When Dr. Alwi Shihab addressed the Brigham Young University campus in a University Forum on October 10, 2006, a little known fact was suddenly brought to the attention of everyone present: there is a significant and intimate relationship between Mormons and Muslims. This was first made evident by the speaker’s endearing introduction given by President Boyd K. Packer which revealed their long-time friendship. However, this was only a microcosm of the relationship which seemed to connect Dr. Shihab to Brigham Young University and which brought him, a Muslim Indonesian government official, to speak at a BYU Forum. In his introduction, Pres. Packer informed the University that he, President Bednar, and Dr. Shihab had cooperated closely to aid Indonesians suffering after the tsunami of December 27, 2004. Pres. Packer then concluded with this marvelous declaration: “Alwi, a devout Muslim of Arabic ancestry, and I, a Christian and devout Mormon, have agreed to symbolically walk arm in arm into the future. Together we hope to build a bridge. Except what that symbolizes is accomplished, all of us face a very dark and very dangerous future” (Packer). Indeed, if one truth was made unmistakably clear by Dr. Shihab and by the whole proceedings of this Forum, it was that cooperation between Mormons and Muslims is happening and must continue to happen.

Surprising to many BYU students, these interfaith relationships appears on a much smaller scale on the BYU campus. One manifestation of such is the presence of a large number of Muslim students on BYU campus. Approximately sixty Arabic students attend BYU every year, most of these Muslim and all of them usually going unnoticed by the generally Latter-day Saint student body (Toronto and Finlayson 24). According to official University demographics, 98 percent of the student body is Latter-day Saint with the remaining 2 percent representing more than 20 faiths. Also, “[o]f the 6 percent daytime international students [. . .] 7 percent [were] from the Middle East” (Demographics). This group of Muslim students is significant enough to warrant the setting aside of a room in the Wilkinson Student Center where Muslims gather many times daily for prayer.
and religious learning. While this could be ignored as simple happenstance, these Muslim students are, in a way, recruited by BYU through a series of scholarships and international student programs. Through the BYU Jerusalem Center, for instance, two scholarships are awarded every year to one undergraduate and one graduate student from Palestine in the amount of full tuition for all years of attendance at BYU-Provo.

The attendance of Muslim students at BYU is the result of a relationship of mutual respect and honor between BYU and the international Muslim community. On one hand is the willingness of Muslim students to make the daring leap to attend BYU — a foreign university, hosted by a foreign church located in a foreign country; and on the other hand is the University’s openness to accept and even recruit Muslim students. Muslim students who attend BYU are motivated by a trust in the University’s values and standards which they find very similar to their own. The BYU initiative is a manifestation of many religious factors. In a world of increasing religious turmoil, this tie between Mormons and Muslims is of utmost importance. It serves as a message to members of both faiths trapped in attitudes of opposition. Thus, Muslim students are both allowed to and choose to attend Brigham Young University because of a relationship of shared values that diversifies and allies these two religious worlds.

**INTERVIEW AND INSIGHT: WHY BYU?**

Nouar Qutob loves BYU. She enjoys her classes, upholds the Honor Code, regularly goes out for a movie on Friday nights with friends, and takes full advantage of the devotionals, forums, and other unique opportunities BYU offers her. She is also a Muslim — from Jerusalem, in fact. As a senior majoring in Bioinformatics, she has spent the last four years here and has not regretted the decision to attend BYU. Her number one reason for attending BYU: “the standards,” she says.

Growing up in Jerusalem allowed Nouar the chance to see BYU students first hand. Although the BYU Jerusalem Center closed during her senior year of high school, she had already become quite interested in these Mormon students and their notably high standards. So, when it came time to apply for a college, Nouar considered BYU as an alternative to her parents’ suggestions: nearby universities, perhaps one in Jordan. Of her own initiative, Nouar visited the Center, spoke with students and professors, and appealed to the BYU website before finally receiving her parents’ permission. The students she spoke with beamed as they spoke of BYU,
describing it as even more beautiful than the Jerusalem Center. The almost unspoken commentary, however, played a constant message of “standards.” Of all the factors involved in her decision, Nouar explains that shared standards were the most attractive to her and the most comforting to her parents.

In an interview with the author, Nouar explained that her parents were wary — to say the least — about her attending an American university. But, BYU’s credentials and standards as embodied in the Honor Code were such a welcoming comfort that they quickly supported Nouar’s choice to attend this Mormon university located on the other side of the world — quite daring on their part. They were fully won over when Nouar received her scholarship — a full tuition, four year scholarship granted by the BYU Jerusalem Center. And with that, Nouar left her family and traveled the more than 7,000 miles to Provo, Utah, where she has schooled ever since.

