



After the Fact | Restoring Community: Building Understanding

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TRANSCRIPT

Tahija Vikalo, executive director, Sisterhood of Salaam Shalom: The most beautiful aspect of my spiritual upbringing is an openness to learning.

Dan LeDuc, host: Welcome to "After the Fact." For the Pew Charitable Trusts, I'm Dan LeDuc. This season, we've been looking at community in America—finding success stories around the country of people coming together for a shared purpose. Often, it's providing help to those in need.

But at its core, building community means people overcoming their differences and finding ways to better understand each other—and, ideally, appreciate each other more. We opened with Tahija Vikalo, who leads an organization called the Sisterhood of Salaam Shalom that brings Muslim and Jewish women together. For what purpose? Just that—to get together, to talk, to learn more about each other. We'll hear more from her and other women in her organization a bit later.

It might seem like a daunting task to try to find community in the bridging of two religions. So, we thought we'd begin with some data from Alan Cooperman, who directs religion research at the Pew Research Center.

Alan, the Pew Research Center has looked at religion in American life and globally for some time. First, why, and then, what are some trends you've noticed?

Alan Cooperman, director of religion research, Pew Research Center: Very simple—because religion matters. It just plain matters. It matters a lot in individual lives and collectively.

I would say, big picture, Dan, the patterns are pretty consistent over time. That is, the public opinion as a whole is pretty positive toward Jews, toward mainline Protestants—that'd be Episcopalians, Methodists, Presbyterians—and toward Catholics. Those groups get overall favorable ratings and have for years in the various ways that we've tried to ask these kinds of questions. But just big picture, we asked people to rate, online, their favorability. How favorable is their attitude toward a variety of groups? And



interestingly, for many religious groups, upwards of half of the U.S. population, —close to 60% in some cases—give either a neutral position or say they don't know enough to say.

There's both sides of the coin there that are not insubstantial numbers—15, 20% of Americans who rate some of these religious groups either very unfavorably or somewhat unfavorably. So that's not nothing. On the other hand, you've got a big group in the middle, and then you've got a big group that's favorable. So, if you were to add the neutrals plus the favorables, they would outweigh the unfavorables.

Dan: Your notion, though, of combining the neutral in the middle and the positive seems to be—tell me if I'm interpreting this wrong—a sign of great religious tolerance in this country.

Alan: Yes. I don't want to be Pollyanna-ish. I think it's important that we recognize that there is also prejudice and bias in this country. But we also should note that the majority of Americans are either in the middle or favorable toward all of these groups.

So yes, you can think of that as a healthy sign of tolerance, if you will. Again, the other side of the coin is that Jews, Mormons, or members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints, Catholics, atheists have faced bias, prejudice throughout U.S. history, and we should not understate that they still face that. We still see it in these polls.

But an important connection that we've seen in all the work we've done over these years is that people who say they know someone personally in another religious group are generally more likely to rate it positively. There are some exceptions to that, some particular patterns of small groups, but in general, the more you know about a religion, the higher your knowledge, the more positive you're likely to be about that group.

Tahija: The organization was founded by two women.

Dan: That is Tahija Vikalo, a Muslim woman and the current executive director of the Sisterhood of Salaam Shalom.

Tahija: Two amazing women, Cheryl Olitski and Atiya Aftab, who are co-founders, came together to bring Muslim and Jewish women together for a number of reasons but mainly to form friendships and relationships and to get to know each other and to create these spaces where they can be together and talk, spend time together, knowing that many Jewish women never met another Muslim woman, and many Muslim women never met a Jewish woman before.



Dan: The sisterhood was founded in 2010 with a unique mission: to build connections between Jewish and Muslim women. The organization has since expanded, with 3,500 members in more than 180 chapters across the country.

Tahija: The organization for the first 10 years had a great success in attracting many members and was extremely well received, when Muslims and Jews, as minorities in this society, felt that there was a certain level of threat that went up for both communities. So, this was a way to support each other, to build hope and build strength for each community.

