship. As [Tufts University's Muslim chaplain](#), Ibrahim works with students to enhance and improve religious life on campus. During her first two years on the job that meant collaborating with other administrators, architects, and development staff to create a well-located and dignified space where Muslim students could pray and still keep to a tight class schedule. Thanks to her work—and to contributions from students, parents, alumni, and others throughout the university community—the space was recently finished.

“It was a vital development to have a designated space for our basic, everyday religious needs,” Ibrahim says. “That moment was a milestone for the integration of Muslims into the university, but, at a larger level, what it signaled to me was the continued integration of Muslims into the fabric of America.”

The students in Ibrahim's chaplaincy are as diverse as Islam itself, hailing from China, Malaysia, Pakistan, India, Bangladesh, Turkey, northern Africa, and all across the U.S. Some are deeply devout, waking up in the “wee hours of the morning to memorize the Qu’ran.” Others have a cultural identity shaped by Islamic norms but are not particularly religious. Ibrahim's job is to balance the needs of all.

“The challenge is to make sure our community is big enough to welcome people who are Muslim in their cultural identity as well as those who are Muslim in their religious identity,” she explains. “So, we try to integrate religion into our social events, and have a social component to our religious programming.”

At the heart of Ibrahim's pastoral work is spiritual direction. Here, too, there's an enormous range of needs and concerns. Students who grew up hearing the call to prayer five times a

day often come for help upholding their spiritual practice amid the different rhythms of university life. Others have questions common to any young adult forming their own identity: Am I loved? Do I belong? Will I be okay?

“When you’re doing ministry in a tradition that teaches that God is in charge of the universe and means well for you, all you really have to do is help people feel that,” she says. “Once they sink into that sense that a force greater than themselves is supporting and protecting them, the other concerns often work themselves out.”

Ibrahim, who is also the co-director of the [Center for Interreligious and Communal Leadership Education](#) (CIRCLE) of Andover Newton Theological School and Hebrew College, says that her ministry extends beyond the Muslim community. Ultimately, it’s about creating spaces where people can encounter diversity and difference in a way that deepens their own commitments.

“When people encounter the religious other, it awakens them to resources that enhance their own religious experience,” she says. “They’re called to explain why and how they do things, and, in the process of explaining, they end up seeking good answers to good questions. They go into an interreligious encounter thinking that it will be decentering to their faith or identity. In fact, it anchors them even more profoundly.”