“It was hard for me at first,” she said, “just because I felt odd.” But, she quickly adjusted thanks to such helps as her Intro. to Mormonism class and Student Wards. She found herself opening up to students about her religion, her country, and herself. “[P]eople here want to know.”

Nouar is not the only girl from her high school graduating class who has left Jerusalem. Many others of her friends have also attended American universities in places such as Chicago, Manhattan, and Washington, D. C. The difference between them and her, she declared, was that while their standards have slipped considerably under the pressure of non-Muslim peers, Nouar’s are as strong as ever. She opened up and explained that students at BYU do exactly as Muslim students do at Jerusalem: hang out, go to a movie on Friday nights, and have good clean fun. To be on the other end of such a comparison makes BYU very unique indeed.

Lastly, Nouar outrightly illuminated the very BYU standards she was most attracted to: modesty, no drinking, zero toleration of pre-marital sex, and honesty. She marveled at the mechanics of the testing center, recalling four years of conversations with friends who were shocked to hear of its “On Your Honor” system of operation. “Wow, that would be really easy to cheat,” they would inevitably conclude. Nouar would simply reply, “Oh. I never thought of that.” More than all else, she says, it’s the character of the campus that makes it. “All the good characters. Being good people,” she emphasized. For Nouar, the standards of the students were her number one reason for considering and attending BYU. For BYU students, Nouar has become an integral
part of campus life who causes paradigm shifts by her very presence and keeps students from settling into the mass of uniformity. She is a constant reminder of the tie between Mormons and Muslims.

**COMMON GROUND: THE BROTHERHOOD OF STANDARDS**

While very few know of BYU’s existence in Virginia or Boston, BYU is something to be considered in Jerusalem. The Jerusalem Center for Near Eastern Studies draws the gaze of all who visit the Israeli capital city, and its scholarship program certainly piques the interest of Palestinian students. For Muslims, however, BYU says all this and more. For Muslims, BYU is a welcoming environment where students “maintain the highest standards of honor, integrity, morality, and consideration of others in personal behavior” (Brigham Young University Honor Code). As evidenced by national college reviews — the Princeton Review, for instance — these standards are upheld in a way that is unheard of in the international collegiate community, but anxiously sought by devout Muslims (Princeton Review).

In his introduction to Dr. Shihab’s forum address, President Packer expounded on the similarities between Muslim and Mormon standards. In his words, “Church members and Muslims share similar high standards of decency, temperance, and morality. We have so much in common. As societal morality and behavior decline in an increasingly permissive world, the Church and many within Islam increasingly share natural affinities” (Packer). At BYU, these natural affinities magnetically draw Muslims to BYU and BYU to Muslims.

One such area of common devotion is a dedication among both Mormons and Muslims to values and standards. For instance, the woman’s donning of the *hijab* for the sake of modesty is a value Latter-day Saints understand profoundly. Even more, both faiths are often the brunt of ridicule for their dedication to strict modesty, whether of the Islamic style or of the kind codified in BYU’s “For the Strength of Youth” based Honor Code. James A. Toronto, in an article discussing sociopolitical debate in the Muslim community, draws this comparison more fully:

Most Latter-day Saints consider Church standards of dress to be a necessary, reasonable, and comfortable part of their religious lives, while outside observers describe these same standards as rigid and repressive. Most Muslims also feel that their requirements for dress, including veiling for women,
are a necessary, reasonable, and comfortable norm for human society, even while outside observers
denounce these norms as oppressive to women. (Toronto 34)

While the Muslim *hijab* and BYU’s “no tank tops” rule are not exactly parallel, the precept behind the
rule is.

A broader summary of the values and standards of Mormons and Muslims are found in the Thirteenth
Article of Faith and the *Qu’ran*, respectively. The Thirteenth Article of Faith, as quoted in the BYU Honor
Code, declares that Mormons and BYU students “believe in being honest, true, chaste, benevolent, virtuous, and
in doing good to all men” (Brigham Young Honor Code). The similarities between these devotions and those of
the Muslim as expressed in the 33rd *sura* of the *Qu’ran* are more than a few:

For Muslim men and women, for believing men and women, for devout men and women, for *true* men
and women, for men and women who are *patient* and *constant*, for men and women who *humble*
themselves, for men and women who give *charity*, for men and women who fast, for men and women
who guard their *chastity*, and for men and women who engage much in Allah’s remembrance, for them
has Allah prepared forgiveness and great reward. (*The Holy Qu’ran* 33:35, italics added)