So, this mainly was around, as I said, from forming chapters, getting together, talking about rituals, about each other's faith, about family, about different issues that each group wanted to discuss. I came two years ago to this position. I usually say I serve as executive director because it—it's truly a calling and a service rather than a position.

Dan: Tahija's grandfather was imprisoned in a forced labor camp during WWII for his religious views. He survived the war and came back home, only to be made a political prisoner for three years, along with other religious scholars, by the Yugoslavian government. Tahija herself lived through the Bosnian war and the siege of Sarajevo that began in 1992.

Tahija: So, it's a kind of history of this sort of survival, your faith in spirituality under these circumstances and living under communism, having history of, How do you keep your faith with courage and keep doing things that you can do in the society? And the most beautiful aspect of religious education is the openness to learning about different ways of knowing God, and the focus on love for God rather than obeying the rules and fear of God.

Dan: Tahija has big plans for where the sisterhood could go next.

Tahija: My vision is to deepen these relationships and find ways to continue having these safe spaces that we created but deepening it and taking it to creating brave spaces where we can really go deeper into our conversations and to have good listening skills and conversation skills that will take us to a whole different level of relationships.

(Music break)

Alyson Freedman, past chapter leader, Sisterhood of Salaam Shalom: When you think of the old adage, Don't talk about politics or religion, and—



Zaiba Hasan, past chapter leader, Sisterhood of Salaam Shalom: We talk about it all.

Alyson: That went right out the window.

Zaiba: And I think we have covered it all.

Alexa Abdelatey, past chapter leader, Sisterhood of Salaam Shalom: We've had so many fabulous meals. We probably have been to almost everybody in the chapter's house at least once.

Dan: You are hearing from Alyson, Zaiba, and Alexa, three members of the Sisterhood of Salaam Shalom in the Washington area. They spoke with us about their surprising connection.

Zaiba: I'll start with the funny story that I literally chased Alexa down.

Dan: That's Zaiba Hasan, a Muslim woman who now lives in Alexandria, Virginia. She grew up in Chicago in a bicultural household—Pakistani and Irish. She hosts a podcast called "Momming While Muslim."

Zaiba: She was just beautiful—hijabi running in my neighborhood—and I was like, Oh my God, I have to be friends with her. So, I literally stopped at a stop sign, rolled down the window, and I'm like, "Can I have your name and number?"

I totally picked her up. And she was like, This crazy lady stopped me. What is wrong? I'm like, "I dunno any Muslim people, can we be friends?" So that's how we started. And then I feel like, coincidentally we met by happenstance in the same sisterhood chapter—it felt that it was like a meant to be friendship.

And of course, with Allie it was just like this organic, spiritual—like we just sat next to each other, and I think we chatted for, like, hours.

Alyson: Yeah.

Zaiba: Like, "Hi, my name is Zaiba. Hi, I'm Allie."

Alyson: If you know someone so well that you know that they're coming from a place of love and respect, then you can listen to them with an open mind and open heart.



Dan: Alyson Freedman is a Jewish woman from the D.C. area. She works with Zaiba for the sisterhood.

Alyson: You have that foundation, and I think we waited so long to really build that. Every meeting, we would have dinner first.

So, every chapter does that, but we would do that. And it was almost always a potluck. And so, you'd spend half an hour, "Oh, where's this recipe from? This is so great. Can you send it to me? How was your day? What did you do today? How was your week?" And so those things, you get to know people's lives and, once you have that foundation, you can really build from there.

Alexa: And we know each woman as a complex, unique, creative, interesting person who has lived a life—whether they're in their thirties, their forties, their fifties, their sixties, their seventies.

Dan: Alexa Abdelatey also has served as a leader in the sisterhood chapter. Her husband is Muslim, and she converted to the religion shortly after they married.

Alexa: We've surrounded each other in moments of crisis as well, over all of these years. And then we also have laughed so much in this chapter. We've gotten wildly off topic plenty of times, but we had that background when we then went gingerly and carefully and thoughtfully into the planned difficult conversations. And then when there were unplanned difficult conversations, we also said, OK, what is our structure? And let's fall back on the basics and the wonderful structure that Sisterhood of Salam Shalom provides for us. And then use those tools to get through these conversations. And really, for our chapter, underpinning that was this love and affection for each person.

