

Demystifying Islam

Imam Abdulah Polovina builds connections with people inside and outside of Portland's Muslim community



Abdulah Polovina is imam of a mosque at the Bosniaks Educational & Cultural Organization in Portland. Polovina routinely welcomes people of other faiths to his mosque. PHOTO BY CELESTE NOCHE

BY EMILY GREEN
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As he walked softly across the plush, carpet-covered floor of his Southeast Portland mosque, Imam Abdulah Polovina explained that in Islam, there are “99 Beautiful Names” for God.

“Allah,” he said, “is most common.”

Polovina, 44, is a soft-spoken Bosnian man with a thick accent and a magnetic smile.

On this chilly Wednesday afternoon in January, the prayer hall at his mosque is quiet and empty. During Polovina’s Friday services, however, anywhere from 50 to 100 Muslims fill the room – even more when Friday lands on a holiday, he said.

But his services aren’t exclusive to followers of Islam. Polovina has made a habit of opening the doors of his mosque to anyone who wants to learn more about his faith. Whether visitors are followers of other religions, police officers, politicians or simply the curious passerby, Polovina is happy to have them.

“I invite them to come, to actually hear and see that we Muslims have no hidden agendas,” he said.

In November, Polovina welcomed a group of 25 Linfield College students to his Friday service. The students were there as part of a religious studies class, led by professor Jennifer Williams.

The female students brought scarves to cover their hair, but Polovina told them there was no need to wear the head coverings unless they were comfortable with it.

He showed the students where to take off their shoes before entering, where mosque-goers typically wash their hands and faces before prayer, and where to sit during the service – they joined the women in the back partition of the hall.

In Islam, everyone prays in the direction of the shortest distance to Mecca, Saudi Arabia. That’s where, in the seventh century, they believe Allah revealed the Quran to the Prophet Muhammad. From Portland, that direction is slightly east of due north.

Williams said her class needed to “talk through” the gender segregation in the prayer hall, but they didn’t feel excluded from their position in the back with the women.

A pamphlet on “Women in Islam” that

Faith & Justice

A series highlighting the role of religious leaders and groups in Portland's resistance movement

Polovina often gives to first-time visitors states that when people think of Muslim women as being “oppressed, inferior and unequal,” they are confusing Islam with cultural practices.

“These stereotypes,” it argues, “fail to recognize that Islam has empowered women with the most progressive rights since the 7th century.”

According to the Quran, men and women are equal in the sight of God, and Islam gave women the right to education, to marry someone of their choice, to work, to own and

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