When Nouar Qutob applied to BYU she knew very little if anything about the religious beliefs of its host
institution, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. However, the social extensions of both Mormonism
and Islam met before her eyes in the integrity and standards of the BYU Jerusalem Center students. Nouar
continues to confirm that while the common ground was comforting then it has become more apparent as she
has attended the university (Qutob). Another Muslim, who is from East Africa and who has humbly requested
to remain anonymous, placed scholarship offers and low tuition as her primary reason for attending BYU as a
graduate student, but affirmed that standards were a comforting second. After earning her undergraduate degree
at the University of Utah, she said the biggest change in transferring to BYU was a feeling of greater acceptance
for her differences — and those differences are not subtle: the *hijab* covering the hair on her head and shrouding
her neck, a modest dress extending on her arms to her wrists and on her legs to her ankles, and a noticeable
accent (East African Muslim).
Nouar and this East African friend are not the only Muslims who feel a tie of common devotion with the students of Brigham Young University. When the wife of the ambassador from Egypt visited BYU she was reported as remarking, “Your people live the principles of Islam.” The then BYU Public Affairs and Guest Relations director, Ronald J. Clark, recognized, “[t]hat was one of the highest compliments we could be paid—to be likened unto their faith, which they hold dear and sacred. After just a short time on campus, they were very much aware that our students were living by a higher law” (qtd. in Bergin).

Princeton Review has had an experience very much like this. In their list of the 2007 “Best 361 Colleges,” the company ranked BYU as #1 in the categories of religiosity, lowest use of marijuana, and “Stone-Cold Sober School,” and #2 in least use of hard liquor (Princeton Review). All of these achievements point to the success of the University Honor Code and all of these are standards valued by devout Muslims.

There is no questioning the abundance of similarities between the standards of the Brigham Young University Honor Code and those of the Muslim. While BYU’s values may not appeal to the vast majority of world-wide college applicants, they certainly do appeal to the devout Muslim seeking a comfortable and secure university environment in which to study. And while it is impossible to assure that all of BYU’s students uphold the Honor Code, it is obvious that enough of a majority do as to impress Princeton Review, visiting dignitaries, and investigating Muslim students alike.

**POSITIVE DIALOGUE: THE HANDS OF FAITHS**

The Honor Code is the primary attraction — alongside low tuition, good scholarships, and quality educations — for Muslims investigating Brigham Young University and the greatest comfort to Muslims already in attendance. However, the other side of this relationship remains to be explored. Namely, why does Brigham Young University, a private university sponsored by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints with a student body that is 98 percent Latter-day Saint, so willingly accept and even aid Muslim students who apply?

This open attitude toward Muslims is part of a larger Latter-day Saint Church atmosphere of respect toward Islam that finds its roots long before Dr. Shihab’s 2006 forum address. In fact, it was George Q. Cannon who voiced one of the first strongly positive opinions of Islam from the Mormon perspective and who absorbed
the religion into the realms of Mormon doctrine. In 1877, in a discussion of dispensations of knowledge to certain “faithful men in all nations and among all people,” he spoke of Muhammad, the crowning prophet of Islam:

I believe myself that Mahomet, whom the Christians deride and call a false prophet and stigmatize with a great many epithets, was a man raised up by the Almighty and inspired to a certain extent by Him to effect the reforms which he did in his land and in the nations surrounding. He attacked idolatry and restored the great and crowning idea that there is but one God. He taught that idea to his people and reclaimed them from polytheism and from the heathenish practices into which they had fallen. (qtd. in Newquist 1:308-310)

From this beginning, a positive view about Muhammad continued to wind through the discourses of Latter-day Saint leaders up to the present day. Each of these marked a move to bring the two faiths into closer alliance and to spur Mormons to rethink their often biased opinions of Muslims and Islam. In 1892, B. H. Roberts agreed that “[t]he faith of Mahomet has done much toward redeeming a portion of our Father’s children from darkness” (Roberts 3:67). In 1895, he again spoke of Muhammad, saying that God raised this prophet up to the Arabians to teach “that measure of truth that the people could receive,” even if not the fullness of the truth (Roberts 4:236).

