

Muslim groups launch Islam Today series to overcome religious stereotypes

By Paradise Afshar Special to the Miami Herald

Randall Kaufman wants his students at Miami Dade College's Homestead Campus to understand what he calls a simple equation: God equals Allah.

He says that when people don't get that equation, it can breed ignorance and fear.

"I have an interest in letting my students know that other religions aren't so different," said Kaufman, the chairman of the humanities and social sciences department at MDC Homestead Campus.

This desire to educate led Kaufman to work with the Coalition of South Florida Muslim Organizations (COSMOS) to launch Islam Today, a year-long series focused on the faith.

"This is for non-Muslims to understand what a Muslim is," said Kaufman, who believes that education is one of the strongest tools in combating prejudices and misunderstandings. "I think most minority communities understand the majority, the concern for me is the tolerance on the other side."

The program is set to kick off on Sept. 29 with a discussion about Eid al-Adha, led by Imam Zakaria Badat, the imam-at-large for COSMOS. The holiday is known as the festival of sacrifice, which marks the story of Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son as an act of submission to God.

"Surprise, surprise, it may be similar to the roots of Christianity and Judaism," Kaufman said. "The roots are very similar."

Kaufman says he often has students approach him with questions about the faith, culture and rituals — to address the curiosity of those students, Islam Today will not only center around religious teachings, about also Islamic art, food and culture.

For example, on Dec. 3, the program will be a choral presentation from the Florida Turkish American Association of Fort Lauderdale.

Shabbir Motorwala, a board member for COSMOS, says the series is a way to help build understanding.

COSMOS is a local nonprofit organization that works to bring understanding of Islam within among the community by working with interfaith groups, as well as providing social services for the community.

"It's really important for the Muslim community to let students in college understand what Islam is all about," said Motorwala, adding that he sometimes gets asked questions about Islamic stereotypes from those who aren't familiar with the faith. "They think all Muslims have camels and long beards."

He hopes that Islam Today helps dispel some of these stereotypes and that open dialogue will help combat Islamophobia.

"[Some people] don't have any idea that Muslims follow the same prophets as Christians and Jews do," he said. "We have to start telling the people what you see on TV by extremist groups doesn't represent the true image of Islam."

This isn't the first time COSMOS has entered into a partnership to promote the education of Islam. Earlier this year

they entered a deal with Florida International University to establish the Center for Muslim World Studies.

Once open, the program is expected to allow students and faculty to learn about the global Muslim diaspora, interfaith dialogue and Islam and security.

And the organization wants to continue this streak of getting involved with schools. Motorwala said he'd like for COSMOS to enter a partnership with Miami-Dade County Public Schools to expand understanding of Islam with a younger generation.

Kaufman hopes that those who attend the series at his campus will leave knowing more about Islam, and have fun in the process.

"It's a simple equation, God equals Allah," Kaufman said. "When people think that doesn't equal each other, it makes 'others.'"