Dan: And that's how community is formed. Here's Zaiba again.

Zaiba: Our chapter was one of the few that have talked about, obviously, the—the elephant in the room—the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

We waited three years before we even broached that topic. And part of the reason we did that was because we really wanted to focus on cultivating that friendship foundation. Because even with that, you still are in a situation where it can get a little bit dicey knowing the person, but you're less likely to make an assumption because you've gotten to know the person, you genuinely care about each other. None of us, even



Muslims and Muslims, Jewish women and Jewish women, think and feel the same way about these very tough political conversations.

Dan: As I listen to these conversations, I'm wondering if you think there's more in common than not between the two faiths?

Tahija: Absolutely. Absolutely.

Dan: Here's Tahija again.

Tahija: Antisemitism, being centuries old, and Islamophobia, that particular term is a newer term, but that kind of construct that is created to present our two communities in a negative way or as a threat is very similar.

So, all these things are very much still present and very old. We cannot say they're really mirror image of each other, but they are similar manifestations and affect our communities in a very similar way. Learning about experiences from each other as Jewish and Muslim women in this organization is very significant.

We also learn about how to address this, how to change these opinions, how to counteract something that is present either in the media or in our communities, so there's a wealth of information that goes back and forth. Often people withdraw and just create isolated communities, which is not the way to live. It's a big loss for society.

(Music break)

Alyson: One of the things that the sisterhood talks about, as well, is that we are often "othered." The same people that don't like me also don't like you that much.

Zaiba: Yeah, exactly. Let's just be real.

Dan: We're back with the sisters near Washington, D.C.

Alyson: We've all felt that in different ways, and we've talked about that a lot. Whereas I generally walk around the world as a White woman, that's not necessarily the case for our Muslim sisters, depending on all sorts of different factors.

So, we talked about that, about some of our shared experiences and some experiences where some of the sisters can stand up for other sisters and you, when necessary. And ways that we understand each other and support each other and help each other through what can sometimes be a challenging place to live.



Zaiba: We're more likely to empathize and understand where the other person is coming from in a way that someone outside of the two faiths, specifically, may not understand. Actually, some of the biggest disagreements have been intrafaith, not interfaith. And that was really a surprise for us.

I feel like creating space is sticking to the rules. We created a chapter rule. All of us had to be respectful and stick to the rules, so that when we did have those tough conversations, we were more amenable to listen to the other person, even if we didn't agree. We took a class on active listening, which I think is very important. And the biggest thing is: Responding is very different than reacting.

Alexa: Somebody would share their perspective, and then there would be silence, and then somebody else would speak, but we weren't responding to each other's comments.

Particularly when it came to Israel-Palestine, we were giving the space for everybody to share their perspective and putting it all out there so we could hear it. But then there was no debate, there was no discussion, at least in that initial conversation.

Alyson: Responding to someone else isn't always the right thing. Sometimes just being there in the moment, listening to someone else speak is what they need.

Dan: For a final word, we turn again to Tahija.

Tahija: Around the world, women are the gatekeepers of traditions, of rituals of these beautiful feelings that each family has. So, we were hoping to build on that and bring that strength of the empathy that exists in women. Bringing women who can be with each other, and empathize with each other, and at the same time affect their communities. Because we do wear so many hats at the same time, we have big influence on our communities.

Each one of us is changing every time we're together. We're changing each other, and we're hoping to really make some impact because we need to take this deeper.

Dan: In our next episode, we travel to Bowie, Maryland, to meet with local leaders who are teaching the concepts of interfaith to the next generation.

Tameeka Washington, co-founder, Interfaith Coalition of Bowie: And so, I really wanna make sure that this next generation has the tools that they need to begin to do that work.

Dan: Thanks for listening. For the Pew Charitable Trusts, I'm Dan, and this is "After the Fact."