Of course, the most well known and most formal declaration of belief concerning Non- Christian religions is that of the First Presidency of the Church issued on February 15, 1978, which specifically mentions Islam:

The great religious leaders of the world such as Mohammed, Confucius, and the Reformers, as well as philosophers including Socrates, Plato, and others, received a portion of God's light. Moral truths were given to them by God to enlighten whole nations and to bring a higher level of understanding to individuals. (qtd. in Palmer, “World Religions” 4:1589)

The purpose of these quotations is to highlight the long history of positive Latter-day Saint expression concerning Islam. While representatives of the Islamic umma have yet to make such public statements concerning Latter-day Saints, Latter-day Saint leaders regularly extend the hand of interfaith dialogue and,
unsurprisingly, Islamic leaders regularly accept. Mormons and Muslims work together intimately on issues such as abortion, the natural family, and humanitarian aid in order to safeguard common beliefs. In a special issue of *BYU Studies* entitled “LDS Scholars Engage Islamic Thought,” contributors James A. Toronto and Cynthia Finlayson cite multiple examples of Mormon-Muslim dialogue and cooperation:

Examples [. . .] include visits of Muslim dignitaries at Church headquarters in Salt Lake City; Muslim use of Church canning facilities to produce *halal* (ritually clean) food products; church humanitarian aid and disaster relief sent to numerous Muslim areas including Jordan, Kosovo, Turkey, and Afghanistan; academic agreements between Brigham Young University and various educational and governmental institutions in the Islamic world; the existence of the Muslim Student Association at BYU; and expanding collaboration between the Church and Islamic organizations to safeguard traditional family values worldwide. (Welch 24)

Indeed, perhaps most conclusive is this statement by President Howard W. Hunter: “A cabinet minister of Egypt once told me that if a bridge is ever built between Christianity and Islam, it must be built by the Mormon Church” (Hunter 36).

The ties of common ground between the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and Islam are plenteous and undeniable. These ties naturally extend into the operations of Brigham Young University as it is so inextricably connected to the upper leadership of the Church. Thus, the willingness to accept Muslim applicants as students at BYU should come as little surprise in view of the long history of initiatives made by Latter-day Saint leaders to cooperate with Muslims and the brotherhood of the two faiths in the fight to defend common values. Although the average Muslim applicant knows very little of these cooperative efforts and, therefore, they have little sway on his/her decision to apply to or attend BYU, this background is essential in understanding the University’s open-armed acceptance of a considerably large group of Muslim students. In short, the relationship between Brigham Young University and the Islamic world is a microcosm of the greater efforts being made to bring the two faiths closer together for a common purpose.
CONCLUSION: THE WORLD IS OUR CAMPUS

As you walk to the Joseph Smith Building for your first class of the day — Book of Mormon One — you slow to a stroll and let your eyes meander to take in the students around you. In report, there is not much out of the ordinary today: a few couples holding hands, one guy asleep on the grass, and most everyone is following the Honor Code. This means modest clothing, clean-shaven faces, neatly groomed hair, no vulgar language, etc. It is in that moment that you realize the uniqueness of BYU.

You reach the Kimball Tower and turn south to pass the Science Building. And then, something very not ordinary happens. Amidst all the throngs of Caucasian faces and American clothing you see something quite beyond unique, if not even plain strange to you. A black woman walks with a modest gait and is veiled with a blue hijab and clothed with a dress exposing only hands and feet. She is a Muslim from East Africa. You do not know her name, but there is no question in your mind — her presence is captivating.

The presence of nearly sixty Muslim students on the campus of Brigham Young University every year is equally as captivating. Most of them do not wear the hijab, whether by choice or by gender, but all of them bear their faith nobly. Their attendance is not the result of a rare cosmic phenomenon that mysteriously ropes Muslims into the Mormon world of BYU. No, the reasons for their attendance are, in fact, so obvious that they are startling. Like two magnetic forces drawing together and pushing forward, the BYU Honor Code attracts Muslims while an atmosphere of respect and even endearment among Mormons toward Muslims opens the doors and welcomes them onto BYU campus. Of course, not all Muslims enjoy their time at BYU and neither do all BYU students enjoy their presence. Nonetheless, the influence of Muslim students on the atmosphere of the BYU campus is so vivid it is incontestable. They enrich, they enliven, they diversify, and they expand the very purpose of Brigham Young University into broader spheres and they make BYU the place it is: a haven where the world is our campus and where men and women of faith enter to learn and go forth to serve.
Works Cited

<http://magazine.byu.edu/?act=view&a=1811>.


“Demographics.” Brigham Young University. 2006. 21 Nov. 2006


Medina, Saudi Arabia: The Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques King Fahd Complex for the Printing of the Holy Qu’ran, 1413 hijri, 1992/93 C.E.


Qutob, Nouar. Personal Interview. 6 Nov. 2006.


Toronto, James A. “Many Voices, One Umma: Sociopolitical Debate in the Muslim Community.” BYU Studies
Works Consulted

Flores, Dr. Enoc. Letter to the author. 11 Nov. 2006.


